

Noble Initiatives/Best practices in ECCDs in Nepal

Introduction

Education is one of the key priorities of Save the Children (SC). Under education, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and Basic Education (BE) are the sub-thematic areas in which Save the Children has been investing its resources for a long time. Save the Children, a learning organization, also invests its resources in innovating new aspirations and solutions that best serve the felt needs and best interests of the beneficiaries. In the context of Nepal, there are some model ECCD centers known for their excellent ECCD services for their children's overall learning and development.

ECCD refers to the early childhood care and development. Early childhood is the crucial period of human life which is globally accepted from birth to 8 years of age. This age is crucial for overall development of child and it also determines/shapes the adulthood if the children are nurtured with age developmentally appropriate practice.

Center for Research on Education Health and Social Science (CREHSS) carried out this study for Save the Children International Nepal from November to December 2022.

Study Purpose and Key Questions

The study mainly addressed two research questions:

- Which innovations and new initiatives were found to be most effective in increasing the learning and developmental domains of children in general and by gender and marginalized children, including CWD? Why/ How?
- Can those adopted practices and approaches be replicable and scaled up in different locations and contexts? What practices are recommendable for scaling up?

The assessment of "Noble Initiatives/Best Practices in ECCDs in Nepal" took into consideration the themes finalized after a series of discussions with the SC and CREHSS teams. The themes were finalised as:



Method of the study

This study was conducted using qualitative methods through Key Informants Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), success stories, and observation. A total of 22 KIIs, 14 FGDs, 10 success stories were conducted and 10 observation checklists were filled to gather necessary information. The respondents of the study were the Mayor of the rural municipality, ECCD facilitators, the Head of Education of the rural municipality, Parents of children, and the ECCD management committee. This study was conducted in two provinces, namely Karnali Province and Madhesh Province. This study was conducted in 10 ECCD centers which were purposively selected; 5 each in Karnali Province and Madhesh Province. A one-day training was conducted to share the objectives of the research, the context of ECCD, study guidelines, ethics, and the field plan. Qualitative tools; guidelines/checklists were developed based on the objectives of the study and finalized in consultation with SCI program and MEAL team. A team of two researchers was mobilized to each province for the data collection. One of the core team members from the CREHSS also visited the study site during data collection for necessary supervision and monitoring. Ethical approval was sought from each of the local authority before the data collection. Verbal consent followed by written consent was sought from the study participants.

The analysis of the qualitative finding was performed thematically. Initially, the audio recordings of each interview (KII/FGD) were transcribed and later translated into English. The transcripts were coded and

kept in excel sheet and organized and analyzed thematically. Themes were finalized prior to the analysis with consultation of SCI Nepal team.

Findings

The findings are presented to address the two research questions of the study as below:

1. Initiatives were found to be effective in the learning and development domains of children.

Increased community and parental support for their children's learning and development

The participation of parents on the School Management Committee (SMC) has been crucial to the development of effective learning and developmental domains. The involvement of parents in the ECCD made them more aware of their children's school activities and taught them about the ECCD center's facilitation process. This also helped parents engage with their children at home and facilitate the teaching-learning process at home. Furthermore, the regular meetings and visits of parents to ECCD maintained a cordial relationship between facilitators and parents, which helped parents to know about the facilitation and behavior of their children at the center. The participation of parents in resource development and development of physical infrastructure, either in the form of labor-donation or other support contributed to the enhance the standard of the ECCD centers which ultimately result in effective learning outcome of the children.

Managed a Child-friendly environment (Physical/Educational)

A child-friendly environment is regarded as one of the most effective ways to attract children to ECCD centers. The committed and courteous ECCD facilitators were instrumental in preparing the child-friendly environment. Regarding the interior environment of the ECCD centre, areas were well-ventilated and kept clean. The facilitators were experienced and confident in facilitating and in handling various issues including cleaning, maintaining hygiene, respecting local languages, and facilitating classroom environment was ensured by well furnishing including carpeting of the entire floor with foam padding and avoiding the use of any sharp objects to prevent any physical injury. The classroom had enough colorful pictorial boards; few were drawn by children and few supported by parents. The children were provided with options for selecting their learning environment (indoor vs outdoor).

