

Current Status of Physical Management of Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers Operated in Community Schools: A Study of Mangalsen Municipality

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the objective of analyzing the current status of physical management in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers operated within community schools in Mangalsen Municipality, Achham District. A mixed-methods research design was employed in this study to ensure a balanced integration of both quantitative and qualitative data. Out of the 47 community schools in Mangalsen Municipality, 5 schools were selected for the study using purposive and convenience sampling methods. Primary data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and direct observation forms from a total of 16 respondents, including 5 headmasters, 5 School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons, 5 ECD teachers, and 1 head of the education section. The findings of the study revealed that the overall physical management of ECD centers in community schools is weak. The main problems identified include the lack of separate buildings for most centers, the conduction of all activities within a single classroom, and classroom sizes and lighting conditions that fail to meet standard requirements. The studied schools suffer from a severe shortage of furniture, forcing children to sit on the floor on carpets or traditional straw mats (*gundri*). Furthermore, the lack of separate playgrounds and adequate play materials for children has hindered their physical and mental development. Similarly, the absence of clean drinking water, child-friendly toilets, and boundary walls for security leaves the learning environment of these centers unsafe. Insufficient budget allocations, a lack of effective monitoring, and poor coordination among stakeholders (local government, management committees, and parents) have added further complexity to physical management. The study concludes that to make ECD centers effective, the local government must formulate a clear physical infrastructure policy and allocate adequate budget, develop a regular monitoring system, and emphasize creating a child-friendly learning environment by maximizing the mobilization of local resources.

Keywords: Early Childhood Development (ECD) Center, Physical Management, Community School, Learning Environment, Mangalsen Municipality

INTRODUCTION

Education is the pathway to the holistic development of human beings. It brings positive changes in individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies, enabling them to become productive and well-adjusted members of society (Regmi, 2022). Since early childhood forms the foundation of human life, its development is regarded as critically important for long-term outcomes, making it essential to pay special attention to the holistic development of children during this stage (Woodhead, 2006).

Psychological and neuroscientific research has shown that approximately 85 percent of brain development occurs within the first five years of life (UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, this period represents a highly sensitive stage of human development in which the absence of appropriate guidance, nutrition, and environmental stimulation can have lifelong negative consequences (Subedi, 2024).

According to Nepal's Federal Education Policy and the Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2018 (2075 B.S.), a center established as part of basic

education for children who have completed four years of age is referred to as an Early Childhood Development (ECD) Center (Government of Nepal, 2018). To ensure universal access to early childhood education, strengthen the foundation of learning, and reduce dropout rates at the primary level, the Government of Nepal has made ECD centers an integral component of the school education system (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2019). Following the implementation of the Local Government Operation Act, 2017 (2074 B.S.), the authority for the management, operation, and approval of these centers was fully delegated to local governments, thereby broadening and localizing their administrative, financial, and operational responsibilities (Bajracharya, 2020).

Early childhood is a crucial period for cognitive, social, and emotional development. The quality of experiences and the child-friendly environment provided during this stage significantly influence children's developmental progress (Pant, 2023). According to the renowned psychologist Jean Piaget, children construct knowledge through active interaction and adaptation to their environment (Piaget, 1952). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that children's learning largely depends on the social environment they experience and the organized support, or "scaffolding," they receive (Vygotsky, 1930). Therefore, the positive social, emotional, and physical environment provided in ECD centers lays a strong foundation for children's personality development (Shrestha, 2025).

Among the key indicators used to assess the effectiveness of ECD centers, the availability of physical infrastructure and minimum essential facilities is considered one of the most important aspects (Barrett et al., 2019). Safe classrooms with adequate lighting and ventilation, child-friendly furniture, access to safe drinking water, clean and gender-friendly toilets, and sufficient play materials directly influence children's learning participation and cognitive development (Bishwakarma, 2022). International studies have also revealed that schools or centers with inadequate and unsafe physical environments tend to have significantly lower levels of student learning achievement, attraction, and attendance (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, the standardization of minimum physical infrastructure

has become the first and indispensable requirement for developing ECD centers into attractive, safe, and fear-free learning environments (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2021).

