

## **Teacher Engagement with Young Children: A Case Study on Early Childhood Development Center of Nepal**

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### **Abstract**

The Government of Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has a provision for an Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) center in each school. Accordingly, schools are managing early childhood education and development centers in order to provide a better early learning and development environment for young children. However, the availability of quality human resources is still a critical issue. Keeping the existing reality in view, this study explored how early childhood teachers engaged with their young children (students) by implementing varied early learning activities. We deployed a case study approach and analyzed the cases of two teachers who have worked as early childhood teachers for more than five years. Observation and in-person in-depth interviews were conducted for both cases in this study. Single unit analysis for two cases was applied to analyze and draw meaning and implications of the study. This study finds that in order to engage young children in early learning, the teacher-directed approach could be useful, with the teacher taking multiple roles: as a planner, as an environment creator, as a decision maker and as a transformative practitioner.

**Keywords:** Young children, teacher engagement, early learning

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## **Introduction**

'Teachers are guides who show us the way we are to take' is a well-known Nepali saying. Teachers have held a respected role in society since ancient times in Nepal. In that sense, teachers used to take a central position in the classrooms and beyond, to command authority, as well as provide direction, support and care. With the development of educational theories and practices in pedagogy, much debate has focused on student-centered classrooms, where the role of teacher is said to be that of a facilitator. This argument seems valid, but at the same time the subjective role of the teacher in the process of fostering learning and development of young children cannot be denied. The engagement of teachers through different activities with such young children facilitates improvement in their early learning and development in an age-appropriate manner (MoEST, 2016). Every teacher engaging with young children has a vital role in creating a contextualized and effective learning environment, by understanding development psychology, and the unique ability and age-specific interest of each child.

Access and opportunities for quality early childhood development environment and learning activities play crucial roles in children's overall education. It is important that children at an early age receive appropriate stimulation to develop their motor, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional capacities. Learning begins at birth but certain skills and connections can still be developed in later years. In this regard, Young (1996) states that the early childhood development stage is a crucial one, because the most important aspects of brain development take place in infancy. It is challenging to create an environment that supports children for their age-appropriate development. Creating an appropriate environment for learning and development is the joint responsibility of the parents, teachers, community and nation as well. Recognizing that teachers play a vital role in this process (see Dahal, 2016), the purpose of this study is to explore the nature of teachers' engagement with young children in the early childhood development centers; and the implications of teacher directed early learning

activities in children's socioemotional growth and learning. We have explored and analyzed two cases of teachers facilitating young children in early childhood development centers in two community schools in Lalitpur, Nepal.

Early Childhood Education in Nepal is still fairly new, with an official and comprehensive education system only instituted after 2000 AD. Since then, the government has been working continually to reduce dropouts in early childhood and continuation towards primary school education for children across the country. The Government does recognize that investment in education, specifically in early childhood, can reduce inequalities, reduce public spending costs, and help generate a more dynamic economy (MoEST, 2016). However, in order to improve quality early learning, educational investment towards early childhood development and education should be increased at all levels of the government. Among other aspects, teachers' capacity development and its proper implementation in the workplace is challenging in a culturally diverse community structure such as Nepal. In spite of many difficulties and obstacles, teachers dedicate their valuable time and effort to create an appropriate early learning and development environment. Some of the teachers are applying unique approaches and techniques to engage and support young children's early learning and development. Exploring such efforts can provide insights for other teachers in their transformative teaching and learning practices in similar contexts.

Generally, there are three approaches for engagement with young children; teacher-directed, child-directed and child-dominated (Kimer et al., 2016). These three approaches have their own strategies. All approaches have specific contributions to the early learning and development of young children. The Nepalese teaching-learning approach is predominantly the first approach, providing little space for the second and none for the third one (Dahal, 2018; Singh, 2015). Each child is unique and capable of performing an age-appropriate activity - something teachers need to understand.

