Early Childhood Care and Education: A Missed Opportunity for Children with Disability

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Abstract

This article best explains public school-based early childhood program and community-based early childhood program in order to understand the problem in the state's education system addressing the children with disability.It was felt that the teachers have knowledge about child friendly environment and playful practice that is necessary to nurture children from the early age. Global evidence and research findings have shown that children with disabilities are at risk, and vulnerable environment in school, physical facilities for playful environment are difficult to deliver. A cross-sectional descriptive study was designed to assess the knowledge, attitude and existing practices on early childhood development and education for children with disabilities. The diversity of ethnicity, level of education, occupation, and religion were found with different levels of knowledge, practice and attitude of the respondents. Most of the teachers were found with the knowledge about the need of playful environment, health, sanitation and hygiene for early childhood development. Teachers with ECDtraining were found more knowledge about playful environment, health and sanitation. Even though existing strategies were promoting learning centers including awareness raising and improving the availability of funds, transport and supply education and health kits, encouraging for institutional capacity building, in reality most of the playful learning environment were found poor, health facilities were not available in schools. The study has been concluded with feeling the need of nurturing children having special attention in school health and nutrition not only for normal child, but also for children with disabilities, teachers and parents, and also other categories of people.

Keywords

Early Childhood Care and Education, Early Childhood Development, Mother and Child Health, Children with Disabilities, Holistic Development.

Introduction

Public investments in early childhood care and education provisions have increased significantly in recent decades, in both developed and developing countries. The extension of non-parental childcare supply follows a massive growth in demand for those services. Public investments in early childhood provisions are expected to lead to substantial social returns. Evidence on the effectiveness of childcare provisions is particularly weak with respect to quality aspects. This makes it more likely that public childcare investments turn out to be ineffective, delivering sub-optimal social returns. In addition, Early Childhood Development (ECD)have an important role in securing all children a positive and healthy childhood (MOE, 2012). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and UN convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which is the most extensive international convention on the rights of children, commits states to ensuring the rights of all children on the basis of equal opportunity. Early childhood programs result in easier transition to primary school and better completion rates. Early childhood care and education enables women to participate more in the labor market. The most dramatic gains of early childhood programs are for marginalized and vulnerable children. Early childhood education often focuses on guiding children to learn through play. There have been much debates and discourses regarding early childhood care and education in Nepal. There are many issues

raised against pre-schools repeatedly. Government is offering free education in primary level and has not spoken about ECD whether it should be free or in cost sharing basis. Debates are on quality of education and to address the children with disabilities.

Literature Review

For Pierre Bourdieu, culture is a realm of power struggle; it is related to the struggle over the means of violence that characterizes the realm of politics (Ballantine and Spade, 2001). Each culture has its own approach to the physical care of children. Oil massage and tactile stimulation are well-known practices in the care of new borne in Nepalese culture. It is done from birth with special care paid to the whole outer parts of the body.It has nutritional value in the physical growth of the baby (Pennings, 2009). Oil massage is applied usually twice or sometimes three times a day for the newborn baby. The massage is done in the sunshine or in a heated, warm room and passive exercise is done to the limbs. Molding is done to the facial parts in the every day. The eastern culture of oil massage for babies is a scientifically recognized practice for the healthy development of children (Sharma, 2004). Similarly, a mustard seed pillow is used for the new baby to shape the head nicely. Besides this, a newborn baby is kept closely with mother for her filial support.

The role of commercial child care centers not only contributed to the physical development of children, but to emotional and intellectual development as well. They affect the very influential role of the family, especially the role of the mother. Reynolds (2000) states the importance of a mother's attention in child health.

The promoters of ECD centers also believe that learning begins at birth and neuroscientists have demonstrated that the earliest years count in regard to school-readiness. They also feel that educational success is somewhat predicated on what children know and can do as they enter their first years of formal education (Bernal, 2008).

Commercial ECD centers also believe that a child should have reading readiness before graduating from the center. They should be able to look at books or magazines, recognize some nursery rhymes and identify part of the body, and be able to identify objects that have a functional use, tell the meaning of simple words, have some letter recognition and have the ability to express them verbally. They should be able to print their own first name, pronounce their own first and last names, and identify other children by name.

Likewise, children at this stage of development should have the ability to complete the incomplete sentence with proper word, understand that print carries a message and read with left to right progression. They should have the ability to answer questions about a short story, to tell the meaning of words heard in a story, to look at pictures and identify their story (Kaplan, 2006).It is also argued that school-readiness skills by the age of five years old should include the basic concept of position and direction. They should have listening and sequencing skills, be able to follow simple directions, and pay attention to a short story. Similarly, they should have ability to recognize common sounds, repeat a sequence of sounds, and re-tell simple stories in sequence (Lee, 2006).