Overall, the qualitative improvement and physical strengthening of Early Childhood Development Centers constitute the first step toward building a prosperous society and capable citizens (Heckman, 2006). In developing countries such as Nepal, particularly in geographically remote regions, insufficient budgets and inadequate physical infrastructure remain major challenges (Bhatt, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires the effective implementation of national policies at the local level and the adoption of internationally proven child-friendly models (Rao et al., 2014). Only through comprehensive improvements in physical infrastructure, increased financial commitment from local governments, and the integration of child-centered teaching approaches can a secure and brighter future for children be ensured (Engle et al., 2011)

To fulfill the core objective of Early Childhood Development (ECD) education, special attention must be paid to the comfortable physical and psychological management of enrolled children (UNESCO, 2015). However, current community school ECD centers face serious deficiencies in physical buildings, well-equipped classrooms, adequate budget allocation, local resource-based learning materials, and stakeholder coordination (KC, 2079). This acute shortage of age-appropriate infrastructure for movement, play, and learning poses a major barrier to achieving the "equitable, inclusive, and quality early education" envisioned by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, Target 4.2 (UNESCO, 2021).

This structural complexity is particularly evident in remote and hilly regions like Mangalsen Municipality in Achham District, under Sudurpashchim Province, where physical management remains weak, traditional, and challenging (Acharya, 2080; CEHRD, 2080). A pervasive, narrow tendency exists among school administrations and local stakeholders to prioritize the physical needs of upper classes (Grades 1 to 10) while neglecting ECD centers, which serve as the foundation of education. As a result, these foundational structures are becoming increasingly dilapidated and unsafe

(Dhakal, 2081), leaving a massive gap in basic needs such as earthquake-resistant buildings, insulated floor-bedding, clean drinking water, child-height toilets, and secure boundary walls (Mangalsen Municipality, 2081).

International studies confirm that a lack of safe, well-equipped infrastructure during early childhood severely compromises children's attendance rates and their emotional and physical development (UNICEF, 2020). In Mangalsen, the lack of a long-term strategic action plan, insufficient financial budgets, neglected capacity building for ECD facilitators, and a lack of effective monitoring have reduced these centers to mere "childcare centers" rather than venues for holistic development (Tiwari, 2082). Therefore, it is imperative for the local government, ward committees, and school management committees to immediately rectify this neglect and take concrete steps to improve infrastructure, secure adequate funding, and create child-friendly learning environments (Acharya, 2080).

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify the current state of physical infrastructure, buildings, and classroom management of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers operated in community schools of Mangalsen Municipality.
2. To analyze the availability of drinking water, sanitation/hygiene, playgrounds, and safety arrangements in these ECD centers.
3. To identify the roles of stakeholders and financial challenges in physical management, and to recommend measures for improvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The physical management of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers is primarily examined through the lens of three major educational and developmental theories:

Montessori Method of Education: Maria Montessori (1907) emphasized that child-friendly physical materials and an organized classroom environment are essential for children's independent learning. Easy access to learning materials boosts self-confidence in young children.

Sociocultural Theory: According to Lev Vygotsky (1930), since children learn through social interaction, classrooms must have adequate space for group discussion, collaborative play, and interaction. Creative drawings and materials displayed on the walls facilitate active learning.

Cognitive Development Theory: Jean Piaget (1936) noted that playgrounds, colorful classrooms, and safe play materials are necessary for children's mental development. The physical infrastructure acts as a catalyst for a child's intellectual growth.

Policy and Empirical Review

The Education Act of Nepal, 2028 (1971), along with the *National Minimum Standards and Guidelines for Early Childhood Development Centers and Classes*, prescribes clear benchmarks for the establishment, operation, and physical infrastructure of ECD centers. However, implementing these standards in practice remains highly challenging.

Locally, studies by Poudel (2066 BS) and Pokharel (2072 BS) demonstrate that children who attend ECD centers exhibit superior linguistic and social skills compared to those who do not. According to Sharma (2076 BS), early childhood is a "toy age," meaning that a lack of adequate play materials severely hinders a child's holistic development. On an international scale, researchers like Leithwood (2020) and Hargreaves (2000) have concluded that there is a direct correlation between a school's physical management and academic achievement, emphasizing that effective leadership and proper resource mobilization are essential to bridge this gap.

