



Situational Analysis of Early Childhood Education in Baltistan Region: Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (ECE) provides the foundation for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development and contributes significantly to school readiness and lifelong learning. In Pakistan, ECE implementation and quality remain inconsistent despite national policy efforts, particularly in remote regions like Baltistan. This study presents a situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region by identifying the major challenges faced by teachers, parents, and learners, while examining prospects for improving ECE practices. A convergent mixed-methods research design was used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the existing educational situation. Data were collected from 200 participants, (100 teachers and 100 parents) in private schools of District Skardu, through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square tests, whereas qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that respondents acknowledged ECE's growing importance and reported positive perceptions of classroom practices, lesson planning, and child-centered learning. However, the situational analysis revealed several persistent challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, shortages of trained teachers, limited resources, financial constraints, multilingual classroom, insufficient parental awareness, and inconsistent policy implementation. A significant relationship emerged between parental involvement and the challenges affecting ECE ($\chi^2 = 37.123$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$), emphasizing the importance of active family participation in improving educational quality. Qualitative findings supported these results by highlighting the need for continuous teacher training, improved learning environments, stronger school-parent collaboration, and context-responsive policies. The study concludes that improving ECE in Baltistan requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, school authorities' teachers, parents, and development organizations. The findings provide context-specific evidence for improving Early Childhood Education and offer practical directions for addressing existing challenges while promoting sustainable educational development in the Baltistan region.

Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is widely recognized as the foundation of children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The experiences gained during the early years shape their readiness for formal school, academic achievement, and their capacity to keep learning throughout life. Research consistently demonstrates that investment in quality ECE builds children's learning capacities, social competence, and contributes to sustainable national development. Consequently, governments and international organizations increasingly regard ECE as an essential component of educational systems and a prerequisite for achieving educational outcomes.

Access to Early Childhood Education has expanded considerably worldwide, largely through child-centered curricula, trained teachers, age-appropriate learning environments, and supportive educational policies. International organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF, among others, stress that quality early learning improves school readiness, reduce educational inequalities, and strengthen human capital. While many developed nations have successfully integrated ECE into their formal education systems, developing countries still struggle with infrastructure, teacher preparation, learning resources, policy implementation, and equitable access.

Pakistan has gradually paid more attention to through policy steps such as the National Education Policy (2009) and the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy Framework (2017) both of which acknowledge the value of quality early learning during children's formative years. Yet despite these policy commitments, ECE provision and quality vary widely across the country: urban schools generally have greater access to trained teachers, instructional resources, and child-friendly learning environments, while rural and remote schools face greater constraints.

Balochistan is one such remote region, shaped by its mountainous terrain, scattered settlements, harsh climatic, linguistic diversity, and limited educational infrastructure. These geographical and socio-economic realities influence the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of ECE. Private schools have expanded considerably in District Skardu and surrounding areas, yet gaps remain in teacher qualifications, classroom facilities, instructional materials, parental awareness, and institutional support. This makes it necessary to closely examine both the present challenges and the possibilities for improvement in the region.

A situational analysis provides a systematic understanding of the current status of an educational program by examining its strengths, existing conditions, key challenges, available resources, and future prospects. In the context of Early Childhood Education, such an analysis enables researchers and policymakers to identify the factors influencing educational provision and to formulate evidence-based strategies for improving educational quality. Rather than focusing solely on program implementation or educational outcomes, a situational analysis considers the broader institutional, social, geographical, and policy environments that shape educational experiences.

Most of existing studies on Early Childhood Education in Pakistan focuses on urban areas, curriculum, teacher training, or policy, with little attention paid to remote regions such as Balochistan. Furthermore, past studies have been primarily on educational issues in isolation and not on an integrated analysis of the challenges faced by teachers, parents and learners and the

prospects for strengthening Early Childhood Education in the regional context. This gap limits the availability of context-specific evidence required for effective educational planning and policy formulation.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region. It deals with the major challenges faced by teachers, parents and learners and looks at the prospects for improvement in Early Childhood Education through improved teacher preparation, improved infrastructure, increased parental participation, effective policy implementation and context responsive educational practices. The findings are likely to provide empirical evidence to the policymakers, educational administrators, school leaders and other stakeholders who desire to strengthen the Early Childhood Education in the geographically remote regions of Pakistan.

Objectives

1. To identify the challenges faced by parents, teachers, and students at the early 2. childhood education level.
2. To highlight the prospects for updating the early childhood education.

Research Questions

1. What challenges are faced by parents, teachers, and students in supporting early childhood level?
2. What are the prospects for improving and updating early childhood education in the Baltistan region?
3. What is the current status of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in terms of infrastructure, accessibility, and its integration within early childhood development?
4. What roles can government, community, and NGOs play in enhancing early childhood education in District Skardu.

Literature Review

Early Childhood Education and Situational Analysis

UNESCO (2021) stated that Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the foundation of the development of children's cognition, socialization, emotion, physicality and language during the most important years of life. Quality early learning experiences improve school readiness, enhance educational equity and promote lifelong learning and sustainable national development. Therefore, investment in ECE is considered to be one of the most effective educational strategies to improve children's future academic achievement and overall well-being.

UNICEF (2019) reported that quality pre-primary education significantly enhances children's communication, problem-solving, and social skills while reducing educational inequalities. The organization stressed that effective Early Childhood Education depends on qualified teachers, developmentally appropriate learning environments, adequate educational resources, and active parental involvement. These elements collectively create supportive conditions for children's holistic development and successful transition into primary education.