At the children's request, certain sessions were held outside the centres. In addition, the ECCDs are the basis for learning about various societal norms, including social, emotional, psychological, and moral norms. The ECCD established social norms as a basis for comprehending the diversity of Nepalese society.

Tuning with Government curriculum and its implementation

The curriculum and its implementation have played a significant role in the holistic development of children, including their social, psychological, and emotional growth. The protocol for utilising the curriculum and its application were crucial to class management for the centres to be effective. The curriculum was used to plan the daily lesson and adhere to the guidelines, and it assisted with the management of the class. In certain instances, NGOs also provided curriculum-aligned learning materials (pictorial books) in the local language. It assisted the children, who were not fluent in Nepali, in comprehending the context.

Effective Functioning of the ECCD leadership and management committee

Leadership and management play an important role in increasing the learning and development of children. A good leader can manage the organisation despite the unforeseeable challenges that arise during their tenure. During the observation of the ECCD center, the work of the head teacher to lead the school was found to have made remarkable changes in terms of building infrastructure (dispensary and child-friendly restroom), encouraging for professional development, and facilitating during the absence of ECCD facilitators.

Well-equipped Classroom management, including Developmentally Appropriate Practice materials

One of the most effective ways of promoting children's learning and development is through the management of classroom learning materials. As observed, all ECCD centers had designated six corners: personal, social, and emotional development, communication, language and literacy, mathematical development, knowledge, and understanding of the world, physical development, and creative development. It was mostly prepared using locally available materials and resources. In some cases, they were prepared by the parents of the ECCD children, which resulted in the parents' engagement in the ECCD centers. Meanwhile, in some cases, real



objects, such as vegetables, fruits, and household items, were used for facilitating. The seating arrangement in the ECCD center was a semicircle where the children and facilitators could face each other. This helped with the engagement of the facilitator and children. Furthermore, the classroom had a foam mattress, which protected the children while they were learning through play. Similarly, use of audio-visuals in some ECCD centers was worth noticing while facilitating few lessons, such as stories from YouTube, especially about dos and don'ts, and entertaining the children.

Invested in facilitators' professional development

The professional development is meant to enable the facilitators to conduct and facilitate classes. Professional development via training was discovered to be an effective method of promoting children's development in the ECCD center. All the facilitators had at least 90 hours of training, and some had refresher training as well. The refresher training provided for the facilitators helps them gain new methods of engaging children in a playful manner. As a result, it draws children to the ECCD center because many of them are leaving their homes for the first time with strangers. One of the head teachers of the school was also trained in ECCD facilitation, where she regularly visits the center and assists the facilitator together. In some communities, there was diversity in the classroom. Therefore, the facilitators used the local language to facilitate the classes.

Facilitated with play-based and activity-based approaches

The playful and activity-based methodologies and use of audio-visual means were among the most effective ways to aid the learning process. The ways to teach children using the play methods such as demonstration, singing, and playing with children are effective because by that way children do not feel the burden and enjoy learning new things. Play way methods such as acting, singing, and dancing have been fruitful for the overall development of children. It has helped the center to attract the children to school. The hand gestures and movements allow the children to participate in the activities, which results in learning new things playfully.

Launched effective health, nutrition, and WASH programme

The children were taught about maintaining sanitation at the ECCD centers, which helped them to maintain daily hygiene. Moreover, the construction of a child-friendly washroom with a tap and a girl-friendly washroom ensured sanitation

facilities are adequately available to the students attending the school. Some of the schools also have designated health staff to take care of the children. The school takes care of general health and hygiene along with nutrition. In the observation and interviews, it was found that the children were provided mid-day meal as well, while some had to bring food to school.

Provision of policy strategy, system, and alliances at different levels

Policy and systems play a vital role in the implementation of effective ECCD innovations. In some centers, municipalities played a vital role in ensuring the quality of ECCD in classroom management and capacity building. There was also a conference organised to maintain the interaction between different stakeholders. The provincial-level stakeholders and local levels met and shared their issues on education.

