

## ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CLASSROOMS: PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES OF TEACHERS IN PAKISTAN

د ماشومتوب د لومړنيو زده كړو په ټولگيو كې ارزونه: په پاكستان  
كې د ښوونكو نظرونه او كړنې

Uzma Dayan<sup>1</sup> Bibi Kulsoom<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Early childhood assessment is crucial to a child's overall growth and development. It is a comprehensive framework that helps in evaluating a student's present level of knowledge and skills. The purpose of this study was to explore the current assessment practices of teachers of Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs of district Peshawar. The study was carried out employing qualitative methods with two main objectives. One, to explore perceptions of ECE teachers regarding the purpose of assessment in relation to students' learning; two, to explore their current assessment practices. The study was guided by constructivism, a theory which explains how people learn and acquire knowledge. A total of eight ECE teachers, four from public and four from private schools of Peshawar comprised the sample. These teachers were selected using purposive sampling technique. The study was delimited to schools that offered ECE program. The data were collected through semi-structured in depth interview and analyzed by thematic analysis technique. Findings of the study revealed that for majority of ECE teachers, the purpose of assessment was to get information about student's learning for promotion purpose. The study also revealed summative assessment such as final term exams and annual exams through traditional paper-pencil tests to be commonly used by teachers. The study recommends providing in-service training to ECE teachers in the area of assessment. Based on the data, the study also suggests formative assessment techniques for assessing children of ECE programs. Moreover, the traditional paper-pencil exams need to be minimized.*

Key words: Assessment practices, early childhood education, Pakistan, teachers' perceptions.

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Institute of Education and Research, University of Peshawar, Pakistan. (uzmadayan@uop.edu.pk)

<sup>2</sup> MPhil scholar, Institute of Education and Research, University of Peshawar, Pakistan. (grkhan28@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood refers to the first eight years of a child's life. These years are recognized as a vital stage of one's life because there is a rapid physical, intellectual and emotional development. This development acts as a foundation for personality building of an individual (Sadu, 2004). It is universally known that children learn and develop the most between the ages of 1 to 8. Assessment in early childhood education provides a roadmap for teachers. This roadmap benefits the student as the teacher can devise a strategy suited to a learner's needs and thereafter derive a suitable learning progression (Khan, 2017; Rahim, Venville, & Chapman, 2009).

Presently, tests are conducted in groups to check a child's level of knowledge. Such testing methods seldom provide information about a child's critical thinking skills and cognitive, social, and emotional dispositions. Early childhood assessment then becomes critical to a child's overall growth and development. ECE supports children's school readiness and academic success hence, benefits a nation. ECE encourages not only academic learning and cognitive development but also emphasis social and emotional well-being of a child (UNICEF, 2012). Olmstedt and Weikart (1989) researched to explore the historical emergence of ECE in various countries including USA, China and Sweden. Findings of their study revealed that the modern thrust of ECE arises after 2nd world war, and the current trends of ECE is the result of gradual development in these countries. In USA, the change came in 1950s, with the increasing realization about children welfare (Weikart, 2000). In China, ECE developed with the rise of People's Republic of China when in 1950s; the kindergartens became places for the care and education of small children (Shi, 1989). Today ECE is experiencing an increasing focus and transfiguration worldwide. In almost all societies of the world, ECE is now the main responsibility of formal and informal institutions, e.g. day care center, kindergartens and preschools (commonwealth task force on child development, 2005).

There are two important perspectives on ECE assessment; the developmental perspective and the socio cultural perspective. These perspectives are underpinned by specific views about young children, their development and learning (Woodhead, 2006). The developmental perspective describes early childhood as a malleable period, in which positive experiences play a lifetime effect on the development of children's feelings, knowledge and skills (Dunphy, 2008; Katz, 2010;

Woodhead, 2006). The Socio-cultural perspective states that a child learns various skills as a result of engaging with his/her culture and social surroundings. (Dunphy, 2012; Woodhead, 2006). Vygotsky (1978) was one of the pioneers of this perspective. He views social interaction particularly the role of adults or an advanced learner as central to learning.

ECE assessment looks at young student's perceptions and their capabilities and documents it. It helps in understanding how an ECE student thinks and learns. It is also about tracking their progress and facilitating their learning (Dunphy, 2008). Effective assessment is a continuous and comprehensive process using multiple sources of information that helps to communicate with others about children. Generally, assessment is divided into two categories that are formative and summative assessment. Black (2013) claimed that both formative and summative assessments have integral role in teaching learning process but only when both of them support each other. Where formative assessment is a tool for planning, and summative assessment, explores skills, abilities and learning during a specific period of learning (Black, 2013).