Heckman (2006) argued that investment in early childhood yields greater educational, social, and economic returns than interventions introduced later in life. Early development of cognitive and

non-cognitive skills establishes the foundation for future learning, employability, productivity, and social well-being. Consequently, Early Childhood Education is increasingly recognized as a strategic investment in human capital rather than merely the initial stage of formal schooling.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that children's development is influenced by the interaction of family, school, community, and policy environments. This ecological perspective suggests that the quality of Early Childhood Education depends not only on classroom practices but also on parental support, institutional capacity, educational resources, and policy implementation. Therefore, a situational analysis provides a comprehensive framework for examining the multiple factors that shape Early Childhood Education within a specific context such as the Baltistan region.

The authors also found that there were ongoing disparities in access, especially for children in rural and disadvantaged areas. Results indicate that in order to enhance ECE outcomes in Pakistan, teachers need to be trained, curriculum needs to be of a culturally relevant nature, home environment needs to be supportive, the government needs to be more inclusive, and investments in this sector need to be sustained (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Fatima, 2025).

The findings are significant for the Baltistan region as remoteness, fragmented communities, diverse languages, limited institutional resources, and variations in community context can have an impact on the delivery of ECE. The Pakistan–Indonesia comparison also suggests that involving the community and integrating local culture can enhance the relevance and sustainability of early childhood programmes in less-served areas (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Fatima, 2025).

International Perspective on Early Childhood Education

UNESCO (2021) identified Early Childhood Education as a given its role in children's holistic development and lifelong learning. Countries investing in quality ECE have reported improved school readiness, higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and greater educational equity. Successful ECE systems are characterized by child-centered curricula, qualified teachers, inclusive learning environments, and strong collaboration among schools, families, and communities.

UNICEF (2019) highlighted that despite global progress, many developing countries still struggle to provide equitable access to quality ECE. Limited educational infrastructure, shortages of trained teachers, inadequate resources, and low parental awareness remain significant barriers, particularly in remote and economically disadvantaged communities. Strengthening teacher capacity, improving learning environments, and promoting family engagement are seen as essential to raising quality.

OECD (2017) reported that high-performing ECE systems emphasize play-based learning, continuous professional development, systematic curriculum planning, and effective quality assurance. These practices encourage creativity, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving while supporting children's active participation in learning. Such international experiences provide valuable guidance for improving ECE in developing countries.

Early childhood care and education is a key area of investment in children's school readiness, their participation in education in an equitable way, social development and lifelong learning,

recognised internationally. Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025a) noted that there were significant variations between ECCE systems of developed and developing countries in terms of governance, public funding, enrolment, teaching qualification, infrastructure, curriculum, equity, and learning outcomes.

The comparison shows that the ECCE system in developed countries are more developed than the ECCE system in developing countries, which are often characterized by inadequate professional training of teachers, poor infrastructure, and insufficient financing, and low participation of children in ECCE. Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025a) thus highlighted the need to address inequitable financing, human resource in the field, quality assurance mechanisms, and targeted interventions for disadvantaged children.

A regional view is especially crucial since countries with similar social and economic contexts might have similar issues in delivering ECE. To understand the standing of Pakistan in South Asia, Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025b) reviewed the ECCE policies, access, quality, equity and developmental outcomes in the SAARC countries, providing a locally relevant example.

The SAARC comparison applies to Baltistan because interventions at national level may fail to address the needs of remote, rural, poor and geographically isolated communities unless they can be delivered sensitively. Close neighbours in the South Asian region can, therefore, provide inspiration in finding models that can be implemented in Baltistan on a community level that are inclusive, affordable, and locally appropriate in expanding ECE services in the region (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025b).

Woodhead (2014) emphasized that the ECE quality depends on qualified teachers, supportive environments, parental participation, and culturally responsive practices and that policies should reflect local contexts and regional diversity to ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities. Collectively, the international literature demonstrates that strengthening ECE requires coordinated efforts across policy, teacher development, institutional support, and community participation, providing a conceptual foundation for examining the educational situation in the Baltistan region.

Early Childhood Education in Pakistan

Government of Pakistan (2009) recognized Early Childhood Education (ECE) as a fundamental component of the national education system through the National Education Policy. The policy emphasized that quality ECE promotes children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development while improving school readiness and lifelong learning. Although the policy established a strong framework for expanding ECE, its implementation has remained uneven because of disparities in educational resources, institutional capacity, and provincial execution.

Government of Pakistan (2017) introduced the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Policy Framework to improve the quality and accessibility of ECE across the country. The framework emphasized child-centered learning, teacher professional development, developmentally appropriate curricula, parental involvement, and supportive learning environments. However, the policy acknowledged that limited financial resources, inconsistent monitoring, and inadequate institutional support continue to hinder effective implementation, particularly in underserved regions.

UNICEF Pakistan (2018) reported that despite gradual improvements in ECE enrolment, substantial disparities persist between urban and rural areas regarding infrastructure, classroom facilities, learning materials, and access to qualified teachers. The report further highlighted that limited parental awareness and inadequate educational resources reduce children's opportunities to benefit from quality early learning experiences. Addressing these inequalities requires greater investment in teacher training, school facilities, and community awareness programs.

Early childhood education in Pakistan still has a number of governance, access, financial, curriculum delivery, teacher capacity and policy implementation and practices issues. Rafiq-uz-Zaman and Fatima (2025) noted that the ECE system in Pakistan was relatively centralised and suffered from weak resources, governance fragmentation and unqualified workers in their comparison with the ECE system in Indonesia.

