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Early Childhood Special Education: A Hope for Lost Oysters

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Abstract: Education in the early years of life is crucial for the lifelong development of individuals and, ultimately, societies. Early childhood education programs initiated by govt. The private sector in Pakistan is striving to provide quality education. On the other hand, children with special needs are barred from participating in early childhood programs. This conceptual research paper explores the multifaceted terrains of early childhood special education (ECSE), intending to provide a comprehensive framework that integrates diverse perspectives and approaches. By intertwining evidence-based practices, this paper advocates inclusive early childhood special education. Through a transdisciplinary lens, it is explored that professionals of various disciplines can synergize their expertise to provide comprehensive support for children with Special Needs. This conceptual paper highlights the significance of ongoing professional development to ensure that educators are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to adapt to the evolving landscape of ECSE. This conceptual framework envisions a future in which early childhood special education becomes synonymous with inclusive education.

Key Words: Early Childhood Special Education, Inclusive ECSE, Early Childhood Education, Education of Children with Special Needs

Introduction

Children are the state's future and need to be fostered for the permanence of society. Early childhood is a subtle period of a human's development. Children are castellan of many characteristics, and the education system must lead to achieve better. Education in the early years of life should be engaging, developmentally appropriate, and accessible for all learning environments. In developing countries like Pakistan, many families face poverty, poor health, non-stimulatory home environments, and malnutrition, which deteriorate and affect their physical, social, intellectual, emotional, and other aspects of development (UNICEF, 2019). In all these situations, if children face disability condition, it doubles the miseries of children.

Education For All (EFA) declaration sets out an overall clear vision followed by all countries to make education accessible for all learners. Dakar's framework and Salamanca's statement stressed the effective regular school education for all children. 48th session of IBE-UNESCO with the theme "Inclusive Education – The way of the future" (Ainscow, 2020). Pakistan has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Millenium development goals, Sustainable development goals, and 2030 agenda, like all countries. Despite this, Early childhood education in every country is influenced by the practices and laws of each country (UNESCO, 2020).

Early childhood education (ECE) in Pakistan refers to the education of 3 to 6 years of age. The Early Childhood Care and Education program narrated the 3 to 7 years of early childhood education. Since Pakistan's National Development Vision 2025 is closely aligned with Agenda 2030, its achievement is also

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furthered through the provision of ECE to all children, especially the most disadvantaged. ECE is also included in annual development planning processes and Pakistan's Twelfth Five Year Plan (2018–2023). The ECCE Standards include features of child-centered pedagogy and encourage teachers to respond to diversity in the classroom, considering the individual learning styles and background context of all their students. Furthermore, they promote the use of Universal Design for Learning strategies (Grimes et al. [2021](#)).

The ECCE Standards also contain a section on standards for teachers, in which teachers are enjoined to commit to values and beliefs that will help in teaching all children effectively. Some of these standards nurture inclusive values and practices, such as believing that all children can learn and be successful; all children bring skills and strengths; having respect for diversity and tolerance and nurturing the same in all learners; and reflecting to improve teaching and learning processes. The country is committed to making sure that all children, irrespective of their differences such as abilities, culture, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background, have access to quality education (National Education Policy, 2009), realizing that inclusive education is acutely necessary for the long-term benefits of children with disabilities and the country itself. However, many people with disabilities are invisible, ignored, and uncounted in the country. As a result, persons with disabilities face several barriers to education (Naqvi, [2020](#)).

Barriers to primary inclusive schools/early childhood inclusive education include lack of awareness, the need for advocacy, training of teachers, the need for resources, inclusive education goals, and teaching methodologies (Ehsan, [2018](#)). By actively tackling these challenges, Pakistan can move closer to ensuring that every child, regardless of their abilities, culture, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background, has equal access to the transformative power of education, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Statement of the Problem

This paper endeavors to explore a forgotten dimension of early childhood special education in Pakistan. In Pakistan, preschools barred children with special needs from participating in early childhood programs. Only a few private institutions specific to special needs education are considering the needs of this population. Unfortunately, Children with disabilities in Pakistan remain disadvantaged for not being identified at a young age (TahirKheli, [2022](#)). At the same time, Early childhood education covers 3 to 8 early years of a child's life and demands to be nurtured for superior future development.