ECE assessment is different than assessment at secondary level because young children's characteristics vary from those of adults. Hence they need to be assessed differently. ECE children are usually in sensorimotor and pre operational stage of Piaget. They learn best when actively engaged in activities that appeal to their sense. Therefore, they need to be provided with sensorimotor experiences (Biehler & Snowman, 1990). As so the purpose of assessment is not ranking students but help them learning better (Nah, 2014).

According to Notari, Losardo (2001), traditional approach of assessment usually involves using standardize tests for screening and diagnostic purposes. These tests are norm-referenced i.e. the performance of a child is compared with in a group having children of same age, area, income level and cultural background. On the other hand informal or alternative assessment practices are anecdotal records, running records, portfolios and performance based strategies (Black, 2013) and observations. Observation is defined by Smith (2007) as "tracking of everything done or said by a child in a particular setting (P.18). It helps to get a detailed sketch about ECE student's development and interactions (Flottman, Stewart & Tayler, 2011). In ECE settings, professionals recommend observation as the most relevant method of knowing and understanding students' learning. The reason is that at young students unable to show their knowledge and understanding by formal methods (Wortham, 2005).

Check lists are actually outlines of development and learning of a child. It is actually a list of information about a child. At ECE level checklists are recommended because they are easy to use, flexible and frequent in recording. They are one of the commonly used assessment instruments in results (Brown & Rolfe, 2005). Similarly, rating scale and rubrics are alternative assessment instrument that provide ECE teachers with more qualitative data to evaluate a child's development and learning (Wortham, 2005; 2012). Selection of an appropriate assessment tool results in productive improvement in children's learning and development.

### **ECE in Pakistan**

It is assumed that in Pakistani ECE classroom, the use of these qualitative assessment modes i.e., observation, rating scale and rubrics is limited. Students are assessed by traditional paper pencil tests. Teachers are oblivious to modern modes of assessment. They seldom assess their students by formative assessment techniques.

National Education Policy 1998 emphasized the need for ECE in Pakistan (GoP: 1998). As a result, a curriculum was developed for ECE in 2002 which was the first ever curriculum for ECE. This was very late as compared to developed countries. However, in order to provide proper guidelines and instructions, the government of Pakistan developed a detailed curriculum of ECE in 2007.

Similarly, National Education Policy (NEP, 2009) also emphasized the importance of ECE and set a target for the provision of at least one year pre- primary, education in all public schools with trained teachers and additional budget allocation (GoP: 2009). It proposed the following recommendations about ECE:

1. Age group for ECE shall be three to five years. At least one year pre-primary education is compulsory.
2. Curriculum shall be improved to discourage rote learning and encourage holistic development of children.
3. Two years pre-service training for ECE teachers.

After 18th amendment (2010), education was declared as provincial subject after the provincial autonomy. As a result, provinces took initiatives to introduce ECE in public schools. The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa also introduced ECE in its public sector schools with stated

targets and curriculum (GoP: 2017). According to National Education Policy (2017) emphasizes that ECE must be set free from the panic of examinations. The grades and marks system will be avoided at ECE level. Instead verbal feedback will be used in result cards.

The current researchers found a considerable difference between what is stated in the policies and teachers' practices. Further, a difference between teachers' perceptions about the purpose of assessment and their actual practices was also noted. The researchers observed over time that schools generally do not follow the guidelines stated in NEPs, where the ECE students are exempted from exams. The idea of "active learning" is hardly seen in practice. Children have to sit for hours to attend the exams followed by grades and positions. These traditional paper pencil tests not only encourage rote learning among children but also create boredom.

ECE is comparatively a new concept in Pakistan. The main purpose of ECE assessment is to help students learn better by identifying their strengths and learning gaps. In Pakistan, its purpose has been limited to testing students for the sake of promotion. The purpose of the current study was to explore whether the teachers are aware of this purpose or not and how do they view their assessment practices in relation to students learning. Why young children are being examined through paper pencil tests? Are they learning as a result of such exams? Is this learning effective? Do kids enjoy such activities? Such and related questions intrigued the researcher's mind which led her taking interest in investigating the assessment practices of ECE teachers in district Peshawar, Pakistan. The study, therefore, aimed to explore the perceptions of ECE teachers regarding the purpose of assessment and its relationship with their current assessment practices and students' learning. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are ECE teachers' perceptions about the purpose of assessment in relation to students' learning?
2. What assessment practices do ECE teachers adapt in their class rooms?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The study is based on the educational theory of Constructivism and Montessori Method. Constructivism states that children are free learners and learn best when construct their own knowledge. The foundations of contemporary advocacy for constructivism in ECE were laid by Rousseau, Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and Maria Montessori (Ogunyemi, 2012). In a Montessori Method of education, learning is based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning and

collaborative play. Similarly, assessment of learning is based on the observation of the whole child as they work and engage in activities each day. Bodrova and Leong (2003) agree that both Montessori and Vygotsky can be described as constructivists: they believed that children construct their own knowledge and do not simply mirror what is being taught to them.