Children can engage more in specific activities when the peers play together without any disturbance from teachers and other children, but the teachers must be nearby (Singer et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2020). In such cases, the role of a teacher is expected to be that of a facilitator. Children can learn while playing freely by planning, managing and applying appropriate rules and regulation themselves. They can communicate with living and non-living things by creating their own medium of communication and also develop their perception towards things. These all are their own way of understanding and adjusting within their real-world and surroundings. In all of these early childhood learning activities, teachers' engagement, planning and communication with children have implications upon their learning and growth. Therefore, this article analyzes how teachers' engagement and support influences the natural learning environment in the formal classroom settings.

### **Methodology**

The study was premised on the philosophy of interpretivism and therefore is principally qualitative, using a case study approach. The study is based on a particular setting or context and time boundaries where the teachers and their young children are spending their real-life together to socialize and learn (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The daily basis of togetherness of the teachers and young children creates phenomenon according to the specific context. However, the study does not have clear boundaries between the phenomenon and context (Yin, 2003) because more than one case is selected for the same issue, which is also called a collective case study (Zainal, 2007). To explore the teacher's engagement with their young children, the cases of two teachers engaging with young children through varied activities in their respective early childhood development center are taken for this study.

Each teacher has their own phenomenal context where they are engaging with their students in a different way, but they have the same purpose of engagement i.e., to support early learning and development of young

children. The study is located in the urban contextual setting of Lalitpur Metropolitan City. It focuses on observation and then interpretation of the process of teachers' engagement with their young children through varied early learning activities (Baxter & Jack, 2008). For that, with the consent of the teachers, we observed the ECED teachers engagement with young children and then interviewed them individually. The generated information from observation and interview were thematically coded and rhetorically analyzed to construct potential meanings and implications. At the same time, the corresponding literature related to the teacher engagements were reviewed and we reflected on the observations.

### **Cases**

For methodological consideration, a collective case study approach was applied to explore cases on teacher's strategies to engage with their young children in early childhood education and development centers. The two cases presented below have been chosen for this study. To analyze these cases, a single unit of analysis is deployed (Yin, 2003) because both cases have similar phenomenal context and same purpose of studying the teachers' engagement. Only two cases are taken, as Yin (2003) states the two-case case study has higher significance of presenting and exploring the cases better, compared to a single-case. Further, these cases slightly differ in context, but the internal notion of these cases are common and applicable to both. This study intended to explore day to day activities of teachers engaging with their young children - i.e., teacher directed activities in early childhood development centers that actively facilitates learning among young children. From the observation and interview with respective teachers, the synopsis of the two cases is as follow:

#### **Case –I**

It is a sunny day but with four windows on both sides of a room and an open door, the class is a bit parky. Well managed rooms with various early learning materials such as drawing kits, child literature, blocks, musical instruments

and a learning center for different subjects in each corner of the room looks impressive. The room has sufficient space for indoor play and 12 young children are sitting in four groups. A teacher named Sarita (name changed) is sitting beside them. Each child has a drawing paper and pencil and it seems they are about to draw something. The teacher asks them to draw anything and starts drawing along with them. Each child shows their drawing to her. After this, the teacher hands them a paper and asks them to write the name of the food they had before coming to the Early Childhood Education Development (ECED) center. Then she asks them to play blocks in four groups and she also engages herself in their block play moving between groups, questioning what they were building and how they could build it. The children are enjoying and constructing different structures from the blocks and she admires their creativity. After an hour, some children have some discussion among themselves and the teacher initiates another activity.

After a short recess, she requests all the children to sit in a semi-circle and she sits in front of them. She has a book in hand - 'Mero Ghar' - and is showing the cover of the book. She reads all the information written in the book. Children are listening attentively and watching her face and at times at the book as she reads the contents loudly. After the reading, they interact actively then she requests them to read a book from the book corner. While children are reading the book, she goes to the children individually and asks them about the story and participates in discussion with them. At 1:00 pm, children have their day meal and then are involved in subject-wise learning centers. Two groups participate in the language learning center and the other two participate in the mathematics learning center. They spend more than one hour in the center and she provides different tasks to the respective groups. All of the children are actively engaged with the teacher. They are learning about numerical literacy through math games, and language and phonics competency through language games. Now it is 2:15 pm, the time for music and movement. The teacher plays the music and starts dancing and the children join her. They seem to be enjoying it a lot. At 3:00 pm children

are ready to go home. Some go with their parents and some are with their siblings. The teacher manages the room, sits down for tea and reflects on the activities and incidents of the day. She plans for tomorrow's activities and leaves the ECED center and heads towards her home.

