

Effect of Child-Friendly Learning Environment on Dropout Rate and Quality of Education at Primary Level in Punjab

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Abstract

The study aimed to investigate the effect of a child-friendly learning environment of school on the dropout rate and quality of education at the primary level. In this study, Child friendly environment refers to the physical infrastructure, health and hygienic factors, students' involvement in co-curricular activities, parents and community involvement, and student enrollment in school. The design of the research was casual-comparative. The population was consisted of the teachers working in child-friendly and non-child-friendly schools at the primary level in six districts (Rahim Yar Khan, Mianwali, Sargodha, Sadiqabad (RajanPur), Kasur and Sheikhpura) of Punjab. Five child-friendly and five non-child-friendly schools from each section were selected through stratified random sampling technique. Two questionnaires on five points Likert scale were developed; First for the teachers and the other for parents of respective students. Students' dropout rate was calculated by data taken from the school record. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. It was concluded that child-friendly schools have positive effect on dropout and quality of education as compared to the non-friendly schools.

Keywords: *Child-friendly Schools, Non-child-friendly Schools, Dropout, School Record*

1. Introduction

A child-friendly atmosphere is one in which all of the students' requirements, as well as their interests and levels of development are met. Additionally, UNESCO (2004) found that these schools' good environments and high standards of instruction are their key characteristics. A child-friendly school makes sure that every child is in a setting that is physically safe, emotionally comfortable, and mentally enabling (Effendi, 2023). The most crucial element in establishing a productive and inclusive classroom is the teacher. Children are innately capable of learning, yet this ability can be compromised and even lost. By fostering a learning and learner-centered school culture, pedagogical

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practices, and curriculum, a child-friendly school recognizes, fosters, and supports children's developing learning capacity.

According to a global study of the idea of child-friendly schools and how it has been implemented in UNICEF programs, there has been a tendency to understate the factors that make a school child-friendly. The technique has advanced steadily worldwide, from an estimated 33 nations in 2004 to 56 countries in 2007 (UNICEF, 2010), notwithstanding the disparity in approaches. As a counterpoint to the "effective schools" movement, which has been a powerful concept to enhance school management and classroom practices over the past three decades, Child-Friendly School (CFS) ideas have been embraced in a variety of ways in various locations.

In Pakistan, the literacy rate is 57% and 50% of children who enrolled at the primary level leave school before completing primary education. Punjab, Pakistan's most densely populated province represents 83.7 million people. The literacy rate of Punjab is 59% (male: 69% & female: 50%) which needs to be more satisfactory. Among many other factors responsible for dropout, one major factor is the lack of physical facilities in schools (Hussain et al., 2011).

Although the Government of Pakistan has taken different steps, e.g. through the National Plan of Action (2001-2015) and in education policy 1998-2010, it was decided to increase enrollment in schools and to decrease the dropout rate, this target still needs to be achieved (Hussain et al., 2011). Therefore, UNICEF launched a child-friendly school program, especially for girls, by providing a child-oriented environment to increase enrollment in schools and decrease the dropout rate (UNICEF, 2009). This study was conducted to address the issue of how a child-friendly learning environment affects the dropout rate. Moreover, this study also explored the role of a child-friendly learning environment in altering the quality of education.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study included to:

1. determine the effect of a child-friendly schools on students' dropout rate at primary level.
2. find out the effect of child-friendly schools in improving the quality of education at primary level.

1.2 Hypotheses of the Study

This study was conducted to seek the answers to the following questions:

- H_{A1}: There is a significant effect of child-friendly schools on the dropout rate at primary level.
- H_{A2}: There is a significant effect of child-friendly schools on the quality of education at primary level.

2. Literature Review

"Child-friendly learning environment" is one where students are motivated to learn, and staff members are friendly to the children, physical facilities are available in the school, teachers attend to their students' health and safety needs and interaction with community and parents take place. Corporal punishment is forbidden, and children are entirely safeguarded from child abuse. All stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and the local community, participate in the policy-making, planning, implementation, and assessment processes (UNICEF, 2009; Murtaza, 2011).