The authors also found that there were ongoing disparities in access, especially for children in rural and disadvantaged areas. Results indicate that in order to enhance ECE outcomes in Pakistan, teachers need to be trained, curriculum needs to be of a culturally relevant nature, home environment needs to be supportive, the government needs to be more inclusive, and investments in this sector need to be sustained (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Fatima, 2025).

The findings are significant for the Baltistan region as remoteness, fragmented communities, diverse languages, limited institutional resources, and variations in community context can have an impact on the delivery of ECE. The Pakistan–Indonesia comparison also suggests that involving the community and integrating local culture can enhance the relevance and sustainability of early childhood programmes in less-served areas (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Fatima, 2025).

Zubairi and Rose (2017) found that the quality of Early Childhood Education in Pakistan is influenced by teacher competency, classroom environment, curriculum implementation, institutional support, and parental participation. Similarly, Khalid and Mahmood (2019) emphasized that active parental involvement through home-based learning and regular communication with schools positively influences children's academic and socio-emotional development. Collectively, these studies indicate that improving Early Childhood Education in Pakistan requires coordinated efforts to strengthen teacher preparation, institutional capacity, educational resources, and family engagement.

Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan Region

Bashir and Akhtar (2018) observed that the educational context of Baltistan is strongly influenced by mountainous geography, dispersed settlements, and limited accessibility to educational services. These geographical conditions affect the planning, delivery, and quality of Early Childhood Education, particularly in remote communities where schools frequently experience shortages of infrastructure and educational resources. Although educational opportunities have expanded in recent years, ensuring equitable access to quality ECE remains a continuing challenge.

Ali and Hussain (2019) reported that private schools have played a significant role in expanding Early Childhood Education in District Skardu by increasing enrolment and promoting child-centered learning practices. However, considerable differences remain among schools in terms of

teacher qualifications, classroom facilities, learning resources, and institutional capacity. These variations continue to influence the quality and consistency of educational provision across the region.

Shafa and Yousuf (2020) identified teacher competency as a major factor affecting the quality of Early Childhood Education in northern Pakistan. Many preschool teachers have limited opportunities for specialized training and continuous professional development, resulting in inconsistent classroom practices. Similarly, Khan and Bano (2021) found that parental involvement positively influences children's early learning, although family participation is often constrained by educational background, household income, and limited awareness. These findings suggest that strengthening teacher development, improving school facilities, and enhancing parental engagement are essential for improving Early Childhood Education in Baltistan.

Ahmed et al. (2022) highlighted that multilingual classrooms present an additional challenge in Baltistan, where many children enter school speaking Balti or other local languages while classroom instruction is primarily delivered in Urdu and English. The authors recommended culturally responsive teaching strategies and appropriate language support to facilitate children's transition into formal schooling. Overall, the literature indicates that despite gradual progress, Early Childhood Education in Baltistan continues to face challenges related to infrastructure, teacher preparation, parental participation, language diversity, and geographical isolation, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive situational analysis of the region.

Challenges Affecting Early Childhood Education

UNESCO (2021) emphasized that although Early Childhood Education (ECE) has gained global recognition, many countries continue to face challenges in providing equitable and quality early learning opportunities. The organization identified inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, limited learning resources, weak institutional support, and insufficient financial investment as major barriers to effective ECE implementation. These challenges are particularly evident in geographically isolated and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, where educational inequalities restrict children's access to quality education.

UNICEF (2019) reported that teacher competency remains one of the strongest determinants of quality Early Childhood Education. Many preschool teachers, particularly in developing countries, have limited professional preparation in child-centered pedagogy and classroom management. Similarly, Shafa and Yousuf (2020) observed that teachers working in remote areas often lack opportunities for specialized training and continuous professional development. Strengthening teacher education and institutional support is therefore essential for improving instructional quality and children's learning experiences.

Zubairi and Rose (2017) found that inadequate educational resources, overcrowded classrooms, and poor learning environments continue to affect the quality of Early Childhood Education in Pakistan. Likewise, Khalid and Mahmood (2019) highlighted that parental involvement significantly influences children's academic and socio-emotional development, although financial constraints, limited awareness, and weak school–parent communication often reduce family participation. These findings indicate that improving school facilities and strengthening partnerships between schools and families are critical for enhancing educational quality.

One of the most pressing problems in the quality and effectiveness of ECE in Pakistan is a lack of professionally prepared teachers. Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2024) concluded that teacher vacancies, lack of professional training, overcrowded classrooms, age-mixing and underutilisation of ECCE learning kits were the factors affecting the delivery of ECE in the schools searched in Punjab.

The study also revealed many classrooms in ECCE were inadequately trained teachers or teachers/caregivers who do not have the skills to implement the child-centred and activity-based teaching. These results indicate that a study of ECE in Baltistan should consider the teacher's strength, qualification, professional training, workload in the classroom, use of learning materials and age-appropriate placement of children as well as the availability of dedicated ECE staff members (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2024).

Issues faced by teachers are closely linked to the wider institutional context and system issues. Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025d) found that quality provision of ECCE was hindered by; big class sizes, lack of play materials, lack of training in modern teaching resources, poor infrastructure, poor administrative support and high workloads of staff.

Government of Pakistan (2017) acknowledged that policy implementation remains a major challenge due to inadequate funding, weak monitoring systems, inconsistent teacher preparation, and institutional disparities. Furthermore, Ahmed et al. (2022) emphasized that multilingual classroom environments in regions such as Baltistan create additional instructional challenges, as many children begin school speaking local languages while formal instruction is delivered in Urdu or English. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that the challenges affecting Early Childhood Education are interconnected and require integrated educational planning, particularly in geographically remote regions such as Baltistan.