The main points that emerge from the knowledge relevant to constructivism that offer implications for learning include: people can actively construct their learning, learners use their prior knowledge to construct new knowledge and learners can make their own learning (Yager, 1991; Magoon, 1977). These ideas were central to the current study and can be functionalize by the given points:

- Assessment does not block the learning process (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
- Assessment varies with changing course works and teaching situations (Zahorik, 1995).
- Assessment comprises of range of techniques (Burry Stock, 1995).

### **3. Methodology**

The present study is qualitative in nature for which qualitative methods are adapted. Since the study aimed to explore ECE teachers' perceptions and practices, qualitative approach best suits because it accounts for the context and natural settings surrounding the study (Cresswell, 2007). Qualitative researches enable the researchers to provide a deep understanding of the phenomena by interacting in-depth with the partakers of the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Brown (2006) stated that the aim of qualitative research is not to deliver the ultimate and definite answers to the research questions but explores the research questions. The study employed qualitative exploratory design. Exploratory research is conducted when a phenomenon needs to be explored in-depth and contextually (Sounders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). It is conducted when enough is not known about a phenomenon that has not been clearly defined (Sounders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2012). Since the main objective of the current study was to explore the assessment practices of ECE teachers, exploratory research design best suited the study.

#### **Research site**

The current study was conducted in Peshawar district. Peshawar is the provincial capital of KP, Pakistan. It has a total of 74,521 km<sup>2</sup> area. It is one of the largest cities in Pakistan. The study was conducted in public and private schools of district Peshawar. Among public sector school, only

university constituent schools were selected. The rationale behind selecting these schools is that all of them offered ECE programs.

### **Sample and sampling techniques**

ECE female teachers of public and private schools of district Peshawar from which the sample was drawn. Participants for the current study were selected from two public and two private sector schools. Public sector schools were university constituent schools working under the constituency of University of Peshawar and Agricultural University, Peshawar which are public sector universities of district Peshawar. Similarly, two schools from private sector that offered ECE program were selected.

A total of eight sample units, four from public and four from private schools participated in the study. All the participants were female. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. They were also selected on the basis of their teaching experience. They must have 10 to 15 years of teaching experience in early childhood classrooms. Besides, they were selected on the basis of qualification, i.e. Masters in the discipline of arts or sciences alongside a teacher training degree. The researchers interviewed a total of eight ECE teachers. The sample size was kept small according to the nature of the study. Since qualitative researches tend to involve exact, careful and manipulative processes to produce a reasonable amount of data, small sample sizes make sure that analysis can be comprehensive and study remains feasible (Ritchie, 2014).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Setting type	Public	Public	Public	Public	Private	Private	Private	Private
Age	35 Years	34 years	30years	34 years	30 years	35 years	30 years	32 years
Qualificatio n	M.A, B.Ed.	M.A, B.Ed.	M.A, M.Ed.	M.A, B.Ed.	M.A, M.Ed.	M.A, M.Ed.	M.A, B.Ed. Montessori course	M.A, M.Ed.
Experien ce	16 Years	10 years	12 years	10 years	8 years	10 years	8 years	9 years

### Data collection tool

The data were collected through semi structured interviews. Semi structured interview combines a set of pre-determined open questions and thus allow the researcher to dig specific issues with probing questions (Tashakori & Teddlie, 2003). Moreover, it has an interactive nature that helps the researcher to get a deep understanding of the respondents' opinion (Fontana & Frey, 2000). It not only provides a pre-determined list of questions but also gives space to dig deeper into the answers given by the participants to guide their conversation (Yeo, Legard, Keegar, Ward & Lewis, 2014). Since the current study aimed to explore the perceptions of teachers, semi structured interview was considered as an appropriate data collection tool (Creswell, 2003).

