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Pedagogical risk-taking and courage of Early Childhood Education: A study of Government Schools in District Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

Ghulam Haider

Ph.D Scholar University of Sargodha

Email: haiderqazi82@gmail.com

Saima Yasmeen

Ph.D Scholar University of Sargodha

Email: saimasagoo@gmail.com

Dr. Muhammad Sheraz

School Education Department

Email: muhammad05121978@gmail.com

Dr. Dildar Hussnain

School Education Department

Email: dildarshah136@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in the government schools in the District Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan within the context of pedagogical risk-taking and courage of children and teachers. Based on qualitative and mixed methods research in public sector schools in Sargodha, the study identifies a number of key systemic impediments to pedagogical innovation. Results show that while government policies have been introduced, systemic issues such as insufficient resources, large classes, lack of professional development and post-training support limit teachers' ability to take pedagogical risks. The study shows that pedagogy is driven by pedagogical courage, which is manifested by creativity and resourcefulness of teachers and their approach of children oriented practices, but still limited by the systemic barriers. Finally, the article makes evidence based recommendations to bolster teacher education, teacher training and policy enforcement to facilitate brave pedagogy in the government schools of Sargodha.

Keywords: Pedagogical Risk Taking, Pedagogical Courage, Early Childhood Education, Government Schools, Teacher Education, Professional Development, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan, Systemic Constraints, Child-Centered Pedagogy, QAED Training.

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a key pillar of lifelong learning, social development and economic productivity and is underdeveloped in the government schools of District Sargodha. Sargodha, the largest district of the Punjab in terms of area and population is seeing the load of Early Childhood Education Programs initiated by School Education Department and QAED (Quaid-e-Azam Academy for Educational

Development). There are, however, serious concerns about the extent, frequency, and quality of training that makes policy a reality in the classroom (Ansari, Fasih, & Humphry, 2024). Currently, there are some 21.5% (5,600) public primary schools in Punjab that have ECE classrooms, while the situation of Sargodha is alike, demonstrating the gaps in implementation (The News International, 2025).

The problem of ECEC in government schools of Sargodha is not just one, it is multi-faceted. In-depth studies on QAED trainings show that although the readiness of the trainers and fidelity of their guidelines in training rooms is generally good, tensions limit the implementation of the trainings, such as unequal exposure to supervision, insufficient pacing of the trainings, logistical issues in nomination and attendance, and inconsistent follow-up after training (Rashid et al., 2025). These systemic issues make teaching with limited resources and lacking in pedagogical innovation and support. In addition to being poorly-qualified, teachers in government schools of Sargodha typically lack adequate teaching-learning materials, and the classrooms are overcrowded and aesthetically unpleasing, limiting teaching and learning activities (Ashraf, Alam, & Gladushyna, 2024).

The picture of ECEC in the government schools of Sargodha is neither simple nor clear cut - it gives a picture of some good and some not so good. Studies have shown that QAED reaches around 0.4 million teachers with trainings, such as Early Childhood Education programs, in Punjab (Government of Punjab, 2023). However, evaluation studies have found that there are various persistent problems such as lack of funding, inadequate continuous training programs, insufficient staffing, and insufficient provision of ECE kits (Malik & Khalid, 2023). The descriptive results of the teachers in government schools show that they are feeling frustrated because of the budget constraints and they are paid less, and they do not get any proper benefit (Ansari, Fasih & Humphry, 2024). However, overwhelmingly large classroom sizes exacerbate these issues and some ECE classrooms are reported to have more than 200 students, which leaves the teachers with limited space to use ECE materials effectively (Ansari, Fasih, & Humphry, 2024).

However, there is a lack of understanding of pedagogical risk taking and courage in the context of government school ECEC in Sargodha in the literature. International studies have revealed that the ways in which early childhood educators understand risk-taking as a desired part of their work practice stem from three core motivations: professional growth and development, developing children as competent and empowered individuals and advocacy and activism (International Journal of Early Years Education, 2025). Risk taking in professional practice is put into practice by offering opportunities for children to take risks, trust the child, attempt something new, share ideas and opinions, and share content that could be controversial or complex (International Journal of Early Years Education, 2025). But the systematic study of the pedagogical risk-taking of teachers in Government schools of Sargodha and their barriers and enablers has been overlooked.

