

# Understanding E C D Through P r a c t i c e

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An Exploratory Study with ECD Teachers in Sindh

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This précis describes the Releasing Confidence & Creativity (RCC), an early childhood programme and the effects it already has in target government schools in just two years. RCC programme is one of the few projects which are implemented in government schools and so far the results, in terms of the improvement of physical and learning environments of these schools, have been remarkable.

This summary encompasses in particular RCC's impact on teachers of RCC phase I schools which are 103 in number. It explores teachers understanding of early childhood concepts and how do these concepts influence their practices. Teacher development has been a major area of

the programme. Over 200 teachers have been trained in phase I of the programme (16 months) out of which approx. 106 were in Sindh. Furthermore, 53 of these females, known as community teachers, were selected by their local communities to serve as katchi teachers along with the government teacher. Besides training the implementing partners have employed extensive support mechanisms in the classroom, where the teachers have been applying child-friendly teaching techniques. Resource kits, including teaching and learning materials, have been delivered to 103 schools, which have helped in transforming classrooms into interactive spaces for learning.

This summary presents the findings of the research study which involved 26 teachers from 16 RCC schools in Sindh. Both the government and community teachers from these schools were included in the sample but in certain cases some government teachers were not available, reason being their involvement in teaching other classes especially due to the dearth of teaching staff in the government school. The research study focused on exploring RCC teachers' (both government & community) understanding of ECD concepts, their perception of learning ECD concepts and their implementation in the classroom including challenges and prospects and the impact of RCC programme on their practices, school and community.

# Introduction

*“We must get away from training teachers to be simply efficient technicians and practitioners. We need a new vision of what constitutes educational leadership so that we can educate teachers to think critically”*

*(Henry A. Giroux)*



Besides parents, teachers are deemed as most important contributing factor in bringing about any meaningful transformation in early childhood related programs. Hence, in RCC program capacity building of teachers is a critical part of program success, as teachers are perhaps the most visible catalyst for change in the classroom/school. It is endeavored that through training and follow-up, teachers will gain understanding of child centered concepts and new pedagogical techniques that allow children to

explore their self-confidence and creativity in a safe environment, instigating a positive change in classroom environments and in student achievements and enrollments. The teacher training programs by the Aga Khan Education Service, Pakistan (AKES, P) and Teachers' Resource Center (TRC) entailed a framework that emphasized more on the deeper understanding of ECD concepts and related practices instead of focusing only at the mere transference of mechanical training components in the classroom. Observations and reflections from the field do indicate that these models of teacher development have helped in creating better understanding amongst teachers along with generating creativity not only in children but the teachers as well, resulting in a vibrant learning environment.

This research further explores the notion of how successfully the ECD concepts have been



implemented in the classroom/schools since capacity development of the teachers in ECD concepts has been one of the fundamental tasks in the RCC programme. AKF with the financial assistance of the USAID and technical support of partner NGOs invested substantial resources to develop the capacity of RCC school teachers and ECD support teacher (known as community teacher), selected from the community. Teacher Resource Center conducted training for HANDS and SOCIETY whereas AKES, P conducted training for their RCC school teachers. Through intensive training workshops, ensued by field based support and follow up visits, ECD concepts and their implementation techniques were communicated to teachers. Although, the documentation at different levels such as the reflections on the training process, the reports of implementing partners' continuous interaction

with schools and the comparative analysis of baseline and the monitoring data, suggests that the capacity building initiatives have helped the teachers to understand ECD concepts and the corresponding teaching methodologies. For example a considerable improvement can be observed in the monitoring data vis-à-vis teachers' administration of child-centered pedagogy as compared to baseline. However, hitherto, no study was conducted directly with teachers to explore/document their perception of learning ECD concepts, the articulation of these concepts and their experiences of translating these concepts into classroom practices and their impact on children's learning/development<sup>1</sup>. This study attempts to explore all these areas. Some of the findings of this study are summarized in the following sections along with the methodology and sampling details.