ECCE in Pakistan, initiated by QAED, has established around 13000 ECE centers across Punjab but is not meeting the learning needs of young learners (Rehman, Husain & Khan, [2023](#)). For children with special needs in Pakistan, ECE does not entail preceding primary education but only a primary education. In Pakistan, the budget for early childhood education is 55.9 million, but there is no room for young children with special needs (UNESCO, [2006](#)). In 2019, UNICEF developed a nurturing care framework for the children of Pakistan, and early childhood education is one of the components of that framework. Framework talks about equitable health facilities and diagnosis, provision of resources, and support for children with disabilities. However, there is no specific talk regarding ECE for children with special needs.

As far as the role of special education institutions is concerned, only 72 primary-level special education schools and centers are in the province of Punjab. Special education institutions in Punjab are facing multiple challenges due to a smaller number of qualified teachers, insufficient facilities, low budget allocation, poor physical infrastructure, limited access to curriculum & and quality education, lack of technical resources, and lack of parental awareness (Punjab Special Education Policy, [2020](#)).

In addressing the critical issue of inclusivity in early childhood education, it is vital to recognize that the current exclusion of children with special needs from mainstream preschools perpetuates societal disparities. To rectify this, a comprehensive approach is required, encompassing not only awareness and advocacy but also a significant shift in the mindset of educational institutions. By acknowledging and dismantling the existing barriers, Pakistan can lay the foundation for a more inclusive and equitable early



childhood education system, ensuring that every child can thrive and contribute to the nation's future prosperity.

ECSE Practices Across the Globe

Lundqvist et al. (2016) in his study evaluated the quality of Swedish preschools to embrace the inclusion of children with special needs. The study indicated that Sweden needs to develop the quality of preschool units to include and meet the needs of children with special needs. In China, over 2.46 million children under age 6 exist with disabilities. China is facing the issue of a lack of ECSE programs (Gargiulo & Piao, 1996). Saudi Arabia is offering inclusive environment services to children with IDD. Teachers' experience and knowledge affect the inclusion practices of children with IDD in Saudi ECE programs (Alanazi & Alhazmi, 2023).

In 2010, Ireland launched a universal ECCE scheme, and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was developed in 2015 to include children with disabilities and special education needs (Hanley & Garrity, 2022). Ireland is struggling with some barriers to implementing inclusion for all children in preschools (Roberts & Callaghan, 2021). In Zimbabwe, a research study indicated that special needs children in early childhood development centers are in pathetic conditions (Mpofu & Shumba, 2012). In the UK, there is a clear divide between two parallel systems: early childhood education and special education. Nind (2002) suggested a holistic outlook, alliance with parents, multidisciplinary partnership, and developmentally suitable practices.