Objectives:

1. To discuss the system related constraints on the quality of ECEC and the risk taking of pedagogy in government schools of Sargodha.
2. To investigate teachers' perceptions of pedagogical courage; and identify factors which facilitate courageous practices in public sector ECEC settings.

Research Questions:

1. What are the constraints of the government schools in Sargodha that hinders the pedagogical risk-taking abilities of teachers?

2. What conditions facilitate/disabuse courageous pedagogical practice in public sector ECEC settings in Sargodha?
3. How do teachers view and practice pedagogical risk-taking in the light of barriers within the school system in Sargodha's Government schools?

2. Methodology

Research Design

The research design used was a convergent mixed methods approach, using quantitative data on classroom quality and structural characteristics, and qualitative data on teachers' experiences, training effectiveness, and systemic difficulties. The design was guided by the pragmatic epistemological consideration which highlights the importance of objective measurement and subjective understanding to understand the complexity of ECEC in the context of Sargodha in a government school.

Data Sources

The study was conducted using various sources of data from 2022 to 2025 in the District Sargodha. The primary data source is a qualitative, descriptive analysis of the QAED-oriented trainings of ECE conducted in District Sargodha, which involved the use of semi-structured interviews with the principals and ECE teachers of the district who were conveniently selected. (Rashid et al., 2025) This data helped in analyzing on the effectiveness of training, challenges while implementing it and systemic constraints of the Sargodha context. Other quantitative data were acquired from a study on classroom structure features in public schools around the cities of Punjab with representation from Sargodha district which concerned classroom size, physical environment, academic quality and teacher-child ratio (Zaheer & Hassan, 2025). Policy and implementation information was sourced from UNICEF's ECE models review in Pakistan (UNICEF Pakistan, 2023), government reports (Government of Punjab, 2025), and the evaluations of training programs (Malik & Khalid, 2023).

Population

The population of this study included headteachers, district Sargodha, QAED principals, government officials, and early childhood educators of District Sargodha. As for the training initiatives part, the study analyzed QAED programs that are targeting teachers in Sargodha, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principals of QAEDs who were selected conveniently (Rashid et al., 2025). ECE headteachers and teachers from rural and urban areas of Sargodha were taken as sample (Malik & Khalid, 2023). In Sargodha, the System Transformation Grant (STG) initiative, which was being carried out in all districts of Punjab, served as a backdrop for the issues of expanding ECE provision and training teachers (Government of Punjab, 2025).

Outcomes Measured

Structural Quality Indicators: Classroom size, physical environment, academic quality, teacher-child ratio, provision of ECE kits and infrastructure condition.

Process Quality Indicators: Activity based pedagogy, ECE materials used, teacher-child interaction, training content.

Training Effectiveness: Principals' perceptions of trainers' readiness, fidelity of the guidelines, tensions during the training, post-training support, and barriers to training implementation.

Systemic Constraints: budget constraints, staff shortage, infrastructure constraints, monitoring quality, and implementing policy.

Pedagogical Risk-Taking: risk-taking motivations, risk-taking themes, enabling and constraining factors, risk-taking adaptations.

Statistical Analysis

For quantitative data analysis, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software package of version 25.0 was used and followed descriptive analysis such as Frequency analysis and ANOVA (Zaheer & Hassan, 2025). Qualitative interview data were analyzed in line with six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2025) which are: familiarization, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Transcriptions were coded to a practice-to-impact matrix established by Rashid et al. (2025) that linked the policy standards, design of professional development, drivers of implementation, and operating local conditions.

3. Results

Comprehensive Overview of ECEC in Sargodha's Government Schools

Table 1: Comprehensive Summary of ECEC Quality, Training, and Pedagogical Practices in Sargodha's Government Schools**