Any early childhood education system is composed of several building blocks and a number of questions relating to the quality of each of these building blocks need to be articulated (UNICEF, 2008).

Based on the existing legal provisions and policy measures, the Ministry of Education and Department of Education have adopted a number of strategies to achieve the EFA ECD goal in Nepal. Both the National Plan of Action and the Core Document for EFA 2004-2009, SSRP (2009-2015) emphasized the need for coordination, networking and partnership with communities for implementing ECD programs. Coordination in ECD programs is aimed at adopting an integrated approach to child development in terms of Program contents and in terms of delivery and harmony in the Program. ECD training packages, curricula and learning materials were developed to cater to local needs and address children's diversity (DOE, 2012).

Different activities has identified and assigned to ECD actors based on their expertise. And all relevant stakeholders and partners are involved in planning jointly for the consolidation and expansion of ECD services. The community participation has been a fundamental for the entire process: from Program initiation to Program evaluation. Since all ECD centers and PPCs are established at community as community based units communities play a key role in the implementation and monitoring of ECD programs.

There seems to have sharp shortages of resources in poverty-ridden areas in the country. This calls for providing subsidies and support in remote areas and disadvantaged communities. The government is committed to provide basic support in all areas and additional support to disadvantaged communities. In this regard, two different modalities of support have been adopted for urban and rural areas: demand driven approach with partial Government support for urban and accessible areas; and special support for establishment and operation of ECD centers in the areas of deprived and disadvantaged communities (DOE, 2012).

The development index developed by the National Planning Commission, which categorizes the district into four categories have been followed in the development of special policies required for disadvantaged communities. The government has developed a policy of establishing ECD centers in poor and vulnerable communities of least developed districts. The proxy of adult illiteracy and pupil enrolment from census data has been used as a guide for allocation of ECD centers at the district level.

Research Methodology

From exploratory research method, done on the subject that have either no or little information is available. This research provides a basis for general findings. Researcher and practitioners can explore the possibility of using such general findings for the care of children with disabilities in future (Pfau-Effinger, 2004). The purpose of explanatorymethod is also broader than the descriptive method, it is conducted to build theories and predict events (McNabb, 2008). This method explains the causes of social phenomena and aims at establishing a relationship between variables.

In this study, descriptive scheduled interview, survey and focus group discussion method were used. A simple cross sectional descriptive exploratory study design was selected to examine, describe and predict the relationship among variables based on schedule. In this study, the researcher has aimed to explore knowledge, attitude and practice on physical environment and community empowerment. This study was based on primary information.

The research participants were policy makers, donors, representatives of local government, teachers, parents, community people and students. Purposive sampling targets a particular group of participants. The analysis of data consisted of organizing, tabulating, performing statistical analysis and drawing inferences (Pant & Wolf, 2002). The coding process included the categorization of responses on the interview schedule, giving appropriate numbers for each different response and copying the responses on a code-book.Skillfully integrating quantitative and qualitative data can greatly increase the richness of information by providing credible estimates of data as well as an explanation of the processes and interventions that yield research outcomes. Using both forms of data allowed researchers to simultaneously generalize results from a sample to a population, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest. High quality research, which commanded respect and attention from broad audiences, required multiple methods (Yunus, 2003).
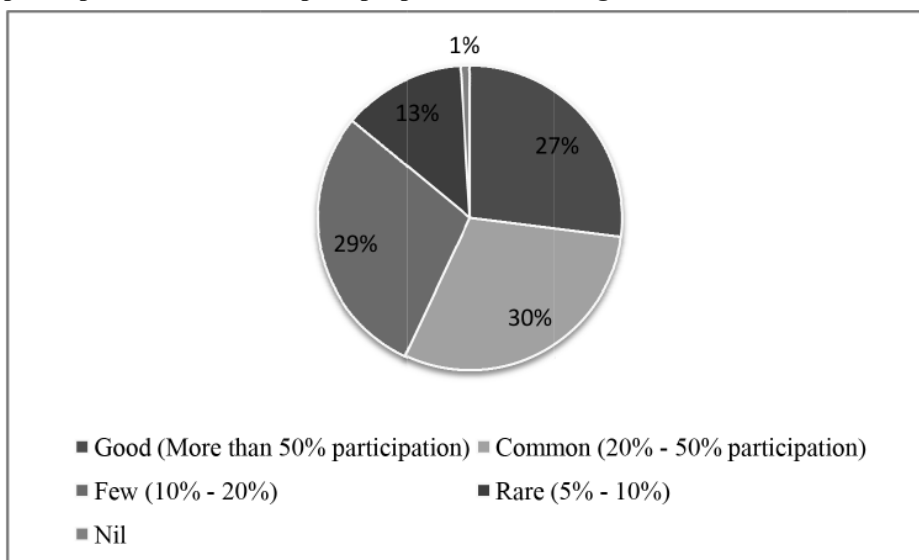
As a community organization activist, teacher and professional trainer in the subject matter, the student of education, the researcher took a frame of reference that was based in principle of ECD management.