### Data collection and analysis

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, schools were closed. Therefore, the data were collected online. All respondents agreed being interviewed online via WhatsApp, voice calls and telephonic calls. The purpose of interview, aims and questions of the interview were shared with the respondents few days prior to interview. All the interviews were audio recorded. Interviews started with informal talks about background of the respondents followed by questions from the semi structured interview schedule. Respondents were quietly listened during interview to get their view on the topic carefully. Time frame for interviews was different for every respondent, ranging from 60 to



90 minutes, depending on factors like the discussion level, length of replies and available time of respondents. All the interviews were conducted in Urdu. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed and then translated into English. The data were analyzed by thematic analysis guided by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). The data analysis process followed the four steps i.e., translation of data, initial coding, thematic analysis and refining the themes and developing explanation.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings have been divided into three main themes: ‘observing students’ development’, ‘Promotion and determining individual differences’ and ‘participants’ assessment practices’. These themes recurred throughout the interview. Consequently, they were often used interchangeably by the participants.

##### Observing students’ development

Majority of the respondents of private schools stated that the major purpose of assessment is to observe students’ development. They were of the view that assessment at ECE levels means to see where the child is. It is a continues process to check learners’ development through their day to day activities. Some respondents defined assessment as the act of getting knowledge of the capabilities and learning of students. They said that a child’s mind at the beginning is usually blank and we assess them in the mid and final term through assessment we check their abilities and learning progress. Majority of the respondents were found focusing on what the child can do, and what he /she cannot. Some respondents assessed students as a group also. For example one of the respondents shared:

“Assessment is to check what a child can do as an individual and as a group member” (Respondent 5). Similarly, another respondent shared: *“The purpose of assessment is to check the learning ability of students. If we want to judge learning of a child we assess him/her* (Respondent 8). Teachers of public sector schools viewed assessment as an evaluation tool for testing students’ knowledge. For example one respondent stated: *“Assessment includes the general exams system. It informs us about the progress of a child* (Respondent 2).

##### Promotion and determining individual differences

For majority of the respondents, promotion to the next grade was the foremost purpose of ECE assessment. Promoted to next grades on the basis of results obtained through formative and

summative assessments was a common practice in respondents' schools. They shared that on the basis of students' record obtained from tests and exams, students are promoted to the next higher grade. As one of the respondents shared: *On the basis of students' exam record, we just decide if the student is ready for promotion or not* (Respondent 4).

Teachers were found assessing students to determine individual differences. Assessment was regarded as a means of identifying students with their potential and actual abilities. Teachers can set their instructional targets in the light of students' unique capacities. As one respondent shared: *"We assess students to differentiate them and monitor their behavior"* (Respondent 7). Similarly another respondent of private school stated: *Students are assessed to see their positions and requirement in learning. It informs us how to deal with students in the process of learning* (Respondent 5). Likewise, another respondent from public school regarded the same purpose in this way. *Actually the main purpose of assessment is to look at the behavior of our students. It will help us to treat them accordingly* (Respondent 1)

The ECE teacher's level of satisfaction regarding classroom assessment practices is high in private sector as compared to Public sector and that is a significant difference among them. Teachers from the private schools feel more confident in assessing students' daily activities, providing feed back to their parents and getting information from parents. This finding corresponds to the study of Hafeez (2007) which states that private school teachers are confident in students' assessment.

### **Participants' assessment practices**

Under this theme, the study reflects on the main research question. That is exploring assessment practices of ECE teachers in district Peshawar KP. The findings reveal the differences in the assessment practices of participants of public and private schools. A notable finding is that though there was a difference in participants' views about assessment, yet there practices were more or less the same. For example, participants of both sectors i.e., public and private used paper pencil tests for promotion purpose. The main themes regarding assessment practices of ECE teachers along with participants' views are presented below:

#### *Observation*

The first and foremost common assessment practice of both public and private teachers was observation. Both public and private teachers use observation methods to assess their students throughout the year. Observation was found as the most effective commonly used informal method

of assessment at ECE level. One respondent from public school stated: “*ECE students are young and unaware of the concept of formal assessment so we have to judge their performance through observation along with other forms of exams.* So observation is done throughout the year and teachers keep records and mention it in annual report card. (Participant 3) Likewise, another participant from private sector stated:

“*We assess students throughout the year. We observe them... in midterm we avoid marks system, just have statements or comments of teachers about performance of kids, on the basis of teacher’s observations*”. (Participant 7)

The views of respondents reveal that observation is common in both public and private schools. The conclusions drawn from a teacher’s observation are discussed with parents periodically but this discussion with parents is more prominent in private schools as they conduct parents-teachers meeting frequently. Furthermore, the results of observation were shared with parents in result cards and check lists along with comments of the teachers in the form of a separate file. On the other hand, in public schools there was no separate file or form for the evaluation of different aspects of students’ development. A small section of the result card was specified for informal evaluation.