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1. If the teachers have taught in the past do they feel any difference between their previous and present practices and approaches?



# Research Methodology

The research methodology is determined by its purpose. Therefore, no method in social research is regarded as a 'perfect method'. However, most of the researchers prefer to apply an integrated methodology, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. This helps them to develop a much broader understanding of the situation. As discussed earlier this research focuses more on the exploration of teachers' experience of learning and implementing of ECD concepts and their perceptions of the impact of RCC programme on their lives, school and community. Therefore, the study primarily falls under the broader category of qualitative research. However, information

regarding some quantitative indicators was also collected in preparing teachers' profile and to understand their views in the context of these quantitative indicators.

As this study aimed at bringing to fore critical issues in the learning and implementation of ECD concepts by teachers' and their perceptions of the impact of RCC programme through in-depth inquiry therefore, 'case study' approach was employed as 'research strategy' as Bell (1999) suggests that 'the case-study approach is particularly appropriate for individual researchers because it gives an opportunity for one aspect of a problem to be studied in some depth within a limited time scale.'



The study was conducted in the following phases:

## Phase I

A detailed discussion was held with the two agencies who conducted the trainings: AKES, P and TRC to identify the ECD concepts communicated to

RCC teachers through teachers' training workshops. Moreover, trainers' perception of the capacity building process was also explored with focus on key issues including:

- Teachers' response to National ECE curriculum
- Teachers' response to training manual and methodology
- Field-based support to teachers
- Trainers' learning during the capacity building process – highlighting prospects and challenges

The training manual was also analyzed to identify the ECD concepts imparted to teachers for implementation in RCC schools.

## Phase II

In-depth interviews were conducted with 26 teachers in 16 randomly selected RCC schools in Sindh. Interviews entailed the important aspects of teachers' learning of ECD concepts and their implementation in the classroom. During the interviews it was also discussed with the teachers that, in their view, what impact RCC programme has created on their professional and personal lives, schools and communities. Finally,

interviews helped to highlight success stories and constraints vis-à-vis teaching/learning practices in RCC and teachers' perception of the possibility of their replication in other grades/schools.

In order to keep the focus of the study intact, 'semi-structured' interview schedule were conducted. Literature review was done simultaneously on issues such as early learning, teaching in early years, reflexive practice in teaching etc.

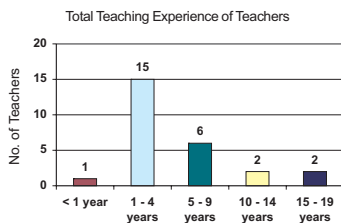
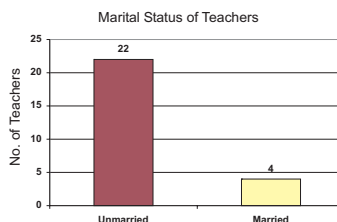
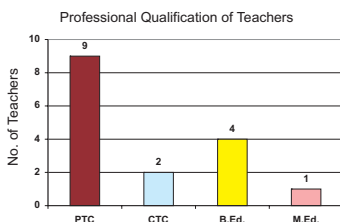
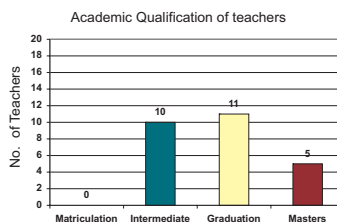
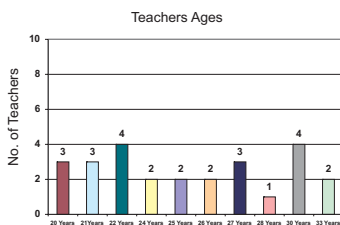
## Phase III

This phase comprised data categorization, data transcription (partially) and data analysis and report writing.