## **Case II**

A room with floor seating is heavenly for those young children who are learning to socialize with peers and adults. The room is bright and beautifully decorated with different learning materials for the young children. Four corners and four sides of the room are specified for specific activities, they are sorted accordingly for morning meeting, songs and rhymes, mathematics activities and language and phonics including child literature. Similarly, one side of the room has blocks and the second side has materials for role-play, such as puppets. The third side is where the teacher puts her belongings and the fourth side has a bed for children to sleep. The classroom agreement made by the teacher and young children is also hanging on the wall of the room. Fifteen children and a teacher named Sona (name changed) are in the room. Students along with the teacher read aloud the classroom agreement. She asks the class who has made this agreement? Who is the implementer of the agreement? Who is responsible to follow the agreement? After this activity, she requests all the children to sit in the corner of the daily morning meeting. All of the children are in their specific place and the teacher asks them some questions related to their family, food, and travel from home to the ECED center. Children enthusiastically share about themselves according to their level and she respects their sharing with 'thank you', 'how nice' and so on.

Now it's time for the block play. Children divide themselves into 3 groups and start playing. The teacher is looking at their creative work and actively supporting their activities while children are enjoying. After more than an hour and a half of their active engagement with blocks, she requests them to come for the day meal. Students follow her. After the meal, she requests the children to participate in role-play activities. In this activity, the teacher is

holding a dog and cat puppet in each hand and creating a conflict scenario then trying to solve their anger and conflict. Finally, she conveys the resolution of conflict by showing the love between dog and cat. It is really interesting for me as an observer because all of the children are laughing and enjoying the activity with full engagement. It is 1:00 pm and it's time for learning center activities. Two groups of children are sitting in the two corners of the room, one group in the language and phonics learning corner while another group sits in the mathematics learning corner. The teacher facilitates them in math and language games. The young children are actively involved in such games by interchanging their placement. After an hour, she plays songs and rhymes and all the children sing along. Parents of the young children arrive in the ECED center to receive their children at 3:00 pm. After cleaning the room and managing all the materials, Sona prepares for tomorrow's lesson. She talks to her colleagues about the children's progress, discussing her experiences of the day, reflecting on the children's response to the activities and how she could make the activities even more interesting for the next day. Sona also leaves the ECED center for her home.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The above presented two cases have different contextual phenomena for the same purpose where the two teachers are engaging with their young children through varied activities. In both the cases, the activities among the young children are similar and are focusing on learning by playing with application of a teacher-directed approach. However, these cases may not represent all early childhood education and development centers, functioning in every public/private preschool of Nepal. These cases give insights to analyze how teacher-directed teaching - learning approaches with varied activities related to play, are creating or hindering effective early learning and development environment among young children. The debate on the approaches of early learning varies from either teacher directed or children centric (Kimer et al., 2016). Both approaches have their own unique importance and significance in young children's learning and development. However, the central focus of



early childhood education is to create an environment where young children can get varied opportunities for their age-appropriate physical (motor), social, emotional, psychosocial and cognitive development (Terreni, 2019). The critical examination of these two cases demonstrates four thematic domains: teacher as a planner, teacher as a facilitator for learning environment, teacher as a decision-maker and teacher as a transformative practitioner. From the discussion above in the introduction section and the theoretical linkages within the cases, we argue that early learning happens when these domains are considered as important aspects of teaching - learning approach in early childhood education.