More significantly, an important factor in ECE assessment is collaboration between parents and teachers. Although parents have valuable information about their child, however, teachers know well about a child’s learning and development. When they work together in a cooperative relationship, it is the child who benefits. Unfortunately, the current study revealed that most of the parents have no interest in their child’s learning at ECE stage. On the other hand some parents have high expectations and they hardly accept the result of their children shared by the teachers. Such a situation of involving parents is also a great challenge for ECE teachers.

#### *Written assessment*

Traditional assessment practices like written exams were found as common practice in schools. Majority of the participants of public sector shared that they assess students only through traditional methods. They give importance to assessing students’ academic knowledge i.e. reading, writing and solving math problems. Students are prepared for the next grade. Therefore, teachers focus on skills such as reading writing and drawing. These practices were used by majority of the participants. These traditional exams were taken periodically. Exams were

conducted in the form of mid and final term in a formal method. Both written and oral tests were included. Papers were prepared by respective class teachers within the given syllabi. Through these papers, students' attained abilities were checked. For instance, a participant from private school stated:

*“We have terminal exams that are in oral and written form. But we do not depend only on these exams. We observe our students every time and have experts and physicians to check the physical and mental development of our students”* (Participant 8).

Although differences are there yet formal and traditional methods of assessment were found commonly used practices in both public and private schools. Few participants were found aware of the lack of alternative assessment practices. They doubted about the effectiveness of traditional methods of assessment at ECE level. According to a participant, *“students are assessed in the course contents taught to them in midterm and final term only. No personality aspects are checked”* (Participant 1). It shows that few teachers are in favor of the alternative forms of assessment. Yet they are practicing the traditional methods. They agree that their current practices were dominated by the traditional methods. The study found that ECE teachers are dependent mainly on traditional assessment methods such as terminal examinations having written papers (paper- pencil assessment) and oral testing (Notari & Losardo, 2001) as compared to the alternative methods, that accelerate creativity, for example observation, anecdotal record, portfolios, projects etc. (Guddemi & Case, 2004).

#### *Oral assessment*

Beside written assessment, oral assessment is also a compulsory component of ECE assessment in both public and private schools. The purpose of oral assessment is to check cognition and language development of the learners. Oral assessment includes reading from the book which helps in recognition of alphabets and increase in vocabulary through names of objects. It also helps in learning phonics. Another type is questioning method which includes basic questions of general knowledge and Islamic knowledge. An important finding is that in both public and private schools, the oral questions are asked from a specific portion of the syllabus that is already shared with student. This practice creates rote memory in children. For example, one of the participants shared: *“Indeed oral assessment is of most importance, as it helps in language development of young students. We generally assess language development by periodic oral assessments, in the form of questions about general knowledge, Islamic studies and book reading”*. (Participant 4)

Similarly, another respondent said: “We have divided oral assessment in three sections: oral language and book reading. (Participant 1)

The dominant perception that emerged is from the interviews with public sector school participants was knowledge transmission through traditional method and so is the method of assessment. On the other hand, private school teachers revealed that they use both traditional and alternative methods to teach ECE students. But for assessment, they follow traditional methods with a little use of alternative methods. For example, hands on experiments. They stated that drilling and copying is not the only way of learning and assessing. This is reflected in the following description by a private school ECE teacher:

*“At nursery and K.G, we provide the students with different material like blocks, books, toys, etc. like if we are teaching language we have kits for alphabets and words. For Math we have kits for numbers. During these activities we generally assess students by observing them. We use statements for these observations”.* (Respondent 5) It is evident that traditional methods of assessment are dominant in ECE classroom with little or no use of modern formative assessment practices.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

ECE teachers hold diverse views on assessment. They value the use of multiple modes of assessment in students’ learning, yet do not practice it. In public sector schools, the ECE assessment is formal and against the educational policies. In these schools, students are assessed through traditional paper pencil tests. On the other hand, private sector schools give some space to informal assessment. However, they too depend on traditional testing for promotion purpose that encourages little or no creativity. It is concluded that assessment planning and decision making in both the public and private sector is teachers centered.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that ECE assessment may be included in the curriculum of teacher trainings programs for a specialized knowledge, skills and practices in all domains of ECE learning. Assessing ECE students through traditional methods may be discouraged. ECE assessment practices are to be linked with educational policies. Currently the policy makers are emphasizing on boosting the quality of ECE teacher training. It is therefore, recommended that, teacher training institutes may offer a variety of assessment techniques to pre-service and in-service teachers. Similarly, teachers may apply various assessment techniques as recommended by

experts and policy makers. Parents may be involved in the process of assessment to share information about their children’s style of learning, interests and habits. In addition, it is suggested that in service refresher courses on assessment practices may be arranged by teacher training institutes.



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