### Research Findings

Findings are presented into two parts. The first part of the finding is based on the quantitative overview primarily related to basic information about the ECD teachers in the RCC schools. This includes

teachers' age, their academic and professional qualifications, their marital status and their work experience. Following is the analysis of the quantitative data:







The data suggest that the average age of teachers in the RCC programme is 25 years while most of the teachers have completed their education up to 12th grade and beyond. Moreover, a considerable number of teachers have been exposed to professional training programs. Additionally, all the teachers have got training in ECD concepts and their implementation under the RCC

programme. Besides a significant number of teachers falling in age group from early to mid 20s, most of the RCC teachers are unmarried which means that the programme has engaged young female members of the community into a professional development process. Thus, a possibility has been created for the young women to benefit from the options in their lives other than marriage<sup>2</sup>. This point was further highlighted during detailed discussions with the teachers. Except a few, most of the teachers have started their professional careers through RCC programme.

### **Following is the summary of the qualitative data:**

As mentioned earlier, extensive discussions were carried out with the ECD teachers. During the conversation a number of issues were discussed with teachers which included:

- Teachers' association with the teaching profession
- Teachers' learning of ECD concepts and their implementation in the classroom
- The impact of RCC programme on teachers' professional and personal lives, school and community

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2. This is a cultural phenomenon, particularly in the rural context of the country, when girls reach their teen age or their early twenties their marriage becomes the most preferable options for the families.



## Teachers' Association with Teaching Profession

- During the discussion most of the teachers acknowledged that RCC has created learning and employment opportunities for them. This was particularly highlighted by the young community teachers who, after completing their education, were seeking opportunities for professional growth. The respondents also underlined that becoming ECD teacher did not only create a professional opportunity but it was also a wonderful learning experience which subsequently brought a major shift in their attitude towards young children. The capacity building workshops under the RCC programme were a remarkable learning experience which sparked creativity and confidence in them. Moreover, they got this opportunity to equip themselves with 'developmentally

appropriate' teaching techniques. Thus, teachers realized that young children's learning is inextricably entwined with their own learning. Some of the respondents candidly said that they became teachers to fulfill their financial needs. However, after experiencing the profession, they do not want to switch to any other profession. Some of the teachers reported to join the profession to respond to their childhood aspirations. One of the teachers regarded teaching as a 'prophet's profession' (paigambari paisha). While another teacher argued that it is a teacher's responsibility to help children become 'good citizens'. Most of the teachers were convinced that teachers, through their actions, create a lasting impact on the lives of their students.

## Teacher's Learning of ECD Concepts and their Implementation in the Classroom

A comprehensive discussion was held with teachers focusing on the learning and implementation of ECD concepts in the classroom. The salient features are as follows:

- Almost all the teachers reported that they prepare and use lesson plans. Lesson plan development is not a mere formality in their ECD teaching as most of the teachers were unequivocal about the impact of lesson plan on their teaching. Teachers argued that lesson plan helps them to organize their teaching, manage the classroom well and consequently save time. It also helps them in assessing the impact of their teaching particularly by reviewing the lesson plan they randomly identify certain topics which are already covered, and then ask children to revise them. This in turn helps them to assess children's ability to retain their learning. Most of the teachers prepare their lesson plans on daily and weekly basis.
- Interestingly, during the discussion some of the teachers were not able to recall the description/meaning of 'Child-Centered Learning'. However, during the



observation it was noticed that after each activity the teachers were asking children what they want to do next. Further discussion with teachers revealed that most of them were aware of the fact that teaching children as per their will/wish is at the heart of ECD teaching. Teachers also expressed their confidence in children's ability to learn on their own as most of the teachers seemed convinced that children learn best by doing certain things.