### **Teacher as a Planner**

Scaffolding requires constant assessment of students' needs and instead of limiting oneself to a 'passive facilitator', teachers need to actively engage in understanding where children need assistance and how learning can be facilitated in a creative way with inquisitiveness. Teachers, especially in early childhood classrooms, take the position of a planner, decision maker and manager in the classroom to facilitate the learning process. Turnšek and Pekkarinen (2009) suggest that plurality, equity, and participation are the three key characteristics that make teachers visible in the class. Plurality concerns itself with the notion of freedom of choice, alternatives and co-existences. It determines how the teacher creates a learning environment with children by providing alternatives of activities, accepting the differences of understanding and variety of choices to make decisions. In the ECED centers, we could observe teachers providing young learners with a variety of activities which were carefully planned according to their learning needs and interest, however most of the choices on activities were mostly teacher directed.

*“Each child has a drawing paper and pencil and seems like they are about to draw something. The teacher asks them to draw anything and starts drawing along with them. Each child shows their drawing to her. After this, the teacher*

*hands them a paper and asks them to write the name of the food they had before coming to the ECED center.” (Case I)*

Teachers can be managers in the classroom as they actively engage in planning and making use of the available space and materials in the classroom to facilitate effective learning. Along with the physical environment, creating a 'respectful' environment (DeMeo, 2013) and one of 'trust' among teachers and children, is supportive for continuous early learning. The respectful environment in early childhood development centers make children feel physically and emotionally safe and respectful of who they are and what they are doing (Wessler, 2003). In the ECED centers, we noticed how teachers provided choices for young learners in terms of what they could draw instead of providing them with a strict direction. Teachers were patiently listening to the opinions of young learners which provided them with space to express themselves and also encouraged an environment of trust between the teacher and learner. Such practices help young learners pursue their own interest as well as reflects the respectful environment that the teachers are trying to construct. A respectful environment should be a critical aspect of early learning environments (Miller & Pedro, 2006), as it involves how teachers view early childhood pedagogy and reflects their understanding of early childhood psychology. However, the early childhood teachers need to be skillful to organize the early learning environment in order to support children's innovation, investigation, exploration and socialization.

*“... then they are involved in subject-wise learning centers. Two groups participate in the language learning center and the other two participate in the mathematics learning center.” (Case I)*

*“Two groups of children are sitting in two corners of the room, one group in the language and phonics learning corner, while another group is in the mathematics learning corner. The teacher facilitates them in math and language games.” (Case II)*

Place allocation for specific learning activities supports teachers to organize lesson plans, helps children stay organized and gives children opportunities to explore and learn independently, providing equal space for all the children to explore and learn. The subject-wise learning center allocation in a classroom (as in the cases I & II) is a way to stay organized in the learning process, which also helps teachers to create an effective learning environment.

Another important characteristic is equity, which is embedded in the values, such as enabling equal opportunities for all children, respecting their rights, without discrimination and supporting an inclusive classroom. The division of groups by the children themselves is supporting their right to choose, as independent learners (Case II) and inspires respect and trust. Similarly, participation creates an environment for involvement, dialogue, cooperation and shared responsibility between an individual child, teacher and the education management (Turnšek & Pekkarinen, 2009). The participation discourse emphasizes the role of children as social and political actors holding special rights in decision-making. The teachers plant the early seeds of cooperation, peer respect and valuing teamwork, as well as respecting and accepting diversity in the group, all of which facilitate socialization and effective learning process.

### **Teacher as a Facilitator for a Learning Environment**

Teachers engage with children in various ways during the teaching learning process. In every engagement however, teachers are required to think of ways to address the socioemotional growth of the children. Learning is phenomenal as well as a social process where the learner must be engaged and socialized during the learning process. The teacher can set the 'stage' for facilitating learning as per the interests and needs of learners. The cases explored through this study present teachers as creators of early learning stages for their young children in the respective early childhood development centers. Observation from both the cases show that teachers are actively

engaged in setting up a child friendly learning classroom with plenty of materials.

