Leadership role in promoting childhood education: Perception of practitioners in Pakistan

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a significant stage to develop responsible generations. Holistic child development may be possible through a plan of early childhood education (ECE) and early learning. This study is planned to explore the role of school leadership in promoting ECCE in Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), Pakistan. This research study may play a significant role in sensitizing the educationist, practitioners, pedagogical leadership in early learning centers, and political leadership. The study was quantitative in nature. In the first step, a stratified sampling technique was used to select the districts among the three divisions of AJK. In the second step, a simple random sampling technique was used. Self-developed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used to collect the data. The study concluded that leadership plays a significant role in promoting ECCE. It is encouraging that educational leadership involves parents in the process of teaching-learning. Learners are happy in the school activities, and academic leadership is planning to minimize the workload of kids. It is recommended that children may be facilitated with better infrastructure.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early learning plays a vital role in human life. Researchers concluded that those children who enrolled in early learning programs have a significant difference in social behaviors [1]. It is being reported that three major areas, including acceptable behaviors, social interactions, and emotional stability, were found to be positive and strengthened among those children who did attend the early learning programs. Additionally, it was reported that children with poor socioeconomic backgrounds are not ready to join the schools. Children may be more cooperative if they play with equipment relevant to their age group in a planned system like a daycare center or early learning institute [2]. It is assumed that practitioners who are part of education need to have soft skills so that they may promote these skills among the children, more specifically at early learning centers or schools [3]. These practitioners should have intellectual, emotional, and social skills to impart these to early childhood education (ECE) level students.

Leadership within early learning centers or institutes is one of the significant in hand issues to be explored and discussed [4]. Early learning leadership needs to provide quality services to the children, including a caring environment, and a safe place to learn the skills and work collaboratively with the other critical stakeholders of such centers. It was claimed that most countries are making investments in early learning to make and shape their future. Leadership at early learning institutes is a holistic process and work. Like other experts, in this research, it is claimed that leaders in early childhood care and education (ECCE)

need to collaborate and coordinate with their teachers, parents, and kids [5]. During the last couple of decades, early educational leaders proved to be responsible, caring, and motivators to early learners, early practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders. The role of educational leaders is more significant in promoting education in early learning [6]–[8]. These studies concluded that leadership played an essential role in the early learning and sustainability of the programs. Scholars reported that school principals played a key role as school leaders [9]. Furthermore, the research added that any school leader motivates their students, curriculum development, and role model. Leadership plays a vital role in the promotion of education.

The Will of leaders sets a pathway for the development of society. Both political and educational leaders played a significant role, where early learning was available to all the citizens at the doorstep. The researcher studied 625 kindergarten practitioners' opinions that ECE leaders organize, lead, and act proactively to obtain the goals of early learning [10]. Scholars reported that successful educational leaders have the skills to adapt the changes and accept challenges [11]. There are no secrets to being a successful leader. What an educational leader knows that should be adopted and implemented with true spirit is the only way forward to being a successful education leader. These findings concur with [12] who also found that leadership is associated with teamwork and collaboration. Leadership at the early level was not represented in the literature compared to secondary and primary education [13]. He claimed that during the first decade of 2000, in a journal of educational management, administration and leadership, there were only fifteen papers on primary education (which covers ECCE) compared to more than forty documents in the same journal on secondary education.

Pakistan is a developing country located in South Asia. According to the Statistics Division of Pakistan, the population of Pakistan recorded during the 6th census in 2017 was 207.77 million [14]. In this population, there are 30.45 million children in Pakistan in the age group 0-9 years [15]. A report published by the Academy of Educational Planning and Management (AEPAM) in Islamabad reflected that there were no separate teachers for the ECE classes nor any classrooms for these classes [16]. This showed the interest of the educational leaders in Pakistan in promoting ECE.

Moreover, out-of-school children (OOSC) in Pakistan are alarming. The report stated that currently, Pakistan has the world's second-highest number of OOSC, with an estimated 22.8 million children aged 5-16 not attending school, representing 44% of the total population in this age group [17]. The given number creates a challenge for educational leadership to overcome the said issue. The examples in many countries reflected that ECCE enrolment is essential to decrease dropout and increase the retention of students in schools.