Empirical Findings

The management aspect of ECD is that, there are rights established for the all categories of people both rich and poor in terms of resource use, roles and responsibilities. The social inclusion has been vital to poverty alleviation and for the social protection by supporting schools and health posts for poor people.

The view of participants, about the participation of Dalit, marginal, and excluded poor people in ECD managementis shown on figure.

The participation of Excluded poor people in ECD management

Out of 317 participants, 30 % participants realized that the participation of Dalits and other excluded community from the poor ones has been good i.e. more than 50% in community ECD management. However, 29% participants rated that involvement of real ultra poor is common i.e. in between 20% to 50% and 13% pointed out that there are still some activities like resource distribution and nomination of key posts, excluded ultra poor are nil or totally excluded. However, some 27% pointed out that the nominated female and other some excluded in key posts are rare i.e. from the range of 5%-10%.

ECD Centers as the Playful Means for Learning and Development

Children from the very beginning come in the school with some social and cultural values and norms already they are familiar with. The school premises help them to delearn of the already practiced skills and knowledge with the interaction of other children. They start delearning and relearning in the different ways as they involve on due course of learning in the ECD centers.

The curricular and co curricular activities carried out with children having different socio cultural background start delearning and relearning as they grow on in playful environment. The view of respondents, about the frequency of homework given to the children in ECD centers as a part of delearning and relearning has been illustrated in table.

Home Work Frequency

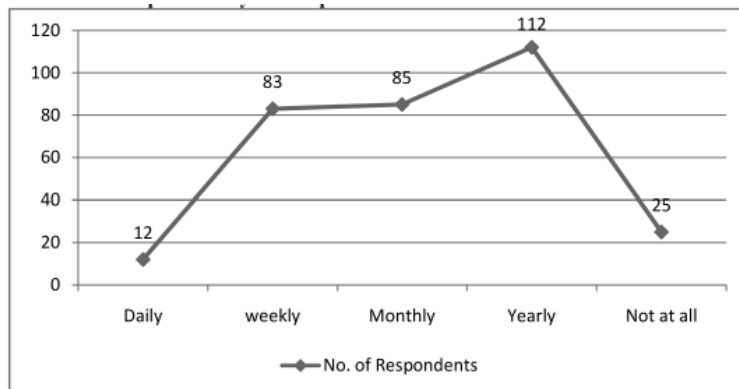| Home work to children	No. of Respondents	Respondent (%)
Always	61	19
Rarely	143	45
no homework	113	36
Total	317	100

Source: Field survey, 2014

Out of 317 respondents, 143 respondents i.e. 45% rated that teachers and facilitators provided home

works rarely and another 36% said that they did not provided homework as the burden to the children. However, 19% participants pointed out that they always provided homework on the request of parents and they wanted to make the children busy in home involved in learning.

Monitoring and Supervision of ECD

The supervisors and resource persons have the responsibilities of mentoring and coaching the facilitators and teachers in the classroom. The facilitators are expected as guide on the side and just playing the roles as inspirer, motivator and coordinator. The frequency of visit by resource persons and or supervisors in the ECD centers has been illustrated in figure.

Trend of ECD Supervision by RPs/ Supervisors

Source: Field survey, 2014

The majority of the visit by RPs and supervisors has occurred in between weekly and yearly and mostly the visit is found monthly and yearly. This has reflected that the close supervision has not yet been adopted in practice.

The reporting mechanism of supervisors and resource persons has been provisioned to district education office, feedback to facilitators and also information to the head teachers. The supervisors and resource persons are expected to guide and provide feedback in the classroom and also discuss with head teachers for management aspects of ECD centers. The regular reporting is expected by district education office for planning and further improvement of ECD centers. The reporting mechanism of resource persons and or supervisors in the ECD centers has been illustrated in table.