*“A well-managed room with various early learning materials such as drawing kits, child literature, blocks, musical instrument and learning center for different subjects in each corner of the room looks impressive. The room has sufficient space for indoor play ...”* (Case I)

The early learning environment is not only limited to the management of social relation between children and teacher but management of the physical environment in the classroom (Sahin et al., 2011). Well managed and physical environment-conscious classrooms have significantly contributed to young children’s development and learning outcomes in early childhood development centers (Berris & Miller, 2011). Well managed rooms with access to age-appropriate early learning materials, arouse curiosity in children to use the materials in their process of learning by playing. The proper placement of those materials makes children responsible for sorting things as well. The cases above show that the children did not have the freedom of choice for the activities and the use of materials. The cases have presented teachers as a means of creating learning environment, demonstrating cohesion between the indoor and outdoor environment, teacher and children’s activities and materials and their management. However, the teacher-directed activities may not provide ample learning opportunities as per the desire of students as the interactions between children and environment are limited by the preset activities.

*“The room is bright and beautifully decorated with different learning materials for the young children. Four corners and four sides of the room are specified for specific activities, they are sorted accordingly for morning meeting, songs and rhymes, mathematics activities, and language and phonics including child literature.”* (Case II)

The “well-managed classrooms can be seen as a harmony of decisions and physical factors” (Sahin et al., 2011, p. 187), which supports children to be independent learners in future. The teachers have significant roles and responsibilities as one who ‘sets the stage’ for an early learning environment. According to Burden (2003), teachers’ actions to create a physical environment for early learning of young children support positive social interaction, self-motivation and active engagement with human beings and non-human things in early childhood development centers. The environment for learning consists of place, learners (children), teachers and materials. The effective discourse between these four entities makes early learning happen among young children in ECED centers. The environment for teaching - learning in ECED centers is a phenomenon created by mobilizing the available resources effectively.

*“One side of the room has blocks and the second side has materials for role-play, such as puppets. The third side is where the teacher puts her belongings and the fourth side has a bed for children to sleep.” (Case II)*

The teaching - learning environment considers contextually-appropriate management of the available resources in the classroom. Both the teachers and children are responsible to manage the resources in a way where children can use them as per their learning interest and needs. If the teacher alone decorates the class as per his/her interest, it may not be supportive to all the children who have different interests or backgrounds. Each child has his/her own way of socializing and vary in terms of learning attitudes. This requires the teacher, as an adult supporter, to have adequate and appropriate knowledge and skills to engage with the young children, to create an environment and support them to socialize with it. The teacher as a facilitator can use different props and sounds to attract children towards the learning environment.

*“She has a book in hand - ‘Mero Ghar’- and is showing the cover of the book. She reads all the information written in the book. Children are listening attentively and watching her face, and at times at the book, as she reads the contents loudly. After the reading, they interact actively then she requests them to read a book from the book corner.” (Case I)*

The positioning of the teachers as an adult supporter may create assertive (or unassertive) roles in the socializing process and learning competency of the young children. Teachers need to position themselves as a scaffolder (Vygnotsky, 1978) in the socializing and learning process of the young children. The teachers’ support to young children from the sociocultural learning perspective is essential in their learning transformation and for age-appropriate early learning as well.

### **Teacher as a Decision Maker**

Early learning takes place through a process of scaffolding. This occurs when teachers provide support through a process of engagement with young children in varied activities (Heritage, 2010). In the cases above, teachers are actively engaging with children and creating the environment to engage children in the learning activities. Teachers are required to decide the point of intervention, which can be unique for every child. However, the activities implemented by the teachers are not sufficient to address the individual needs as per their age and development status (Cases I&II). The nature of intervention and the way such guidance or support is to be provided also varies with each individual child's need. The teacher creates the learning environment in relation to their attitude towards diversity of the classroom. Each child needs unique remedial support from a senior or capable peer to choose the right way in the span of their socializing and learning process.