Prospects for Improving Early Childhood Education

UNESCO (2021) emphasized that sustainable improvement in Early Childhood Education requires investment in qualified teachers, child-centered curricula, supportive learning environments, and effective educational leadership. The organization argued that coordinated efforts among governments, educational institutions, communities, and development partners are essential for ensuring equitable access to quality early learning opportunities.

UNICEF (2019) highlighted that continuous professional development, mentoring programs, and classroom-based support significantly improve teachers' knowledge and instructional practices. Similarly, OECD (2017) reported that successful Early Childhood Education systems consistently invest in curriculum improvement, teacher preparation, quality assurance, and evidence-based educational planning. These practices encourage creativity, communication, problem-solving, and active learning while supporting children's holistic development.

Government of Pakistan (2017) emphasized that the ECCE Policy Framework provides strategic directions for strengthening Early Childhood Education through institutional development, curriculum reform, teacher education, and improved stakeholder collaboration. Likewise, Khalid and Mahmood (2019) found that stronger partnerships between schools and parents enhance children's educational experiences by improving learning support, communication, and school readiness. Active parental involvement should therefore be considered an integral component of quality Early Childhood Education.

Promoting a more child-centred, play-based, inquiry-based, and developmentally appropriate approach to early childhood education will depend on the prospects for improvement moving away from the traditional teacher-directed approach. Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025c) introduced the concept of STEAM education as an interdisciplinary approach that can foster creativity and collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, cognitive developments and socio-emotional competence among young children.

However, for STEAM to be successful, it must be integrated into the curriculum, teachers must be trained on STEAM, learning resources must be widely available, culturally responsive approaches must be adopted, and meaningful partnerships must be established between schools, families, and communities. In the context of Baltistan, low cost STEAM activities using local resources, indigenous knowledge and environment, and community experiences could be a viable way to enhance ECE while not relying on costly technology alone (Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025c).

Rafiq-uz-Zaman (2025d) suggested that key concerns in the improvement of ECCE are the trained staffing, continuous staff training and development, higher engagement of parents, and better infrastructure, workload reduction, supportive supervision and funding by the government. The actions suggest coordinated reforms in teacher recruitment, teacher capacity building, curriculum implementation, learning resource provision, institutional monitoring, community participation and public financing are needed to achieve sustainable progress in Baltistan.

Likewise, Rafiq-uz-Zaman and Fatima (2025) emphasized the importance of culturally responsive curricula, engagement of community, inclusive governance, and continued investment in access and quality in ECE. The opportunities are especially apt for Baltistan where community based ECE centres, contextually relevant teaching materials, multi-lingual teaching, teacher awareness and decentralized plan and program of education could facilitate ECE to children not served or in remote localities.

Shafa and Yousuf (2020) recommended that educational planning in geographically remote regions should respond to local cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic conditions. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2022) suggested that technological advancement, improved educational planning, multilingual instructional support, and stronger collaboration between public and private educational institutions can significantly enhance the quality and sustainability of Early Childhood Education. These findings indicate that improving teacher capacity, educational infrastructure, parental engagement, and context-responsive policies offers promising prospects for strengthening Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of research on Early Childhood Education, existing studies have primarily examined individual dimensions such as teacher competency, curriculum implementation, classroom practices, parental involvement, and educational policy. Most investigations have focused on specific educational issues rather than providing a comprehensive assessment of the overall Early Childhood Education system.

Furthermore, limited empirical evidence is available regarding the combined influence of institutional, geographical, socioeconomic, and community-related factors on the implementation

of Early Childhood Education in geographically remote regions. In particular, there is a lack of comprehensive studies examining the current status, challenges, and future prospects of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region by integrating the perspectives of teachers, parents, and classroom observations within a mixed-methods framework.

The present study addresses this gap by conducting a comprehensive situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region. It examines the existing educational situation, identifies the major challenges affecting the implementation of Early Childhood Education, and explores the prospects for its improvement. The findings are expected to provide context-specific evidence to support educational planning, policy formulation, and institutional decision-making for strengthening Early Childhood Education in the region.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods research design to conduct a situational analysis of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the Baltistan region. This design combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the existing ECE system, the challenges affecting its implementation, and the prospects for its improvement. Quantitative data were collected to measure the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding various aspects of Early Childhood Education, while qualitative data provided detailed insights into their experiences and viewpoints. Both types of data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and integrated during interpretation. The combination of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the educational situation and enhanced the credibility and completeness of the study.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in District Skardu, Baltistan, Pakistan, where selected private schools offering Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs served as the research setting. Skardu was selected because it represents the educational context of the Baltistan region and provides an appropriate setting for examining the current status, challenges, and prospects of Early Childhood Education. The region is characterized by its mountainous geography, dispersed population, and cultural diversity, all of which influence educational access and service delivery. Despite the expansion of private educational institutions, variations remain in educational facilities, teacher preparation, learning resources, and parental involvement. Therefore, the selected schools provided a suitable context for conducting a comprehensive situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised teachers and parents associated with private schools offering Early Childhood Education (ECE) in District Skardu, Baltistan. These stakeholders were selected because of their direct involvement in the planning, implementation, and support of Early Childhood Education. Teachers provided information regarding classroom practices, instructional challenges, and institutional support, while parents contributed their perspectives on children's early learning experiences and educational development. The study focused