A child-friendly atmosphere is one in which all of the students' requirements, as well as their interests and levels of development, are met. Also, UNESCO (2004) found that these schools' suitable environments and high standards of instruction are their key characteristics. If any of these are absent, the school will not be child-friendly. Child-friendly schools (now onwards CFS) are "healthy for children, successful with children, caring for children, and involved with families, communities, and children," according to a framework for such schools that UNICEF has disseminated (Anwar et al., 2016). According to Shaeffer (1999), in child-friendly schools; teachers are the catalyst for a supportive and encouraging educational setting, providing an excellent social, moral, emotional, and intellectual environment.

Child-friendly schools strongly emphasize students' academic performance and offer abundant capacity-building opportunities. Since family cooperation is the foundation of students' learning, schools should connect positively with families. Gender parity is also addressed in child schools. A safe environment has been created to benefit boys' and girls' education.

The term "learning environment" describes the tenor or atmosphere that a teacher creates through the relationships they foster in the classroom and how they impart knowledge. Children feel motivated and ready to study in a child-friendly setting. Seyoum (2012) discussed the factors that make up a learning environment, including lecture theatres, libraries, private study spaces, teaching aids, support services, and other alternatives beyond merely allowing learning to occur in a school setting. Each setting should be efficient in a way that improves learning.

The following factors were considered when comparing child-friendly and traditional schools based on research on both types of school programs. The employees are friendly, children are warmly welcomed at school, and their health and safety needs are met. It follows that a child-friendly school offers a learning environment suitable for kids' requirements. These schools focus on enhancing kids' learning and innate potential. Also, according to UNICEF (2009), these

schools focus on children's needs, interests, and levels and adapt the curriculum and atmosphere to suit them. Children receive an overall enriched physical, emotional, and cerebral environment. Children are treated equally inside and outside of school, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic background, or other factors. This is known as equity, practiced during the admissions process. Needs for safety and health command the administration's full attention (Shaeffer, 2016).

In Pakistan, the situation of primary education is not better, and still, there are no appropriate facilities to accommodate all students of school-going age (Habib, 2011). Dropout is defined as students who leave school for any reason except death before completing their primary education. Among the significant dropout factors is the non-conducive atmosphere of shelter-less schools (Hussain et al., 2011).

Pakistan's Government has made many efforts to provide a child-friendly learning environment, but they still need to translate their words into action. The reason behind this is political, economic, social and cultural obstacles. So, In Punjab, child-friendly schools were established in Rahim Yar Khan, Mianwali, Sargodha, Sadiqabad (RajanPur), Kasur and Sheikhpura on the need analysis done by Government of Pakistan (2003). It is based on features: inclusiveness, support of health and hygiene, interaction with the community and parents etc. Physical facilities like the availability of drinking water, electricity, boundary wall, toilets, furniture, and playground are the factors which contribute to establishing a pleasant environment in the school. Child-friendly learning environment also requires the support of the community. Effective relations with parents and other community members are essential. Co-curricular activities were an integral part of school life. Co-curricular activities were suitable for building good student-teacher relationships and students perform better in the presence of these activities. A child-friendly learning environment is inclusive and protective because it offers a secure environment in which children participate actively in classroom activities and express themselves (UNICEF, 2008).

The school itself and its facilities all affect the dropout rate. In addition, the need for more school facilities for the number of students who attend the school is also a cause of dropout. More than physical facilities in the school is needed, e.g. more benches, desks and blackboards (Chabbott, 2004). UNICEF (2009) adds that many enrolled children did not complete their primary education due to poor school environments. The challenge in education is to enroll children in schools and improve the quality of schooling. Kanamba (2014) reported that the presence of physical facilities has a significant impact on students' enrollment and attendance. Schools can only accept a few students due to lack of

facilities. Many studies conducted throughout the world have demonstrated the link between attendance and physical facilities. He also stated that schools in India that do not have their premises and hold classes outside or in rented structures typically have low enrollment. UNICEF initiated child-friendly schools to deal with all factors affecting quality. The literacy rate in Punjab is 59%: the male literacy rate is 69%, and the female literacy rate is 50% (Hussain et al., 2011).

A child-friendly learning environment is one where children feel comfortable, their needs are satisfied, and the staff is friendly. It is a setting based on the community and respects children's rights regardless of their gender, religious or ethnic background, physical or mental abilities, or any other considerations (Garduque & Demdam, 2022).