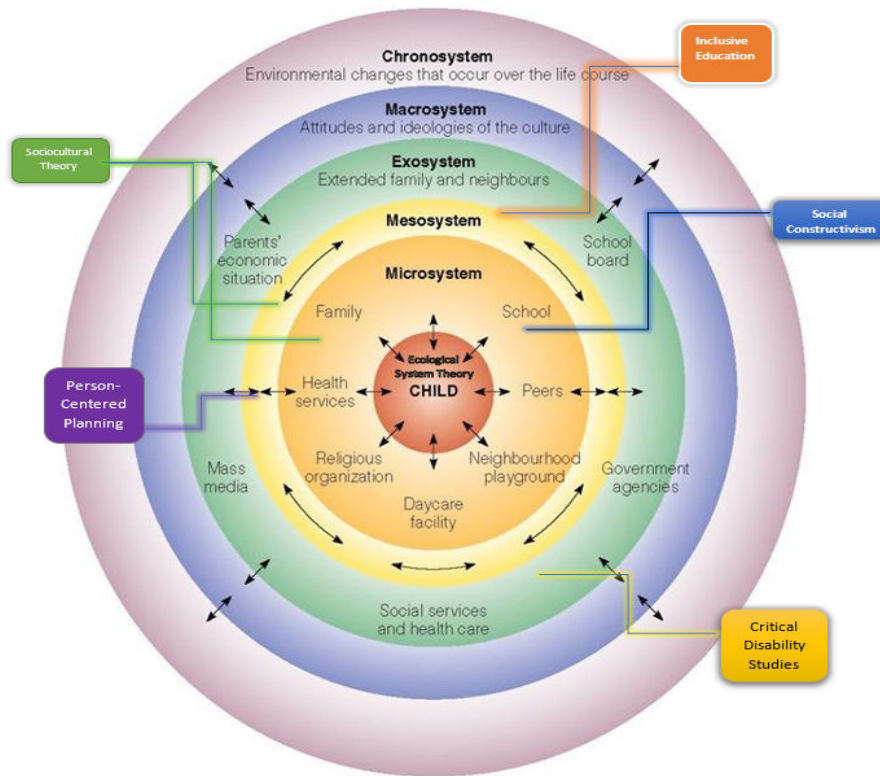
In European countries, 95% of early-age children attend IECE programs (Stahmer et al., 2011). Finland is also practicing inclusive early childhood special education (Pihlaja, 2022). China is also committed to including disabilities from early years (Chen, 2020). The United States is following the Montessori approach to provide educational services to children with disabilities in schools and even in home-based programs (Long et al., 2022). In Canada, students get enrolled in nearby schools, and teachers are dedicated enough to address the responsibility of the learning needs of all students. Inclusive settings from a young age do not bring up attitudinal barriers among peers. Instead, they have more empathy, positive attitudes, and tolerance for diversity (Kwon, Hong, & Jeon, 2017).

Theoretical underpinnings of ECSE

In early childhood special education, a variety of theories influence practices. Behaviorism, constructivism, and sociocultural theory, all from psychology, have contributed to understanding children's learning and development. Children need to activate their zone of proximal development, as Vygotsky (1978) suggested. According to Vygotsky, cognition in children develops at two levels, first with interaction with the environment and others and then integrated into individuals' mental structures. Vygotsky's sociocultural and social constructivism theory stressed the importance of cultural roots and knowledgeable individuals in optimizing learning. In addition, the field of sociology has contributed theory on social integration and, along with systems theory, has provided insights into how families operate as systems and how children with disabilities may affect the family. These theories influence practice and policy in early childhood special education (Odom, 2016).

Environmental factors can be beneficial for a special child, and such a child can be nourished better if we take Bronfenbrenner's (1979) perspective that the child's activities are directly and indirectly linked to the system in which he/she lives. Every single system of his surroundings is attached to a larger system and gives input to make meaning to life and get output from all systems to spend a contented life. The life sphere of a younger child revolves around his family and later school. The child's interaction with every system is bi-directional and reciprocal (Antony, 2022). The contribution of these systems leads to better child development. A study "adapted ecosystem model for inclusive early childhood education comprises five dimensions: (1) the inclusive education outcomes, (2) processes, and (3) structural factors within the microenvironment of the preschool; and the wider (4) inclusive structural factors at community, and (5) at national levels." (Bartolo, et. al. 2021).

Figure 1



United Nations' Inclusive Education Approach advocates the inclusion of all students, regardless of their abilities, at all educational levels. In early childhood special education, a stance of adapted teaching methods and materials can be taken to adjust the learning needs of a diverse group of tiny learners. Inclusion in the early years will strengthen the social and emotional development of all learners, along with other domains of development. Inclusion is needed at every corner of society to convert society to adjust enough to accommodate every need of special needs individuals. Critical disability studies take an interdisciplinary approach to define inclusive early childhood education. This approach accentuated inclusive ECE practices by ensuring the working of systems and policies in a way to provide services, support, and facilities to young children with special needs. Person-centered planning also focuses on individuals and their connected needs within the home, family, community, and society. All the movements related to children with special needs align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Theory. Likewise, many frameworks put children with special needs in the center and evaluate the child in the settings of home, school, society, community, and service providers (Puig & Recchia, 2020).