exclusively on the private school sector, which plays an important role in the provision of Early Childhood Education in the region. Including both teachers and parents enabled the researcher to obtain diverse perspectives on the current status of Early Childhood Education, identify the major challenges affecting its implementation, and explore the prospects for its improvement.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who possessed direct knowledge and experience of Early Childhood Education (ECE). This non-probability sampling method was considered appropriate because it enabled the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing meaningful insights into the current status, challenges, and prospects of ECE in the Baltistan region. The sample comprised 200 participants, including 100 ECE teachers and 100 parents from selected private schools in District Skardu. In addition, 100 classroom observations were conducted to examine classroom practices, teaching strategies, learning resources, and the overall learning environment. From each selected school, two teachers and two parents participated in the study, while classroom observations provided supplementary evidence to support the questionnaire and interview findings. This sampling approach ensured comprehensive and context-specific information regarding the implementation of Early Childhood Education.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using questionnaires, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews to obtain both quantitative and qualitative information. Separate structured questionnaires were developed for teachers and parents using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaires gathered information regarding the current status of Early Childhood Education, challenges affecting its implementation, and prospects for improvement. A structured classroom observation checklist was used to assess classroom organization, teaching practices, learning materials, teacher–child interaction, and the overall learning environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to explore their experiences, perceptions, and recommendations regarding Early Childhood Education. The use of multiple instruments enabled triangulation of data and provided a comprehensive understanding of the educational situation in the Baltistan region.

Pilot Testing, Validity and Reliability

A pilot study was conducted prior to the main data collection to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and suitability of the research instruments. The pilot participants were selected from private schools offering Early Childhood Education in District Skardu and were not included in the main study. Based on the feedback received, necessary revisions were made to improve the wording, sequence, and clarity of the questionnaires, interview guide, and classroom observation checklist. The validity of the instruments was established through expert review by specialists in Early Childhood Education and Educational Research, who assessed their relevance and content coverage. The reliability of the questionnaires was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, and the obtained coefficients indicated satisfactory internal consistency. The validated and reliable instruments were subsequently used for the main study.

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, formal permission was obtained from the concerned educational authorities and the administrations of the selected private schools in District Skardu, Baltistan. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants, and informed consent was obtained before their participation. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to 100 teachers and 100 parents, ensuring that all items were completed accurately. Simultaneously, 100 classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation checklist to assess classroom practices, learning resources, teacher–child interaction, and the overall learning environment. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with selected participants to obtain detailed qualitative information. The use of multiple data collection methods ensured the collection of comprehensive and reliable information regarding the existing status, challenges, and prospects of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were coded, entered, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize the responses of teachers and parents. The Chi-square (χ^2) test was applied to examine the association between the selected study variables, with the level of statistical significance set at $p < .05$. Qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, in which responses were systematically coded and organized into meaningful themes. Classroom observation data were also reviewed and interpreted to support the questionnaire and interview findings. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results provided a comprehensive situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in the Baltistan region.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles. Permission was obtained from the relevant authorities and the administrations of the selected private schools before commencing the research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process by ensuring that participants' identities remained undisclosed and that the collected information was used solely for academic purposes. The findings were reported in aggregate form to protect participants' privacy and maintain the integrity of the research.

Results

This section presents the findings regarding the current situation, challenges, and prospects of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in private schools of District Skardu, Baltistan. The results are based on quantitative data from questionnaires and qualitative evidence from interviews and classroom observations. The findings provide an overall understanding of ECE practices, institutional conditions, stakeholder perceptions, and factors influencing educational quality in the region.

Demographic Profile of Participants

The study involved teachers and parents from private schools offering Early Childhood Education in District Skardu. The inclusion of both stakeholder groups provided a comprehensive understanding of ECE implementation from classroom and family perspectives.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants (N=200)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Respondent Group	Teachers	100	50.0
	Parents	100	50.0
Teachers' Gender	Female	100	100.0
Parents' Gender	Male	18	18.0
	Female	82	82.0
Teachers' Educational Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	40	40.0
	Master's Degree	27	27.0
	Other Qualifications	33	33.0
Parents' Educational Qualification	FA/FSC	14	14.0
	BA/BSc	13	13.0
	BS	28	28.0
	MA/MSc	41	41.0
	MS/M.Phil.	4	4.0
Teaching Experience	Less than 1 Year	48	48.0
	1–5 Years	24	24.0
	6–10 Years	21	21.0
	More than 10 Years	7	7.0

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. The sample consisted of 200 respondents, including 100 teachers and 100 parents. All teacher respondents were female, while the majority of parents were female. Most teachers possessed bachelor's or master's degrees, indicating a satisfactory educational background, while the teaching experience profile reflected a relatively young workforce. Parents represented diverse educational backgrounds, enabling them to provide informed views regarding their children's early learning experiences. Overall, the demographic characteristics indicate that participants were suitable sources for examining the current status, challenges, and future prospects of Early Childhood Education in private schools of Baltistan.

Current Status of Early Childhood Education

The findings indicate that Early Childhood Education is increasingly recognized as an important foundation for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and academic development. Teachers and parents generally expressed positive perceptions regarding the role of ECE in preparing children for formal schooling. However, the results also indicate variations in the quality and implementation of ECE practices among private schools. While some institutions have

developed child-friendly classrooms and organized instructional practices, others continue to face limitations related to resources, teacher preparation, and institutional support.