*“... she asks them to play blocks in four groups and she also engages herself in their block play, moving between groups, questioning what they were building*

*and how they could build it. The children are enjoying and constructing different structures from the blocks and she admires their creativity.” (Case I)*

*“... she requests the children to participate in role-play activities. In this activity, the teacher is holding a dog and cat puppet in each hand and creating a conflict scenario then trying to solve their anger and conflict. Finally, she conveys the resolution of conflict by showing the love between then dog and cat.” (Case II)*

Teachers have to be positioned as a decision maker, as his/her decision to provide 'scaffolding' for the potential development is important for facilitating learning and growth. For example, the teachers need to decide at what point of the lesson to provide hints or prompts to the learner, in order to facilitate the child to move progressively in the learning process and objectives. Though the children are actively taking parts in all the teacher-designed activities, it seems like they are trained to follow the teachers' direction.

*“They spend more than one hour in the center and she provides different tasks to the respective groups. All of the children are actively engaged with the teacher. They are learning about numerical literacy through math games, and language and phonics competency through language games. Now the time is 2:15 pm which is for music and movement. Teacher plays the music and starts dancing and the children join her. They seem to be enjoying a lot.” (Case I)*

As a 'conductor' in the musical symphony takes central position in the stage and directs the musicians to perform, teachers in early childhood centers constantly provide direction and engage with children. However, in such case, the teacher is required to understand the needs and interest and their developmental stage of the young learners and direct the learning accordingly. Such understanding is mostly missing in the teacher-directed classrooms (Case I&II). Teachers have multiple roles and responsibilities. They need to take varied roles such as that of a guide, as a questioner, a listener, an instructor, a motivator, a decision maker, a leader, a researcher and as a

resource person among young children (Phajane, 2014). All of these roles facilitate the young learners' learning process.

*“While children are reading the book, she goes to the children individually and asks them about the story and participates in discussion with them.” (Case I)*

Learning agency refers to something that people do for others, or more importantly, teachers' self-motivation and engagement to ensure early learning happens among young children (Priestley et al., 2015). It has multiple nature, such as temporal and relational. The teachers as an agent temporally plays a scaffolding role in the process of early learning. But, the performance as an agent is relational, where the teacher acts in accordance to the context, available resources, needs and interests of the young children or according to the background knowledge and experience of the teachers.

*“... All of the children are in their specific place and the teacher asks them some questions related to their family, food, and travel from home to the ECD center. Children enthusiastically share about themselves according to their level and she respects their sharing with 'thank you', 'how nice' and so on.” (Case II)*

Teachers in this study have utilized the available resources and space as much as possible to play scaffolding roles in the process and activities of young children's early learning. While engaging with young children in their learning progression and development, nonetheless, the activities were more teacher-centric. Teachers were found to have been more curious than children initially and it created opportunities among the children to learn questioning skills and made them curious towards learning new things.

The teacher is a kind of medium between the interests of young children and available resources to facilitate learning in early childhood development centers. Further, the teachers have affirmative roles towards the activities conducted by their young children through their self-regulation. Both the cases were found to be successful in these activities. The teacher can motivate



children to participate in early learning activities, not only by inviting children's contributions, but allowing them to construct a new path of learning sequences as per their needs and interests (Church & Bateman, 2019). The teachers as agents have a significant role for both cognitive and non-cognitive development of the young children.

*“Now it’s time for the block play. Children divide themselves into three groups and start playing. The teacher is looking at their creative work and actively supporting their activities while children are enjoying. After more than an hour and a half of their active engagement with blocks, .....she requests the children to participate in role-play activities.”* (Case II)

The above activities supported the critical thinking, problem solving, social skills, creativity, self-control, and ethical/moral awareness, which are essential components of socio-emotional development of the children, corresponding to non-cognitive development. By creating such an environment (Case I&II) the early childhood teachers have created agentic capacity to be ‘agents of change’ in children’s early learning and development (Sang, 2020). Moreover, the teachers as agents still need to work on their competence to understand children’s developmental needs and interests first, then plan and regulate actions in educational contexts to ensure that the learning takes place effectively. The structured routine may help children to follow the teachers’ plan, but it may hinder their creativity and limit the opportunities to express their emotional need.