Education is now a provincial subject after the 18th amendment to the constitution [18], [19]. So, Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) has its policy. AJK educational policy (2021-30) claimed that the early years are significant for imparting life skills among forthcoming generations. The potential of children develops in their early years. Researchers and experts found that children growing up rapidly up to the age of 8 and 2-5 years is more critical [20], [21]. The policy claimed that early learning enables children to argue (reasoning and logic), communicate, and develop social skills and physical development. Early learning is essential as studies have proved that it improves children's success and sustainability rate. Early learning is a new idea in Pakistan and, more specifically, in AJK. OOSC, about 60.7% of children aged 3-5 years are not attending any school. This figure is high and threatening. Furthermore, the report concluded that 61.2% of children in the same age group were not in schools in rural areas, while this figure goes down to 43.0% for urban areas [20].

The critical area in current policy is that ECE has twenty-two policy actions; there is no single policy action related to the leadership. This is a question that, even in this developed era, a policy document does not reflect the ECE leadership [20]. So, this area needs to be explored. A national-level dialogue, discussion, and research are in dire need of time to sensitize the policymakers, political leadership, and other major stakeholders about the importance of ECCE leadership.

In the previous scenario, it is clear that AJK-Pakistan faces a challenge of OOSC of about 60.7%. There are other vital issues at schools, specifically at the ECCE level (as reported in national reports), including the involvement of parents, student involvement, provision of playing areas, monitoring visits, and assessment procedures. However, in Pakistan as a whole, and specifically in AJK, there is not a single research study available to highlight the role of leadership at the ECCE level. There is a gap in available national and local literature about this crucial area. To overcome this gap, the research is being planned and executed, which will explore the role of leadership at the ECCE level. This will provide the basic idea to future researchers and scholars, which ultimately impacts the quality of ECCE. Additionally, the study may also sensitize the practitioners, educational and political leaders, and the masses about the significance of their involvement in ECCE. The large number of OOSCs may be minimized. The research results may help promote the role of leadership at the national level.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was quantitative. A survey was conducted to collect the data [21], [22]. In the first phase, a stratified sampling technique was used to select the district. There were three administrative divisions of AJK. These three divisions are declared as three strata. Among these three strata, the highest score of a district (in terms of literacy) [23], Bagh was picked from the Poonch division. District Mirpur was in the middle [23] and represented the Mirpur division. The lowest literacy rate was in district Neelim [23], which meant the division of Muzzafarabad. In the second step, sampling, a simple random sample was used to select the teachers among the private and public schools from the districts. There were 160 teachers chosen through simple random sampling who responded to the given questionnaire. The study was limited to the teachers only due to the challenging task of collecting data from other stakeholders. There was less time to manage this survey. Table 1 represents the number of teachers who were part of the study.

Table 1. Sample of study

Sr. No	Sector	Public sector	Private sector	Total
1	Teachers	160	160	320

2.1. Data collection

As the study was quantitative and a survey was planned, a questionnaire was developed for this research. A questionnaire was used to collect the data [24]–[26]. This questionnaire has fifteen items. These items are written to achieve the objective of the research. The reliability was measured on the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The Cronbach Alpha value reported 0.72, greater than 0.7, so the instrument is reliable [27], [28]. The tool was shared with experts in the field to validate the instrument. Data was collected personally. Data were analyzed through SPSS. Collected data entered in the SPSS in codes. Furthermore, mean and standard deviation (SD) operations are run at SPSS. After calculating, the results are reported and interpreted in the coming section.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are reported in the following section. There are two statistical values, i.e., mean value and SD. Based on these values, each item is discussed as the value/result shown. There were 15 items in the given questionnaire. Each item's responses are reported in the form of mean and SD as shown in Table 2. The overall mean value of all the responses is 3.13, and SD is 0.971. The mean value reflected that teachers' responses tend toward agreement, which depicted that the role of leadership in promoting the ECCE is significant. Moreover, the SD showed that data is not spread, and there has been consistency found in practitioners' responses.

Additionally, except for three (items no 4, 9, 11), 12 statements are accepted in the given table. Most of the results resembled an already conducted survey or research, including OOSC [17], [29] by United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), school ranking [23], and ECE in Pakistan [16]. Item number 6, "school management trying to minimize the homework task," and item number 15, "Children should have places for play at school" are strongly accepted as shown in Table 2. The SD reflected that there has been a consistency in item no.6 (0.555), recorded low, while comparatively there was less consistency among the responses for item no 15.