- The data suggests that all the teachers in the ECD classes practice activity-based teaching. The reason being, as discussed above, all the teachers were convinced that activity-based teaching is the most effective way of embroiling children into the learning process. Teachers argued that given the children's age (which is generally between 3-6) activity based teaching is the most appropriate technique as children have a limited attention span and they prefer to switch from one activity to another quickly. Lecture method or rote memorization may result in boredom and serious learning elapse. Moreover, in this particular age children are highly energetic and dynamic and they want to express themselves through different activities.



- Most of the teachers were able to relate their classroom activities with children's developmental process. The optimal learning and development takes place when children are able to use all their senses. Responding to the research questions pertaining to the relationship between classroom activities and child development teachers elucidated how different activities, they were doing with children, will improve children's skills and competency. These activities included group work, drawing, coloring, counting, physical exercise, learning alphabets etc.

- Most of the teachers categorically dismissed the idea of giving punishment to children as they regarded punishment 'counter productive'. Some of the teachers expressed their apprehension that children may become stubborn as a result of punishment which results in inflexibility. Alternatively, they proposed that adults (teacher or parents) should rather talk to children politely and affectionately to make them realize their mistake. Teachers' perception

of punishment to children reflects that their experience of teaching young children is helping them to understand children particularly their emotional and psychological needs in the early years.

- Teachers informed the researchers that RCC program has succeeded in motivating other teachers in the school to transform their pedagogy and bring it in alignment with the ECD class. Some of the teachers reported that ECD children from their schools have refused to go to any other school or to accept promotion to another class in the same school. The reason being that in the ECD class, children enjoy the learning environment. The findings of classroom observation endorse teachers' perception of children's response to ECD classes in the RCC schools. All five researchers were convinced that the majority of children were fully involved in classroom activities throughout the day. The classroom environment was full of 'life' and it seemed that learning was an exhilarating experience for children.

# Conclusion

The preceding discussion suggests that RCC program has remarkably transformed the learning environment in schools. This has been primarily achieved by enhancing the teachers' capacity to create a 'conducive' environment in the classroom based on children's developmental and learning needs. Low cost material that has been produced and provided in the program compliments teachers' efforts and students' enthusiasm as teachers are well equipped to use this material. In RCC, teachers do not function in vacuum. Conversely, they are mostly aware of the basic ECD concepts which are at the heart of RCC program design. Instead of relying on theoretical explanations of the developmental and learning process in the early years, teachers decipher ECD through their daily classroom activities. Or in other words, as a result of ongoing support and capacity building initiatives in RCC, teachers have started to translate their understanding of ECD into classroom practices. Given the brief program duration since its inception, this can be regarded as a major success.

However, critical examination of different aspects of the program reveals that RCC needs strengthening in several areas, some of which are:

- Given much emphasis on activity-based teaching in the program, teachers' efforts for creating a vibrant learning environment in the school is more geared towards enhancing and modifying practices. However, learning and especially early learning is a process of creating culture instead of recreating already defined culture. Despite best intentions and efforts, following a set of activities ritualistically on daily basis may result in children and teachers' detachment from the learning process in the long run. Therefore, it is important that teachers start to take initiatives beyond the set of activities prescribed in the training program to respond to children and their own creativity. Similarly, teachers should not confine their efforts to become skilled practitioners, but should rather aim to cultivate creative and independent thinking in children by continuously exploring



new avenues for action and reflection.

- The sustainability of the impact of RCC is highly questionable as communities have already started to ask teachers about the future of the program and consequently their children's future. In order to ensure the sustainability of good practices promoted by RCC, all the stakeholders will have to ensure that government, school management and communities show greater ownership and commitment towards the program. Efforts made by just one or two teachers cannot change much unless the whole school

environment does not reflect those values promoting optimum development and learning of children.

- Although, it can be said that RCC has created positive influence on schools, it should not be disregarded that the program may create 'reversed discrimination' as RCC teacher and children are observed by rest of the school as 'privileged ones'. The inclination of teachers and children of the upper classes to study the content of ECD class, with similar pedagogy, indicates that the rest of the school feels 'underprivileged' or 'left out'.