### **Teacher as a Transformative Practitioner**

‘Scaffolding’, which involves ways in which adults or more experienced or knowledgeable peers provide support for children as they learn (Zurek et al., 2014), has to be unique, recognizing that the levels of learning, the cognitive ability, learning style of every child is unique. It requires that teachers bring out innovative ways, reflect on the used methods and their effectiveness, and in so doing transforms his/her own frame of reference as well. In this light,

teachers practice transformation for themselves as they engage in unique ways with children.

*“She talks to her colleagues about children’s progress, discusses her experience of the day reflecting on the children’s response to the activities and how she could make the activities even interesting and better for the next day.”* (Case II)

Onks (2009) argues that encouraging teachers to engage in continuous, systematic collaborative reflective practice helps teachers innovate themselves as they turn their reflections into action-oriented efforts in their classrooms. We could observe that based on their experience with students, teachers were eager to bring about changes or rather improvements so that they could make their engagement with students even more meaningful and supportive of children’s learning.

Teachers’ engagement with children of early childhood is possible when teachers believe ‘teaching is a transformative practice’. More precisely, the early childhood teachers are transformative practitioners. They are reflective learners because they learn from their young children to imply age-appropriate teaching and learning strategies. Teaching in early childhood is a process of learning by doing as well as learning by reflecting on the experience teachers have with the learners.

*“Students along with the teacher read aloud the classroom agreement. She asks who made this agreement? Who is the implementer of the agreement? Who is responsible to follow the agreement? After this activity, she requests all the children to sit in the corner of the daily morning meeting.”* (Case II)

As a transformative practitioner, in this case, the teacher created such an early learning environment where these young children played and behaved with her as a peer. Being an active member of early learning activities, the teacher performed as an adult supporter and transformative practitioner in the learning process of young children (Case II).

*“... 12 young children are sitting in four groups. A teacher named Sarita (name changed) is also sitting beside them. Each child has a drawing paper and pencil and seems like they are about to draw something.” (Case I)*

Here, transformation also indicates doing the same activities differently among the young children. Knight (2008) states the strategies in early childhood education are demonstrated behavior and modelling through varied early learning activities such as songs, art making, read-aloud, games etc. Teachers' practices of teaching and engaging with young children were reflective and transformative in the sense of applying varied activities such as drawing, playing applying multiple approaches (Case I). Meaningful engagement with young children is a process of critical reflexivity. Critical reflexivity refers to the examination of teachers' belief towards their self-capacity to engage with young children through different early learning activities.

The teacher in early childhood education is a person who plays a dynamic role to improve the early learning capability of the children. Further, on the basis of critical reflection of the cases above, these teachers played transformative practices to ensure effective early learning among young children. Teachers sitting with children while engaging in different activities made them closer to each other as a friend. Further, the teachers actively participated in children's activities and played a vital role as adult supporter in their learning progression and development (Kimer et al., 2016).

*“Teacher plays the music and starts dancing and the children join her. They seem to be enjoying a lot.” (Case I &II)*

Motivation is essential for both teachers and children. Teachers' motivation to perform as a transformative practitioner with young children significantly adds value in early learning. Both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors for both teachers and children, ensure that early learning happens

through varied activities (Hill, 2015; Manyara & Murungi, 2018). The children's motivation to engage with the teacher as a friend or peer was also remarkable to understand the teacher's transformative practices in ECED centers.

### **Conclusion**

Early childhood development is a critical stage. Teachers, parents and communities have important role in creating an early learning environment, not only in the ECED centers, but in all other immediate environments. The single unit analysis of the two cases insights agentic roles and responsibilities of the early childhood teachers in early childhood development centers. However, early childhood teachers have essential responsibilities to create an accessible and feasible early learning environment in the given settings. The teachers' role is even more critical and challenging in creating a quality early learning environment for all young children. The cases explained that the teachers tried to engage children based on the children's interests and needs, however, the teachers applied teacher-directed transformative learning approach in their early childhood development centers. Even though they were aware of the notion of transformation in their existing practices, these teachers could have engaged their students by providing freedom of choice, self-directed activities and balance between indoor and outdoor activities understanding their multiple roles; planner, facilitator, decision maker, and a transformative practitioner.

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