It is encouraging that leadership is trying to minimize the home task for the children so that they may enjoy their time with their families and peers. Most of the practitioners strongly agreed that educational leadership is optimistic about providing play places for ECCE learners. The physical development of children during this technological era is very significant. Parents are found to be worried about smartphones and other devices by children. Additionally, these devices also create some behavior problems among children. So, their physical development, including fine motor development and gross motor development, is suffering while using these devices. In this situation, playgrounds at the ECCE level are more significant in supporting the child's behavior and well-being. Meanwhile, the school leadership in both sectors, private and public, was found to work on minimizing the workload of children of ECCE level. This phenomenon is encouraging for this level of education. All these actions reflect school leadership's behavior towards promoting ECCE in AJK.

On the other side, the three statements are rejected. There are two out of these three were rejected with strong disagreement for items number 4 and 9 (mean value 1.41, 1.73). These strongly disagreed statements included school management advertising the ideas of ECCE for admissions and assessment techniques are well planned for the ECCE students. As UNICEF reported that there were about 60% children

of aged 3-5 years never attended any school [17], [20], [29]. This also highlighted a lack of awareness among the stakeholders about ECCE, so this is significant to advertise the idea of ECCE and promote it among stakeholders. The results of this research may be linked to the mentioned report due to a lack of awareness among parents about ECCE admissions and their importance. School leaders need to revisit their policies about admission campaigns. Another statement, i.e., item number 11, school have separate washrooms for the children, is being rejected. AJK is at the bottom in Pakistan regarding infrastructure and facilities for learners. This needs the great attention of educational leaders so that these facilities may be provided to children [23].

Table 2. Perception of practitioners (results)

Sr. No	Item	N	Mean	SD
1	The principal visits your classroom frequently.	320	3.59	0.705
2	Management arranges parents teacher meetings (PTM)	320	3.41	0.603
3	Students feel happy in activities.	320	3.93	0.508
4	School management advertises the ideas of ECE for admissions.	320	1.41	0.775
5	Your classroom has separate spaces for the bags.	320	3.58	1.237
6	School management trying to minimize the homework task.	320	4.15	0.555
7	District Education Officer visits the ECE classrooms.	320	3.58	1.234
8	ECE classrooms are furnished as per the need of students.	320	3.57	1.235
9	Assessment techniques are well-planned for the ECE Students.	320	1.73	1.312
10	A rubric system for assessment is documented.	320	3.45	1.338
11	The school has separate washrooms for children.	320	2.07	0.906
12	ECE students love their uniforms.	320	3.48	1.289
13	A proper employment policy is a dire need for ECE classes?	320	3.22	0.515
14	ECE development in schools needs government support in terms of budget.	320	3.76	0.993
15	Children should have places to play at school.	320	4.01	1.361

The table showed that accepted items from respondents (teachers) included a principal visit to classrooms, regular parents teachers meetings (PTM), space for the bags to provide a comfortable environment, furnishing of classrooms, rubric for assessment, ECCE students love their uniform, employment policy, ECCE needs government funding and should have playgrounds at their schools. Previous researchers also showed that parents are cooperating and furnished classrooms are required at this level of education [20], [23], [24], [30]. The overall trend of the responses to the questionnaire was positive. It is encouraging that schools arrange the PTM regularly. Additionally, there is enough space for the school children in the classrooms. Furnishing classrooms is vital to attract children, developing a sense of attachment, to promote the aesthetic senses as well as creativity.

The mean value for the three items showed that these statements were rejected by respondents. These statements included school management advertising the ideas of ECE for admissions, assessment techniques being well planned for the ECE Students, and schools having separate washrooms for children. A predefined rubric system for assessment is also important to minimize any biasedness in assessment. At the time, the government of AJK is not supporting the schools to run ECCE. Early learners need the washroom facility at school. There is a dire need to advertise the idea of ECCE among parents and especially marginalized communities, so that OOSC may be reduced. The respondents were of the point of view that government should allocate funds for the ECCE classes. Involving parents and other stakeholders is encouraging. This will lead to awareness among community members about the significance of the ECCE.

4. CONCLUSION

Leadership plays an essential role in promoting ECCE. In the same direction, while concluding the results, it is found that leadership affects the learning process, admissions, awareness among parents through advertisements, discussions among stakeholders through parent-teacher meetings, classroom management for learners, and providing a comfortable place within classrooms. The results, which were depicted as newly added in the available literature, including the encouraging phenomenon of minimizing homework and providing a playground to ECCE-level students, were reported. Moreover, educational leaders played a significant role in developing and improving the schools' infrastructure at the ECCE level. It is recommended that educational leadership should promote the ECCE by advertising the idea of ECCE, constructing the basic needs for students in the schools like washrooms, and developing the assessment rubric so that schools may be better learning centers and comfortable places for the children.

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