Effendi (2023) stated that a "child-friendly school" is one where students want to go and study. The setting at school must be wholesome, loving, and inviting. A child should feel comfortable there, both physically and mentally. Habib (2011) concluded that the leading cause of dropout was the school environment and parents' lack of interest. Girls' primary schools pay less attention to providing facilities in school, and consequently, the dropout rate is high among girls. The proportion of child-friendly school girls was more significant than boys due to this reason. Hussain et al. (2011) stated that 68% of the participants agreed that the main reason for dropout is poor conditions of the school, 83% of the respondents stated that inadequate provision of physical facilities in schools and poor standard of health and nutrition is one of the causes of high dropout rate in Pakistan. The dropout rate in grades one, two and three is more significant than in four and five. The reason behind this is the non-availability of school facilities, and when students find an unhealthy environment, they leave the school and, therefore, are included in dropouts (UNESCO, 1984; Habib, 2011). Shaeffer (2016) discovered that the academic results of child-friendly schools were superior to traditional classes (non-CFS). The findings have shown that the school environment is undoubtedly crucial and is a wake-up call for educators and policymakers. Therefore, it is suggested to include more schools in the child-friendly program.

A child-friendly learning environment helped decrease the dropout rate by providing a community mobilization facility (one-month holidays during harvest season). The school provides an attractive environment to students by arranging different co-curricular activities like story reading, debate competitions and sports. Providing free textbooks, learning materials, and transport facilities was also helpful in reducing the dropout rate in schools. Giving awareness of education to the community and parents reduces the possibility of dropout.

Community involvement will also ensure that every child of the appropriate age has the chance to complete primary education (UNICEF, 2008 & 2010).

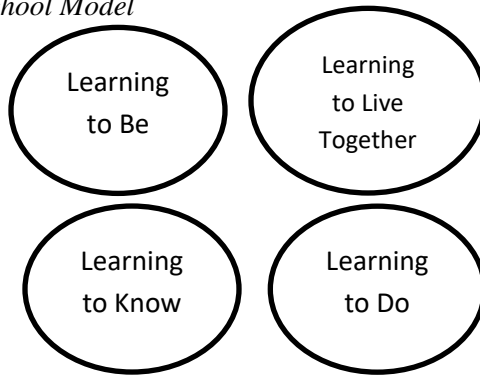
According to the UNESCO Education for All global report, 45% of children still need to complete their primary education due to needing more facilities. Because of the unavailability of facilities, parents did not send their children to schools.

About 28000 children enrolled in child-friendly schools (CFS) by the end of 2007. An additional 23000 children were included with 150 new schools in this project (UNICEF, 2008). Child-friendly school is aimed at improving the quality of education. The child is the central point in the educational process. Child-friendly school models are flexible because when students' requirements change with time, teachers change the activities for them in schools. By providing physical facilities in schools, the quality of education will improve, and this will change the attitude of students and teachers.

In child-friendly schools (CFS), students come from different backgrounds, and their ability to think and reason will develop in this environment. This environment also builds self-respect and respect for others; students' abilities will develop to their full potential. All these factors are responsible for enhancing the quality of education. Research conducted by Orkudashvili (2013) found that CFS have the potential to be an effective tool for upholding children's rights and giving them a high-quality education. Another study in Kenya by Njue (2014) has shown that learning materials, health and safety precautions, training programs, and child-centered teaching/learning methodologies all contribute to successful teaching and can raise students' performance and quality of education. Another study by Al-Fatih and Erdianti (2020) has shown that a child-friendly school program based on the principles of child protection and prioritizing the fulfillment of children's rights will be a solution for the Government today in dealing with various forms of violence that occur in schools. Another study by Bibi (2021) indicated that students learn more through activity-based games instead of just lecturing. And activity-based games are present in CFS where students learn easily through these activities.

By providing textbooks to students, their academic performance will be boosted. Children will become aware of their health and hygienic condition, the school will have access to safe drinking water, electricity facilities and library facilities will be available in school. In this way, this environment considers all children's developmental and learning needs. The learning environment is a crucial feature of the child-friendly school model,

Figure 1
Child-friendly School Model



Source: Wright et al., (2009)

Child-friendly schools suggested that school size should be kept to a maximum of sixty to seventy-five preschool students and two hundred to four hundred in elementary schools. Research showed that small schools give children more significant opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities and exercise leadership roles. All this will enhance the quality of education (UNICEF, 2009).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study was quantitative in nature and the design was causal-comparative because child-friendly and non-child-friendly schools and their effect on drop-out rates have already occurred. School Environment was the categorical variable which was explored as one of the causes of drop-out and quality of education in school at primary level. Moreover, drop-out rate and quality of education were dependent variable which might be affected by the already occurred School Environment (Child-Friendly/ non-Child Friendly). It is the most appropriate design for assessing the study's simple cause and effect relationship (Fraenkel et al., 2023).