Domain	Indicator	Finding	Key Insight
Demographics	School Location	47.3% Urban, 52.7% Rural	Balanced urban-rural distribution
	Student Enrollment	50% schools have >50 students	Overcrowded classrooms constrain pedagogy
	Teacher Qualification	50% have ECE training, 12.7% no degree	Significant training gap exists
Structural Quality	Overall Quality (1-5)	Mean = 2.78	Low quality across all indicators
	Infrastructure Condition	Mean = 2.45	Poorest performing indicator
	ECE Kit Availability	Mean = 3.21	Best performing but still inadequate
Training Effectiveness	Trainer Readiness	89.5% agree/strongly agree	Strongest aspect of training
	Post-Training Support	31.6% agree/strongly agree	Weakest aspect of training
	Overall Effectiveness	58.4%	Substantial room for improvement
Implementation Tensions	Haphazard Post-Training Follow-up	88.9% report as tension	Most critical implementation gap
	Budget Constraints	83.3% report as tension	Limits classroom material availability
	Rural-Urban Disparities	72.2% report as tension	Unequal resource distribution
Systemic Constraints	Inadequate Resources	88.9% of teachers	Most commonly reported barrier
	Large Class Sizes	83.3% of teachers	Second most common barrier
	Insufficient Training	77.8% of teachers	Need for continuous professional development
Pedagogical Risk-Taking	Using Low-Cost Materials	75% of teachers	Most common courageous practice
	Play-Based Pedagogy	58% of teachers	Despite curriculum constraints
	Expressing Ideas/Beliefs	45% of teachers	Least common, limited teacher agency
Enabling Factors	Personal Commitment	77.8% of teachers	Strongest enabling factor
	Creative Resourcefulness	72.2% of teachers	Second strongest enabling factor
	Supportive Head teachers	44.4% of teachers	Opportunity for improvement

(Sources: Zaheer & Hassan, 2025; Rashid et al., 2025; UNICEF Pakistan, 2023; Teacher Interviews, 2024)*

Note: Structural Quality scores based on 1-5 scale. Training indicators based on percentage agreement. Systemic constraints and pedagogical risk-taking based on teacher reports.

ANOVA Results - Structural Quality by Tehsil in Sargodha**Table 2: ANOVA Results - Structural Quality by Tehsil in District Sargodha**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F-value	p-value
Between Tehsils	22.45	5	4.49	3.87	0.003*
Within Tehsils	118.76	104	1.14	-	-
Total	141.21	109			

(Source: Zaheer & Hassan, 2025)

Note: $p < 0.05$ means that there are significant differences among tehsils in terms of structural quality. Post hoc Tukey HSD showed that the quality score of Sargodha City and Bhalwal tehsils were significantly higher than Sillanwali and Kot Momin ($p < 0.05$).

Interpretation: Structural quality is found to be different in each tehsil of Sargodha. The urban-rural disparities in resource allocation are evident in the condition of urban tehsils (Sargodha City, Bhalwal) as these are better equipped in terms of infrastructure and resources than the rural tehsils (Sillanwali, Kot Momin).

Key Findings:**1. Structural Quality and Demographics:**

The study sheds light on the structural issues in government schools of Sargodha. The sample is evenly distributed between urban (47.3%) and rural (52.7%) areas, but the issue of overcrowding is a serious concern in that 50% of schools in the sample have an ECE enrolment of more than 50 students. This is the case of teacher qualifications which is a critical gap, with only 50% of ECE teachers having a specialised training and 12.7% having no formal teaching qualification at all. The overall structural quality is low (2.78 out of 5), and the lowest is infrastructure condition (2.45). Even the best of the indicators (availability of ECE kits: 3.21) is not satisfactory for the high class sizes reported.

2. Training Effectiveness and Implementation:

The fidelity of trainers and fidelity to guidelines were high with good agreement on readiness to train (QAED training programs), however, there were gaps in implementation. The lowest agreement is found for post-training support (31.6%) and supervisory exposure, suggesting that teachers are not provided with adequate post training support. 88.9% of the participants felt that the most important tension was haphazard post-training follow-up, 83.3% felt that budget was an important tension and 72.2% felt that rural-urban disparities was an important tension.

3. Systemic Constraints and Pedagogical Courage:

There are several systemic constraints that teachers reported as barriers, including lack of adequate resources (88.9%) and large classes (83.3%). In the face of these limits, teachers are actively practicing pedagogical courage in a number of ways. Rising to the challenge of using low-cost/no-cost materials (75%) is the most common courageous practice, which shows creativity in resourcefulness. Other practices are giving opportunities for risk (65%), giving autonomy to children (60%) and using play-based pedagogy (58%). Limited teacher agency and administration support is seen in expressing ideas and beliefs about child-centered approaches (45%).

4. Enabling Factors:

Personal commitment to children (77.8%) and creative resourcefulness (72.2%) are the strongest enabling factors for pedagogical courage. Peer support (55.6%) and quality training experiences (50.0%) are also important. Less common, however, are the presence of supportive head teachers (44.4%) and community

engagement (33.3%), indicating areas for greater development of school leadership and community relationships.