Table 2: Descriptive Summary of Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions of Early Childhood Education

Dimension	Indicator	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Curriculum Implementation	Lesson planning for ECE	4.61	0.586	Very High
Curriculum Implementation	Child-centered teaching practices	4.44	0.642	High
Curriculum Implementation	Maintenance of child development records	4.41	0.731	High
Classroom Environment	Safe and secure classroom environment	4.64	0.555	Very High
Teacher Professional Development	Continuous professional learning	4.59	0.698	High
Learning Resources	Availability of teaching and learning resources	4.53	0.703	High
Parents' Perception	Importance of Early Childhood Education	4.91	0.287	Very High
Parents' Perception	Development of basic learning and social skills	4.88	0.353	Very High
Parents' Perception	Overall satisfaction with ECE services	4.52	0.627	High

Source: Field Survey (2025–2026)

Table 2 presents respondents' perceptions regarding different aspects of ECE implementation. The findings show high mean scores across curriculum practices, classroom environment, teacher development, learning resources, and parental perceptions, reflecting an overall positive assessment of the existing ECE situation.

The highest ratings were observed for safe classroom environments ($M = 4.64$) and lesson planning practices ($M = 4.61$), suggesting that many schools have established supportive learning conditions. Parents also showed strong recognition of the importance of ECE ($M = 4.91$) and its contribution to children's development ($M = 4.88$).

Despite these positive perceptions, qualitative findings revealed differences among schools regarding availability of learning materials, specialized teacher training, and child-centered learning opportunities. Therefore, the current situation of ECE in Baltistan reflects both progress and continuing areas for improvement, requiring sustained efforts in teacher capacity building, resource provision, and institutional strengthening.

Major Challenges Affecting Early Childhood Education

The findings revealed several challenges influencing the quality and implementation of Early Childhood Education in private schools of District Skardu, Baltistan. Although stakeholders showed positive perceptions regarding the importance of ECE, various institutional, professional, and social factors continue to affect its effective provision. The major challenges identified by respondents included inadequate infrastructure and classroom facilities, shortage of professionally trained ECE teachers, limited availability of teaching and learning resources, financial constraints, insufficient parental awareness, weak policy implementation, and language diversity within classrooms. These factors indicate that the expansion of ECE services in the region has not always been accompanied by adequate resources and institutional support.

Table 3: Major Challenges Affecting Early Childhood Education

Variables Compared	χ^2	df	p	Contingency Coefficient	Decision
Curriculum × Teacher Training	2.634	4	.621	.160	Not Significant
Curriculum × Infrastructure	1.905	4	.753	.137	Not Significant
Curriculum × Policy Support	1.870	4	.760	.136	Not Significant
Curriculum × Quality Improvement	3.403	4	.493	.181	Not Significant
Curriculum × ECE Challenges	22.328	4	< .001	.427	Significant
Parental Involvement × Infrastructure	—	4	.193	.239	Not Significant
Parental Involvement × Policy Support	2.458	4	.652	.155	Not Significant
Parental Involvement × Quality Improvement	1.346	4	.854	.115	Not Significant
Parental Involvement × ECE Challenges	37.123	4	< .001	.520	Significant
Parental Involvement × Future Prospects	2.903	4	.574	.168	Not Significant

These values come directly from the thesis.

Table 3 presents the statistical relationship between different institutional and stakeholder-related factors associated with ECE challenges. The Chi-square analysis showed significant associations between curriculum-related factors and ECE challenges ($\chi^2 = 22.328$, $p < .001$), as well as between parental involvement and ECE challenges ($\chi^2 = 37.123$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that both educational practices and community participation are important factors influencing the current condition of ECE. However, several other variables, including curriculum relationships with teacher training, infrastructure, policy support, and quality improvement, were not statistically significant. This suggests that challenges in ECE implementation are complex and cannot be explained by a single factor. Instead, improvement requires a comprehensive approach involving teacher development, institutional resources, parental engagement, and effective educational support systems.

Opportunities for Improving Early Childhood Education

Although respondents identified numerous challenges, they also expressed optimism. Despite the challenges identified, participants expressed positive expectations regarding the future development of Early Childhood Education in Baltistan. The findings indicate that stakeholders recognize several opportunities for strengthening ECE quality and expanding its effectiveness. Teachers and parents emphasized the importance of continuous professional development, improved classroom facilities, child-centered teaching approaches, increased parental participation, curriculum adaptation according to local needs, stronger government support, and collaboration among educational institutions. These findings suggest that although ECE in Baltistan faces structural and contextual limitations, significant potential exists for improvement through coordinated efforts among schools, families, communities, and educational authorities. Strengthening these areas can contribute to the development of more effective, inclusive, and sustainable early childhood education services in the region.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provided deeper understanding of the practical realities of Early Childhood Education implementation in private schools of District Skardu. Interviews with teachers and parents revealed important themes related to professional capacity, learning environments, parental involvement, and institutional support.

Theme 1: Professional Development

Teachers highlighted the need for specialized ECE training. Although many teachers possessed general educational qualifications, they reported limited preparation in child-centered pedagogy, play-based learning, classroom management, and appropriate assessment techniques for young children.

Theme 2: Classroom Learning Environment

Participants emphasized the importance of safe, stimulating, and child-friendly classrooms equipped with age-appropriate learning materials, educational toys, and activity-based learning spaces. While some schools demonstrated positive practices, resource limitations affected the quality of learning environments in others.

Theme 3: Parental Awareness

Parents recognized the importance of preschool education; however, teachers reported that many families had limited awareness regarding developmentally appropriate learning practices. Regular communication and parent orientation programs were identified as important strategies for strengthening school-home partnerships.

Theme 4: Policy and Institutional Support

School representatives emphasized that stronger institutional and governmental support is required to improve ECE services, particularly in remote areas. Financial assistance, effective policy implementation, and continuous monitoring were identified as important factors for sustainable improvement.