Reporting Mechanism of Supervisor

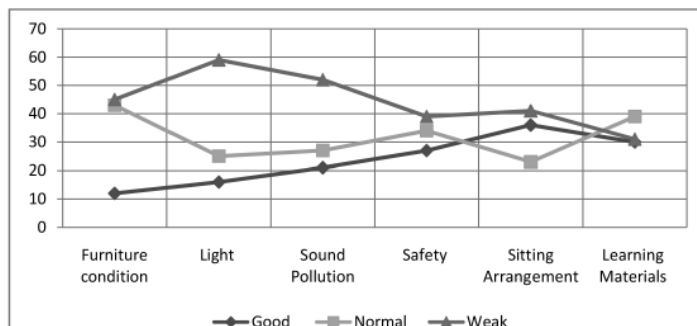| S.N.	RP/ Supervisor Response	No. of participants	Participants (%)
1	Feedback to facilitator	89	28
2	Explain to Head teacher	54	17
3	Discussion with facilitator and head teacher	95	30
4	Report to DEO	34	11
5	Report to parents / SMC	45	14
	Total	317	100

Source: Field survey, 2014

Out of 317 respondents, 95 respondents i.e. 30% with majority rated that resource persons and supervisors discussed with facilitators and head teachers about the matter they observed. Similarly, 89 participants i.e.

28% said that they provided the feedback to the facilitators for improvement and supported to enhance facilitation skills. However, 17% said that they only reported to head teacher, 11% said that they reported to DEO and only 14% consulted to parents and SMC members about the problems of ECD centers during observation. During interaction the participants also realized that the reporting mechanism were not formal, no written records in schools and ECD centers as evidence, even the supervision minutes were not found with records.

The classroom environment during observation by the researcher were recorded with checklist that the condition of furniture, provision of light, intensity of sound pollution, sitting arrangement, safety measures, and available of learning and playing materials were observed.The overall rating of the different environmental factors have been mentioned and illustrated on the figure.

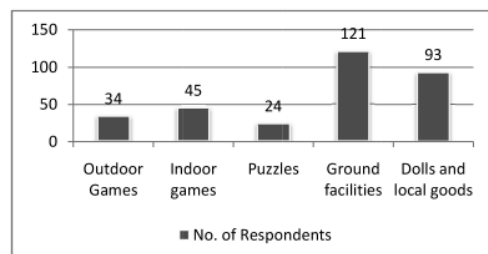**Trend of Classroom Environment**

Source: Field survey, 2014

During observation, 45% ECD centers were found with the weak condition of the furniture, 43% normal and only 12% good and usable. Similarly, 59% ECD centers were found with weak lighting conditions, the windows were made of wooden planks most of the time they were found closed. Similarly, 25% ECD centers had normal light provisions and only 16% had good lighting facilities with electricity back up light used. Similarly, sound pollution was rated as the 52% weak, 27% normal and 21% good. The classroom and surrounding was rated on the basis of safety as 39% weak, 34% good and 27% good. The sitting arrangements of the students were found to be 41% weak, 23% normal and 36% good. The learning materials were insufficient as rated by 31% , just for use by 39% and sufficient rated by 30%.

The sports facilities were the other indicators for the measurement of playful environment in the ECD centers. The indicators were rated based on the outdoor game facilities, indoor game facilities, puzzles, ground facilities, dolls and local goods as sports materials. The status of the sports and other learning materials as rated by the participants has been illustrated in figure.

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Trend of Sports Facilities

Source: Field survey, 2014

Out of 317 participants, 121 participants i.e. 38% rated that ground facilities were good, 29% rated that

dolls and local goods have been included in some extent as good for the children. Similarly, 14% said that indoor games were good for the engagement of children in the room but 11% preferred that outdoor games were more important for physical development of children and maintaining the discipline. Only 8% realized that the puzzle would add the more mental concentration and logical reasoning of the children.

The ECD centers have been measured its safety strategies through well condition of furniture, first aid facilities, drill and simulation exercises about safety and protection, use of safety plan by the center and maintenance facilities. The status of the safety measures as rated by the respondents has been illustrated in table.

Safety Measures

Safety Measure	No. of respondents	Respondents %
Well Furniture condition	77	24
First Aid	75	24
Drill and Simulation	65	21
Safety Plan	34	11
Maintenance Facilities	66	21
Total	317	100

As described on table 4.7, out of 317 participants, 77 participants i.e. 24% rated that the safety strategy used by them is well furniture condition. Similarly, another 24% rated that the first aid facility is the strategy of safety measure in the center, and 21% rated that there is facility of maintenance in the center. Another 21% rated that they took the behavioral change of children through drill and simulation for safety and protection. Only 11% agreed that they have safety plan for the center to ensure safety and protection of children.

Parental interest was another factor for proper management of the ECDcenter. The interest of the parents were observed through supply of homework, proper care of children at home, engaging children on playing, teaching and learning, and helping children on entertainment. The status of the parents' involvement as rated by the participants has been illustrated in table 4.7.