Research Design

Group	Independent variable	Dependent variable
I	Child-friendly schools	Dropout rate, quality of education
II	Non-friendly schools	Dropout rate, quality of education

3.2 Population and Sampling

The population consisted of all the teachers working in child-friendly and non-child friendly schools at the primary level in six districts (Rahim Yar Khan,

Mianwali, Sargodha, Sadiqabad (RajanPur), Kasur and Sheikhpura) of Punjab. Five child-friendly schools and five non-child-friendly schools from each district were selected through stratified random sampling. The sample consisted of 30 teachers and parents from each group.

3.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaires were developed on a five-point rating scale ranging from '1' indicating strongly disagree; to '5' indicating strongly agree.

3.3.1 Questionnaire for Teachers

The purpose of this instrument was to ask questions regarding the school's physical infrastructure, the school's health and hygienic condition, student's involvement in co-curricular activities and parents and community involvement. The data obtained through this instrument were quantitative.

3.3.2 Questionnaire for Parents

The purpose of this instrument was to ask questions regarding students' involvement in co-curricular activities and parents' and community's involvement. This questionnaire was developed in Urdu, and after getting responses, it was translated into English. The experts checked the content for validity of the scale. Data obtained through this instrument were quantitative.

3.3.3 Instrument for calculating the Dropout rate

The dropout rate was calculated by data taken from school records, which contained information, related to students' enrollment in class one and retained up to class five. Difference between the number of students enrolled in class one and retained up to class five were considered as dropout. Students who passed in class five, failed in class five or transferred to another school were not included in drop out. Although the definition of dropout did not include repeaters and the students who transferred to another school (Habib 2011; Shah et al., 2011). Dropout was calculated by the difference in the number of students who left the primary school years in class one, two, three, four and five respectively, they were included in dropout.

3.4 Validity of the Instruments

The validity of the instruments was ensured through reviewing the instrument by the research team and Content Validity Ratio (CVR) was calculated against each item and found valid according to validity criteria given by Ishaque and Zaman (2022).

3.5 Data Collection

Questionnaires were sent to the selected sample through email because it was the easiest way to collect data from the different areas of Punjab. Another way to get high responses was to send the questionnaires to the person in authority to administer it to the potential respondents rather than sending

questionnaires to the respondents (Frankel et al., 2023). Questionnaires can easily be tabulated and interpreted and people easily respond to the questionnaires, if their responses are kept unrevealed. Dropout data were collected through school records.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data collected from teachers and parents were analyzed through t-test. Data were analyzed and interpreted in light of the study's objectives. The mean difference between the dropout rates of both child friendly and non-child friendly schools was found via an independent sample t-test before introducing this environment. Table 1 shows that there is a difference between the two groups that are statistically significant ($p = .00$). It implies that both groups' performance levels were not equal.

Table 1

Difference between Dropout Rate of Child-Friendly and non-Child-Friendly Schools

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.
Child-friendly environment	29	18.01	3.54	58	.15	.00
Non-child friendly environment	31	14.15	3.23			

* $p < 0.05$

Independent sample t-test was applied to find out difference between schools with child-friendly and non-child friendly environment. The mean difference between the dropout rates of both groups is shown in table 1. The child-friendly environment ($M = 18.01$, $SD = 3.54$) and non-child-friendly environment schools' dropout rates ($M = 14.15$, $SD = 3.23$; $t(58) = .15$, $p = .00$) were different from one another. The value of $p = .00$ was shown in Table 1 to be significant at the level of 0.05.

This indicates a substantial difference between the dropout rate in child-friendly environments and the non-child-friendly environment of schools. The outcomes reflected that a child-friendly school environment helps decrease the dropout rate, and students continue their primary education in this environment. In a non-child-friendly environment, the dropout rate was higher than in child-friendly schools.