2. The best practice which can be used to replicate and scale-up the ECCD center

Child-friendly environment (Physical and Educational)

Creating a safe learning environment is essential for child protection and establishing a homely environment at the ECCD center. As children leave their homes and stay with strangers (ECCD facilitators) for the first time, it is essential for children to adapt to the new environment. A child-friendly environment can be created via understanding the needs of every individual child and responding to them separately, using the local dialect with the children and preparing a friendly atmosphere for the children. All of these practices to create a child-friendly environment at the center can be replicated in other centers.

Curriculum and its implementation

The proper use of curriculum is one of the most effective ways of replicating the best and most innovative practices of ECCD centers. It allows facilitators to prepare the session effectively. In case of any confusion, the facilitators can refer to the curriculum and continue the sessions. Referencing the curriculum to facilitate the session eases the facilitators to teaching-learning. It also provides structure rather than conducting the session haphazardly.



School/ECCD leadership and management/ Professional development

The leadership theme of the ECCD centers can be replicated and scaled up to different locations. This can be understood from the case story of the Chapur Municipality ECCD center. The leadership of the head teacher helped to form a well-equipped and sound ECCD center despite of lack of support. In the case story of the Chapur Municipality ECCD center, the support of the head teacher and the enthusiasm of the ECCD facilitators to give a positive and brighter future to the children is commendable.

Class management, including learning materials The use of locally available materials to make the center resourceful seems to be the best method for replicating the best and most innovative practices of ECCD centers. The use of local resources to build the classroom resources allows the parents to engage in the resource building. Furthermore, this encourages the parents to visit the centers and participate with the children. The use of resources to build the six learning areas allowed the children to engage through different activities which was impressive.

This can be understood from the success story of Janata Rashtriya Primary School, where the center has been able to provide outstanding sessions (through effective class management) and they were able to attract children even from private schools.

Learning and teaching methodology

Advancement of play-based instructional methodologies allows the facilitators to facilitate the children in an effective way and this particular thing can be scaled up and replicated to the ECCD centers in different locations. The friendly method of learning and facilitating helps the facilitators to facilitate the session in a positive environment. This can also be understood from the example set by Shanti Bal Bikash Kendra. The school used different teaching-learning methods such as play-method and audio-visual means which helped to gather large number of children to attend the school.

Resources for ECCD

The use of locally available materials to make the center resourceful can be replicated and scaled up in other ECCD centers as they are known to be the best practices. The resources developed in the local areas with the help of parents give ownership to the parents. This can be understood from the Kalika Bal Bikash Kendra, where the resources were adequate (provided by Save the Children and the local NGO; Paanch Tara Yuwa Samrachayan Maanch). The center had enough materials at six learning corners.

Health, Nutrition, and WASH

Health, nutrition, and WASH can also be adopted for the replicability and scale-up of the ECCD centers. At the ECCD centers, the facilitators take care of the hygiene of the children, and they are taught about good hygiene practice at the center, which is shared at home as well. This is evident in the case-story of Shree Rashtriya Adharbhut School, where the center had a child and female-friendly restroom and provided mid-day meals with good nutrition. They also taught their children about hand hygiene and sanitation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study has analyzed the best practices and noble initiatives after visiting 10 ECCD centers in Karnali and Madhesh provinces and gathering information from FGDs and KIIs with different relevant stakeholders. The study identifies the involvement of parents and community (attending/participating in regular meetings and showing interest in children's overall development, resource development), classroom management, child-friendly environment and professional development as the best initiatives.

The following recommendations are drawn based on the observation of the ECCD centers and qualitative findings:

- ECCD centers had abundant resources; however, some of them were operating in limited space and had higher number of children compared to class-room space and minimum standard. Hence, some of the centres are recommended to ensure the required minimum space as per the number of children.
- The center also had ample resources prepared by the parents and provided by different organizations, but they were underutilized to prevent wear and tear. Hence, concerned authority need to monitor and ensure the proper use of the play materials for facilitating the children.
- The national minimum standards for ECCD, encourages parents to visit ECCD centres and share stories and traditional practices using some innovative ways. However, none of the parents we spoke with had a similar experience. Hence, the ECCD management committee or the SMC need to encourage the parents of the children at the ECCD center to participate in the facilitation of some sessions.

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