Parental Interests on ECD Management

Parental Interest	No. of Respondents	Respondents %
Supply homework	34	11
Proper Care	87	27
Engaging Children on Playing	86	27
Teaching and Learning	65	21
Entertainment	45	14
Total	317	100

Source: Field survey, 2014

As described on table 4.7, out of 317 participants, 87 participants i.e. 27% rated that parents involved in proper care of their children at home. Another 27% rated that they spent their time themselves on engaging children on playing. Similarly, 21% rated for giving priority on teaching and learning, 14% rated for need of entertainment and 11% rated for the supply of homework to the ECD children.

Community Managed versus School Affiliated ECD Centers

The community participation has been a fundamental for the entire process: from Program initiation

to Program evaluation. Since all ECD centers are established at community as community based units communities play a key role in the implementation and monitoring of ECD programs.

The responsibility to manage and operate ECD centers rests on the local bodies, whereas pre-primary classes are the responsibility of the schools with extensive community support and participation. Both programs are being implemented on the principle of cost sharing. Schools are subject to identify ways of sharing the cost if stakeholders perceive a local demand for pre-school classes. Partnership between schools and CBOs/ NGOs has been encouraged.

In order to increase the parents' awareness and involve the local community people in the management of ECD programs various forms of parental orientation and education programs are being launched by various organizations. The DOE has been conducting parental orientation programs to make the parents aware about the importance of ECD services and need for ECDcenters.

Parental education programs are being undertaken for the parents in order to deliver early childhood services to their children. INGOs have implemented this program in their respective project areas. The DOE has in the recent years, developed Introductory Parental Education Package and development of a national framework for parental education is offing.

Parental education is conducted by ECD centers for the parents of the children enrolled in ECD centers. Similarly some of the community learning centers have also recently started to organize parental education program for the parents of its ECD centers.

Without, Within and Beyond ECD

Without the intervention of ECD mechanism, enrollment in grade one has been less and attendance rate has been found reduced in case of children with disabilities. The higher drop out was found due to lack of habit of schooling not developed before the admittance. The out of school children problems remained unsolved for long time. The informal learning at home made complication on formal schooling long period for delearning.

However, the religious schools, and flexible school practices existed in the society has given a hope for thinking about the alternative for ECD center management. Without ECD center modality, there may exist the system of child schooling. Gurkul and ancient religious practices of children's learning may be the example.

Within the present framework of ECD management, it has been always the question of sustainability of the program. The fine management is another aspect of community based; school based and institutional based ECD centers. The Montessori based practice has been some role models in some areas and in some cases as fashions. The facilities, training to the facilitators, environment management have become integral part of the existing ECD center management.

Beyond ECD center of practice, the existing gaps and weaknesses can be dropped out making ECD as a part of school structure. The portfolio assessment with Continuous Assessment System in the centers may uplift the alternative way of enhancing the quality of ECD centers. The child club monitoring to ECD or involvement of mothers group or similar community groups may be effective option for the future development of ECD centers. The ECD centers for children with disabilities should be established as model for demonstrating in the country for its replication to address the inclusion.

Conclusion

Conclusions were derived based on the findings and discussions of the research results. Management strategies developed on the basis of community preferences enhanced the ECD's ability to manage available resources more effectively. The ECD facilitators indicated that the resource management practices werechild friendly and helpful for educational improvement, which helped themto use available resources much better andwith understanding. Both the community members and ECD facilitators

accepted thatthe questions on the tools were thought-provoking and they had to motivatewhen choosing a particular answer.

The membersexperienced concretely that the questions in the ECD management sector engagedthem and enabled them to understand the ECD activities. Access to the resources gave the ECD managers ideas (theoretical knowledge) forsolving practical domestic day to day problems in improving the situation. One member pointed out that inorder to solve practical problems one needstheoretical knowledge: the combination of theory and practice is indispensable inthe real situation. In general, the flexible structure of the ECD made itsimple for the people to access the resources, which was straightforwardand to the point and helped them to uplift the quality education.

This study has attempted to describe the newly emerging and inter-disciplinary subject called Integrated Early Childhood Care and Development (IECD) in terms of its historical antecedents, epistemological roots, its justification, utility function, the challenges it faces in Nepal and the researcher's contribution to its development as a discipline. The importance of early care and stimulation in the holistic development of the individual child and the relations this has for later life development and achievement was specified. Its implementation status in terms of poor "student" enrolment, inadequate number and poorly trained teachers, infrastructure, funding etc leads to high level of concern. It has been necessary to be systematically organized, managed and funded in partnership with parents, communities and international development agencies.

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