Table 2

Comparison between Quality of Education of Child-Friendly and non-Child-Friendly Schools

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.
Child-friendly environment	29	18.89	4.23	58	3.41	.00
Non-child friendly environment	31	14.23	3.00			

* $p < 0.05$

Table 2 reflected that the quality of education is high in a child-friendly environment. There was significant difference between quality of education of child-friendly environment schools (M = 18.89 and S.D. = 4.23) and non-friendly environment schools (M = 14.23, S.D. = 3.00; $t(58) = 3.41, p = .00$). Quality of education is good in CFS because of the physical infrastructure, and students' involvement in co-curricular activities is good in CFS as compared to non-CFS.

Table 3

Mean Scores of Sub-Scales of Quality of Education in Child-friendly Environment and non-Child Friendly Environment Schools

Sr. No.	Sub-Scales of Quality of Education	Variable	N	Mean	SD
1.	Physical Infrastructure	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	16.08	1.44
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	10.22	1.24
2.	Health and Hygienic Factors	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	14.66	1.34
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	9.32	1.57
3.	Student's Involvement in Co-Curricular Activities	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	17.23	1.67
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	10.01	1.22
4.	Parents and Community Involvement	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	13.55	1.56
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	5.32	1.33
5.	Student Enrollment	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	15.45	1.78
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	8.32	1.03
6.	Overall Quality of Education	Child-Friendly Environment Schools	29	22.23	1.8
		Non-Child-Friendly Environment Schools	31	15.20	1.39

Table 3 showed the sub-scales of quality of education in CFS and Non-CFS. Results highlighted that CFS have good quality of education with mean score regarding “student’s involvement in co-curricular activities” (M = 17.23, S.D. = 1.67); “physical infrastructure” (M = 16.08, S.D. 1.44); “student

enrollment” (M = 15.45, S.D. = 1.78); “health and hygienic factors” (M = 14.66, S.D. = 1.34); “parents and community involvement” (M = 13.55, S.D. = 1.56). Furthermore, the overall quality of education is also high in CFS (M = 22.23, S.D. = 1.88) as compared to non-CFS (M = 15.20, S.D. = 1.39).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section examines the results of this descriptive causal-comparative study. In the realm of education, the idea of child friendly schools is innovative. This study aimed to determine whether CFS has a positive or negative effect on dropout rate and quality of education. The first research question was to explore the effect of CFS on dropout rate at primary level. The t-test was applied and the results indicated that CFS help in decreasing dropout rate as there was a significant difference in CFS and Non-CFS’s dropout rate. This study results are consistent with the previous results (Habib, 2011; Hussain et al., 2011; Kanamba, 2014) that child friendly environment helps in decreasing dropout and increasing enrollment in schools. The second research question was related to explore the effect of CFS on the quality of education. The t-test results showed that CFS have a good quality of education whereas, in non-CFS quality of education was not too good. The indicators of quality of education were ‘physical infrastructure, health and hygienic factors, student’s involvement in co-curricular activities, parents and community involvement, and student enrollment’. The overall quality of education was also good in CFS unlike non-CFS. The students’ involvement in co-curricular activities scale has the highest mean scores in CFS in contrast to non-CFS. Overall, all subscales have the high mean score in CFS as compared to non-CFS. The results have a number of similarities with the study results conducted by Al-Fatih and Erdianti (2020); Anwar et al. (2016); Bibi (2021); Kanamba (2014) and Orkudashvili (2013) that CFS have high quality of education than traditional schools (non-CFS). Children feel motivated to learn in child friendly environment. The findings indicated that school environment is crucial and is of great importance. Therefore, it is advised to enroll an increasing number of schools in the child-friendly school program.

6. Recommendations

The child-friendly school program seemed to be a success; thus, the suggestions below were made on the basis of conclusions of the study;

1. Child-Friendly Schools have their significant role in decreasing drop-out rate of primary students. To ensure the success and sustainability of the CFS program, rigorous evaluations of child friendly schools may be conducted regularly.

2. Non-Friendly Schools were unable to retain the students. So, it was recommended that a productive and positive learning environment may be developed to improve the situation.
3. Quality of education was much better in Child-Friendly Schools, so it is recommended to incorporate pre- and in-service teacher training programs that are tailored to the needs of child-friendly schools, in order to create a positive and productive learning environment.
4. As Child-Friendly Schools are performing well in order to retain the students and quality of education as well, Government policies promoting child-friendly schools are urgently needed because kids are the future of the country. Moreover, orientations may be provided to inform parents and stakeholders about the CFS program, to ensure that they are aware of the child friendly school initiatives.

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