Table 4: Summary of Qualitative Themes Identified from Teachers' and Parents' Interviews

Theme		Summary of Major Findings
Teacher Professional Development		Teachers emphasized the need for specialized ECE training, continuous professional development, and regular refresher courses.
Teacher Challenges		Participants reported inadequate instructional resources, heavy workload, multilingual classrooms, and insufficient institutional support.
Child-Friendly Learning Environment		Respondents highlighted the importance of safe classrooms, age-appropriate furniture, activity corners, learning materials, and play-based learning environments.
Parents' Perceptions of ECE		Parents considered ECE essential for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and language development and school readiness.
Parental Involvement		Parents acknowledged their responsibility in supporting children's learning through home-school collaboration and regular communication with teachers.
Challenges Faced by Parents		Financial constraints, transportation difficulties, limited awareness of ECE practices, and time limitations reduced active parental participation.
Recommendations for Improvement		Participants recommended enhanced teacher training, improved infrastructure, increased government support, localized curriculum development, stronger school-parent partnerships, and continuous quality monitoring.

Table 4 summarizes the major themes emerging from qualitative data. The findings highlight that improving ECE in Baltistan requires attention to teacher professional development, child-friendly learning environments, parental involvement, and institutional support. The qualitative evidence further strengthens the quantitative findings by explaining the practical challenges and opportunities influencing ECE implementation in the region.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the current situation of Early Childhood Education in private schools of District Skardu, Baltistan. Both sources of evidence showed considerable agreement regarding the strengths, challenges, and improvement needs of ECE implementation. The quantitative findings indicated that teachers and parents generally held positive perceptions regarding ECE practices, classroom environments, and the importance of early learning. However, the data also highlighted challenges related to institutional resources, teacher preparation, parental involvement, and policy support. These findings were further supported by qualitative evidence, where participants described practical issues affecting classroom practices and educational quality. The convergence of multiple data sources indicates that while ECE has developed positively in private schools of Baltistan, its sustainability depends on strengthening teacher capacity, improving learning environments, enhancing parental participation, and providing effective institutional and policy support. Therefore, improving ECE in the region requires coordinated efforts among teachers, families, school management, and educational authorities.

Discussion

The present study provides a situational analysis of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in private schools of District Skardu, Baltistan, by examining existing practices, stakeholder perceptions, institutional conditions, challenges, and future prospects. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study generated evidence from teachers, parents, interviews, and classroom observations to understand the realities of ECE implementation in a geographically remote region of Pakistan.

The findings indicate that Early Childhood Education has gained considerable recognition among teachers and parents as an important foundation for children's educational development. Participants generally perceived ECE as essential for improving children's cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic development, and readiness for formal schooling. This positive perception reflects increasing awareness regarding the importance of early years education and supports international perspectives that investment in early childhood contributes to long-term educational and social outcomes (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2019; Heckman, 2006). The findings also correspond with child development theories emphasizing that young children learn effectively through active participation, interaction, and meaningful experiences.

Despite the positive recognition of ECE, the findings reveal several challenges affecting its quality and implementation in private schools of Baltistan. Inadequate infrastructure, limited learning resources, shortage of specialized ECE teachers, financial constraints, insufficient parental awareness, and inconsistent policy support emerged as major concerns. These challenges indicate that the expansion of ECE services has not always been accompanied by adequate institutional capacity and professional support. Therefore, improving ECE in remote regions requires more than policy development; it requires practical investment in resources, teacher preparation, and school-level support systems.

Teacher professional capacity emerged as a critical factor influencing the current condition of ECE. Although many teachers possessed general academic qualifications, qualitative findings revealed a need for specialized training in early childhood pedagogy, play-based learning, classroom management, and child assessment practices. The findings suggest that continuous professional development is essential for improving teaching quality and ensuring that ECE classrooms provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children.

The study further highlights the importance of physical learning environments in determining the effectiveness of ECE provision. Differences were observed among schools regarding classroom facilities, availability of educational materials, child-friendly furniture, and activity-based learning opportunities. Limited resources were reported as a barrier to implementing effective ECE practices. These findings support previous research emphasizing that supportive learning environments enhance children's engagement, creativity, and overall development (OECD, 2017).

Parental involvement was another important dimension influencing the ECE situation in Baltistan. Although parents demonstrated strong appreciation for preschool education, qualitative findings indicated that awareness regarding appropriate early learning practices was still developing. Strengthening school–family partnerships through parent orientation programs, communication channels, and awareness initiatives may enhance children's learning experiences

both inside and outside the classroom. This supports the view that meaningful parental participation contributes positively to children's educational development.

The findings also highlight the unique geographical and socio-cultural conditions of Baltistan. Mountainous terrain, climatic difficulties, multilingual classrooms, and limited educational facilities create circumstances that differ from urban educational contexts. Therefore, ECE policies and programs require contextual adaptation to address the specific needs of remote communities. Localized approaches, culturally relevant learning materials, and region-specific teacher support mechanisms may contribute to more effective implementation of ECE.

Despite the identified challenges, the study reveals promising prospects for strengthening Early Childhood Education in the region. Participants identified teacher training, improved infrastructure, enhanced parental awareness, localized curriculum development, stronger institutional collaboration, and effective government support as important pathways for improvement. The findings suggest that sustainable development of ECE requires coordinated efforts among educational authorities, school management, teachers, parents, and communities.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the current situation of Early Childhood Education in Baltistan reflects both progress and limitations. While awareness and acceptance of ECE are increasing, challenges related to quality, resources, professional capacity, and contextual barriers continue to influence its effectiveness. A comprehensive approach focusing on quality improvement, equity, and community participation is required to strengthen ECE provision in geographically isolated regions.