Benefits of ECSE to Children with Special Needs

A study indicated that early childhood special education teachers' success correlates to varied knowledge and skills development in young children with special needs (Giovacco-Johnson, 2005). Another research conducted by Kesäläinen, Suhonen, Alijoki & Sajaniemi (2022) yielded cognitive, vocabulary, behavioral, and play benefits of the integrated setup of early childhood education for children with and without disabilities. A study recommended the method of embedded instruction for the enhanced learning and retention of young special needs students, specifically those with developmental delays, in inclusive classrooms (Rakap & Parlak-Rakap, 2011). Children with learning needs confront their learning challenges with their peers effectively (Saari et al., 2022).

Children with language delays in ECE get training through special education assistance bodies in Norway using direct, indirect, and mixed models (Knudsen et al. 2022); sometimes, they get training from non-experts (Nordhal et al. 2018). The individual plan must be parallel with ECEC along with language interventions (Joner, Reikerås, & Alvestad, 2022). "Play-based learning pedagogical strategies support all children in optimizing academic progress, language development, social skills, and emotional behavioral regulation" (Young et al., 2019). Belongingness and social skills of children with autism improved because



of play-based activities in Early special education programs (Syrjämäki, 2023). Peers' interaction improved in ECSE when children with special needs played with children without disabilities. Trust develops from an early age and nurtures subsequent years (Kuutti, 2021). Social skills development through play in ECSE classrooms (Jamison et al. 2012).

ECSE Teachers and Teacher Education Programs

Inclusive education opportunities are cloaked because teachers are not willing and prepared to face the encounters in the classroom (Neves et al., 2022). Stites, Walter & Krikorian, 2021 found in their study that primary school teachers feel anxious while dealing with children with special needs in ECSE settings. Research is an endeavor to develop competencies and capabilities in teachers of children with ECSE needs to teach advocacy skills to bring systematic changes (Rausch, Steed & Strain, 2022). Teachers face many challenges in developing literacy skills in the early years of the life of children with special needs (Kurniastuti, 2023). Special needs students' success is also attached to the competence of early childhood education teachers (Nurhayatun, 2021). Capacity building and in-service training of teachers to efficiently run ECE programs for children with special needs (Ncube & Sedibe, 2022).

Teachers' attitudes affect the ECCE in Inclusion for children with special needs. The study concluded that teachers with special education qualifications had more positive attitudes toward young children with special needs in inclusive environments (Hanley & Garrity, 2022). A study conducted by Chhabra, Bose & Chadha (2018) found that early childhood educators have positive attitudes toward children with special needs and want to attend more training regarding children with special needs and their early childhood needs in any inclusive setup.

Positive academic outcomes for young children with special education needs can best be facilitated when a combination of professionals, including speech-language pathologists (SLPs), general education teachers, occupational and physical therapists, and early childhood special educators (ECSEs) work together (Kaderavek, 2009). Teachers' education and self-efficacy affect the ECSE literacy environment (Guo et al., 2013). Mickelson et al. (2022) suggested blended preparation to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse contexts, roles, and responsibilities of ECE and EI/ECSE practitioners. A collaborated design model is suggested by a few researchers to develop collaboration and self-efficacy skills for pre-professionals/student teachers and service providers (Farrand, 2019).

In 1995 (Hebbeler 1995), as the result of a shortage of teachers, insisted the universities revise the frameworks for educating teachers for early childhood special education programs. He suggested that coursework and field-based practices are not enough to cater to the needs of early childhood special education programs. Teacher education programs should also consider early childhood special education approaches in their programs to prepare the student teachers for incorporating the needs of children with special needs (Rahn, Linzmeier & Winchell, 2023). ECE teacher education programs and ECSE teacher education programs can also collaborate through a coteaching model (Chiasson, Yearwood & Olsen, 2006). Continuous development programs will also help general education teachers. The inclusion of children with special needs in the early years of their lives can be uplifting (Cummings et al., 2015).

Parents' Role in ECSE

The parental role is crucial in the development of their children, but parents of children with disabilities in Punjab lack the basic awareness of the rights and facilities that can be beneficial for their children (Hafeez, 2019; Tassarwar & Khurshid, 2017; Thakur & Abbas, 2017). Parents face communication and language barriers when communicating the needs of their children with special needs to educators in ECSE (Douglas et al., 2022). Parents' training in this regard can never be overlooked. Collaborative programs for teachers and parents of young children with special needs can benefit the development and inclusion of children with special needs (Cummings et al., 2015). Tanveer, Nadeem & Nawaz (2021) asserted that parents must be a part of school-community collaboration to provide ameliorate educational services to their children with special needs.