4. Discussion

The results of this research expose a complicated situation of ECEC provision within Sargodha's government schools with some system failures and fragments of pedagogical innovation and courage. The overall data (Table 1) shows a high level of infrastructure and resource gaps (structural quality mean 2.78/5), low level of teacher training (50% of teachers trained) and limited post training support (31.6% agreement), which limits pedagogical risk-taking. When teachers are ready to use limited materials creatively (75%), willing to use child-centered approaches (65%), and ready to adopt new pedagogical approaches when supported (65%), however, evidence of pedagogical courage does appear.

There are significant gaps between urban and rural areas (72.2% report differences), with rural tehsils having worse infrastructure and resources (Table 2). There is significant difference between structural quality of Sargodha City and Bhalwal tehsils with Sillanwali and Kot Momin, respectively, indicating unequal distribution of resources in the district ($p < 0.05$).

Systemic Barriers and Enabling Factors

The main implementation issues identified are post-training follow-up is not carried out in a systematic way (88.9%), and budget limitations for classroom resources (83.3%). These represent systemic barriers which greatly limit pedagogical risk taking. Without post-training support, supervision and classroom resources, the teachers' ability to utilize innovative and child centred approaches is greatly limited. The fact that the follow up after training seems to be the weakest link and the link with the most leverage to ensure that practice is maintained calls into question the need for systemic support structures.

Teachers rely on enabling factors such as personal commitment to children (77.8%), creative resourcefulness (72.2%), and peer support (55.6%), despite the constraints in place. These intrinsic motivations are what can keep us pushing forward the pedagogical courage even in resource limited situations. Less common are supportive headteachers (44.4%) and community engagement (33.3%) and there is scope to improve school leadership and community involvement.

Implications for Teacher Education and Policy

It is important to note that only half of the ECE teachers have been given pedagogical training, which has profound implications for pedagogical courage. The current training model has a high trainer readiness score (89.5%) but lacks in terms of providing continued support for training implementation. On-going professional learning – not single day or event – is a tension for teachers (66.7%). The recommendations proposed are universal AEO training, tightened nomination criteria, micro-budgets for the development of activity materials, and a standardised follow-up visit (Rashid et al., 2025).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, such as the geographic restriction (Sargodha district only), sample size, the lack of longitudinal data, and the lack of direct measures of child outcomes.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In spite of the systemic constraints, this study shows that pedagogical risk-taking and courage is found in the practices of ECEC in Sargodha's government schools. Educators are courageous in terms of their creative use of resources (75%), commitment to practices for children (65%), and enthusiasm for, and readiness to apply, innovative practices when they are offered (65%). Systematic constraints, however, such as inadequate teacher preparation (only 50% adequately trained), limited teacher resources (88.9% report that they are

inadequate), large class size (83.3% report being too large) and post-teacher training support (72.2% report inadequate support) limit the sustainability of such practices.

The results indicate that pedagogical courage can be developed by personal commitment, resourcefulness in creative ways, and quality training experiences yet can be nurtured by systemic supports like the availability of resources and follow-up after training. Professional development and systemic support brings the highest gains in terms of 'courageous pedagogical practices'.

Recommendations

1. Universal ECE Training: Provide all teachers in ECE in Sargodha with ECE specific pedagogical training and regular refresher courses to enhance the pedagogical confidence and competence of ECE teachers.
2. Enhanced Post-Training Support: Standardized follow up visits (4-6 weeks after training) with structured rubrics and written feedback to guide implementation of new pedagogies.
3. Resource Allocation: Ensure proper provision of ECE materials and micro-budgets for activity corners for an activity-based, child-centered pedagogy in all government schools.
4. Leadership Development: Provide head teachers and AEOs with training on ECE pedagogy and developing school environments that support pedagogical risk taking.
5. Support for Rural-Urban Disparities: Invest in further development of resources and infrastructure in rural tehsils (Sillanwali, Kot Momin, Sahiwal) to eliminate the disparity.
6. Policy Implementation: Ensure consistent monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms to be carried out at the school level and to ensure the translation of policy into action.
7. Teacher Motivation: Support and address compensation and career advancement issues to keep qualified ECE teachers and maintain pedagogical courage.

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