Table 5: Summary of Key Findings and Practical Implications

Major Finding	Evidence from the Study	Practical Implication
Teachers demonstrated positive attitudes toward ECE implementation.	High mean scores across curriculum implementation and classroom practices ($M = 4.41-4.64$).	Continuous professional development should be sustained to maintain instructional quality.
Parents strongly supported Early Childhood Education.	Parents rated the importance of ECE very highly ($M = 4.91$) and recognized its role in children's development ($M = 4.88$).	Schools should strengthen parent engagement programs and home-school partnerships.
Teacher preparation was encouraging.	90% of teachers reported receiving professional ECE training.	Advanced and continuous ECE-specific training should be provided regularly.
Infrastructure and learning resources remained major concerns.	Interview findings consistently highlighted shortages of learning materials and classroom facilities.	Investment in child-friendly classrooms and instructional resources is required.

Parental involvement significantly influenced ECE challenges.	Significant association observed ($\chi^2 = 37.123$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$; Contingency Coefficient = .520).	Schools should develop structured parental involvement strategies to improve educational outcomes.
Most institutional variables showed no statistically significant association with curriculum implementation.	Chi-square analyses for teacher training, infrastructure, policy support, and quality improvement were not statistically significant ($p > .05$).	Educational reforms should adopt comprehensive strategies addressing multiple factors rather than isolated interventions.

Source: Field Survey (2025–2026)

Table 5 presents the major findings of the study along with their practical implications. The results indicate that stakeholders generally hold positive perceptions regarding ECE; however, the quality and sustainability of programs are influenced by multiple institutional and community-related factors. The significant association between parental involvement and ECE challenges highlights the importance of strengthening collaboration between schools and families. The findings further suggest that improving ECE in Baltistan requires integrated strategies involving teacher professional development, adequate learning resources, supportive infrastructure, parental engagement, and effective policy implementation. These measures can contribute to developing a more effective and sustainable early childhood education system in remote regions.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive situational analysis of Early Childhood Education in private schools of District Skardu, Baltistan. The findings indicate that ECE is increasingly valued by teachers and parents; however, several challenges continue to influence its quality and effectiveness. The study highlights that teacher preparation, learning resources, classroom environment, parental involvement, and institutional support are important elements shaping the current status of ECE. The geographical and socio-cultural context of Baltistan further emphasizes the need for locally appropriate strategies and additional support for educational institutions operating in remote areas. By integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study provides a broader understanding of the realities of ECE implementation in the region. The findings contribute to the limited research on early childhood education in Baltistan and provide useful evidence for policymakers, school administrators, and teacher education institutions. Strengthening ECE through improved professional capacity, resource development, community participation, and context-sensitive policies can support children's early development and contribute to long-term educational improvement in the region.

Educational Implications

1. Educational authorities and private schools should establish continuous ECE-specific professional development programs focusing on child-centered pedagogy, play-based learning, classroom management, and appropriate assessment strategies for young children.

2. Private schools should prioritize the development of safe, stimulating, and child-friendly classrooms equipped with age-appropriate learning materials, activity areas, educational toys, and supportive learning facilities.
3. Schools should implement parent awareness programs, workshops, and regular communication mechanisms to enhance families' understanding of early childhood learning and encourage effective home–school collaboration.
4. Curriculum developers should consider the linguistic, cultural, and geographical characteristics of Baltistan while designing ECE curricula and instructional materials suitable for local needs.
5. Educational authorities should strengthen ECE policy implementation through regular monitoring, resource provision, and institutional support, particularly for schools operating in remote and geographically challenging areas.
6. Sustainable improvement in ECE requires coordinated efforts among government institutions, school management, teachers, parents, and local communities to ensure quality, accessibility, and continuity of early childhood education services.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study was limited to private schools in District Skardu; therefore, the findings may not represent ECE conditions in public schools or other districts of Gilgit-Baltistan and Pakistan.
2. The study collected data from teachers and parents only. The perspectives of school administrators, policymakers, and other educational stakeholders were not included.
3. The research focused on stakeholder perceptions and classroom conditions rather than directly assessing children's cognitive, social, emotional, or academic development.
4. Quantitative data were based on self-reported responses, which may have been influenced by participants' personal experiences and perceptions.
5. The cross-sectional mixed-methods design provided a snapshot of the existing ECE situation but did not examine changes over time.
6. Some institutional factors, such as school financing, leadership practices, teacher workload, and administrative management, were not explored in depth.
7. The study examined the challenges and prospects of ECE implementation rather than evaluating the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions or programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Future studies should examine Early Childhood Education practices across multiple districts of Gilgit-Baltistan to develop a broader regional understanding.
2. Comparative research involving public and private schools should be conducted to identify differences in ECE quality, resources, and implementation practices.
3. Longitudinal studies should investigate the long-term influence of ECE experiences on children's academic achievement, school readiness, and developmental outcomes.
4. Future research should directly assess children's learning and development as well as stakeholder perceptions, using standardized assessment tools.
5. Studies should evaluate the effectiveness of ECE teacher training programs and their influence on classroom practices and children's learning experiences.
6. Further research should explore the role of school leadership, institutional management, and policy implementation in improving ECE quality.
7. Research should investigate the influence of parental involvement and home learning environments on children's early development.

8. Future studies should examine culturally responsive and localized ECE curricula suitable for remote regions such as Baltistan.
9. Mixed-methods and experimental research designs should be encouraged to generate stronger evidence for improving ECE policies and practices.
10. There is a need for intervention studies to explore new ways in Early Childhood Education, such as the use of digital resources, inclusive practices and activity-based learning strategies.

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