Discussion & Conclusion

Research in neuroimaging and early learning experiences indicated that early years of life experience yield lifelong results influencing the remarkable development of human beings. The value of early years learning and educational exposure cannot be denied. The deteriorated situation of early childhood education in Pakistan is already distressing, so we can see our special needs in these circumstances where the needs of average young children are not being met properly (Arshad & Zamir, 2018). The two systems in Pakistan show separate pasts, weaknesses, and a desire to avert parallel stigma and are relatively liable for implementing inclusion. The impact of Pakistan's Education and Special Education policies is not without criticism. In recognizing the crucial impact of early experiences on lifelong development, urgent attention is needed to address the distressing state of early childhood education in Pakistan. The evident shortcomings, coupled with the distinct challenges faced by children with special needs, underscore the necessity for immediate action. The existing disparities, separate systems, and criticized policies demand a concerted effort toward a more inclusive and effective educational framework in Pakistan.

There must be a national code of preschool years inclusive education. Now, policies are considering that ECE should be the primary place for children with special needs so that crucial risk factors of the future can be reduced. ECE provided with quality indicators eventually will lower the costs of special education services (Young et al. 2019). Although inclusive education aims to include every student in mainstream settings, a distinct group of protagonists talks about the inclusion of children with special needs (Symeonidou, Loizou & Recchia, 2023). 2030 transformative agenda is giving a new horizon of hope for the inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood along with every level of education. Despite these efforts, many children with disabilities are still not enrolled in school, making the achievement of primary education seem like an unattainable dream.

Early special education, as elucidated by Tan and Mohamad (2019), plays a pivotal role in enhancing various facets of development in children with special needs. This improvement spans academic skills, self-care skills, socialization skills, and behavioral aspects, laying a solid foundation before the commencement of primary school. Complementing this educational perspective, the religious stance on educating children with special needs, as articulated by Rahman, Rasyid, and Adhawiyah (2022), emphasizes the holistic training of the mind, body, and soul within an environment that caters equitably to the diverse learning needs of all students. Extending this narrative, religious preachers, according to Hussain, Munir, and Ibrar (2020), hold the potential to guide the public on how to treat children with disabilities, fostering a compassionate and inclusive societal mindset. However, to translate these principles into tangible action, Schofield et al. (2022) argue for the necessity of legislative measures, particularly in implementing early childhood special education within inclusive setups for children with special needs. Within this framework, the development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), as highlighted by Eilers (2023), attain a definite status, underscoring their significance in the early years of children with disabilities. Through these interconnected perspectives, a comprehensive approach emerges, advocating for the seamless integration of religious, legislative, and educational measures to ensure the well-rounded development of children with special needs.

Implementing the Montessori method to improve young children with disabilities will always be compelling in Pakistan's ECSE condition. The Montessori method provides multi-stage classrooms, self-paced learners, and scaffolding of skills to achieve advanced levels (Long, Ferranti & Westerman, 2022). Teachers need to rethink lesson planning and classroom practices through action research. Individual differences can be seen as opportunities to enrich learning rather than considered problematic. Schools should develop an inclusive culture by reforming practices and structures. Authorities need to organize the resources and form partnerships with other stakeholders like parents or caregivers, teacher trainers and researchers, local and school-level officials, policymakers, service-providing institutions, and communities. Parents can be involved through parent support groups, training parents, and building advocacy skills in parents (Ainscow, 2020) so that they can negotiate for their children's rights with schools and service providers.

The concerted efforts can pave the way for a more inclusive and empowering future for all children in Pakistan. This transformative journey is not merely about adopting a teaching method but represents a comprehensive shift in mindset, policies, and practices that collectively contribute to a more equitable and



supportive educational environment for young learners with special education needs. The potential of these young oysters should not be left adrift in the tumultuous sea of haphazard policies, untested educational methodologies, inexperienced educators, and educational challenges.

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