In summary, various theories and prior studies establish child-friendly physical infrastructure as the cornerstone of early childhood development. Nevertheless, a massive gap persists between these theoretical and policy provisions and the actual ground reality of community schools in Mangalsen Municipality.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a mixed-methods research design, as the nature of the research requires analyzing both

quantitative and qualitative data in verbal and numerical formats.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques

The study area comprises all 47 community schools located in Mangalsen Municipality of Achham District. From this population, a sample of 5 schools was selected using purposive and convenience sampling methods.

A total of 16 respondents were selected for the study: 5 Headmasters (HMs), 5 School Management Committee (SMC) Chairpersons, and 1 Chief of the Education Branch (Municipality) were selected using the purposive sampling method. 5 ECD Teachers / Facilitators were selected using the convenience sampling method.

Data Collection Tools

Three primary tools were deployed to collect data for the study:

Questionnaires: Both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires designed specifically for teachers, headmasters, and SMC chairpersons.

Interview Guide: A semi-structured interview guide used to gather qualitative insights from the Chief of the Municipal Education Branch.

Observation Checklist: An observation form used to directly assess and record the physical condition of the ECD buildings, classrooms, playgrounds, and learning materials.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The experiences of early childhood construct the foundational cornerstone of a child's future. For the physical, mental, emotional, and social (holistic) development of age-eligible children in early childhood centers, a supportive family environment must be complemented by an accommodating physical and psychological school climate. Only a child-friendly management style and a conducive learning environment can foster the full realization of a child's inherent potential.

Embracing this reality, this study focused on five community-school-based ECD centers operating in Wards 3, 4, and 5 of Mangalsen Municipality in Achham District. Based on data collected through field surveys, direct observations, and interactions

with key stakeholders, the current status of physical management, the role of stakeholders, existing challenges, and potential solutions are analyzed and discussed below.

Current Status of Physical Management in Community School ECD Centers

Physical infrastructure plays a direct and profound role in the overall learning process and capacity development of young children (aged 3 to 5 years). Quality learning is virtually impossible without physical adaptability and child-friendly structures. In this context, the condition of classrooms, buildings, furniture, playgrounds, toilets, drinking water, boundary walls, and gardens in the studied centers was thoroughly analyzed.

Status of Building Structures

The study revealed that none of the community-school-based ECD centers had a separate, independent building dedicated solely to early childhood education. Instead, the ECD classrooms were situated within the same blocks as primary or secondary classes. Although rooms were physically available, the construction type and quality of these buildings varied significantly.

Table 1
Status of ECD Center Building Structures

Type of Building Structure	Number of Schools
Permanent (Concrete/Pukka)	2
Semi-permanent (Semi-pukka)	2
Temporary (Mud-and-stone/Kachchi)	1

Source: Field Survey

As shown in Table 1, out of the 5 sampled centers, 2 are running in permanent concrete buildings, 2 in semi-permanent structures, and 1 in a temporary mud-and-stone building.

Although the National Minimum Standards for ECD centers advocate for safe, distinct, and independent physical structures, the ground reality forces these centers to squeeze into old school blocks or isolated corners of primary school buildings. Lacking separate premises, these young children are constantly overshadowed by the noise and high-energy activities of older students from the upper grades.

Classroom Size and Area per Student

An ECD classroom must be spacious, well-ventilated, safe, and filled with adequate natural light. According to the Government of Nepal's *National Minimum Standards for Early Childhood Development Centers 2067 (2010)*, an ECD classroom should have a minimum length of 18 feet, a width of 16 feet, and at least four windows. The actual ground reality of the studied schools is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Classroom Dimensions and Student Density in ECD Centers

Name of the School	Number of Students	Length (ft)	Width (ft)	Area per Student (sq. ft)
Shri Suryodaya Basic School	6	18	15	45.00
Shri Panimul Basic School	7	9.4	9.4	38.57
Shri Balmandir Basic School	10	9.84	8.2	9.05
Shri Radha Secondary School	23	22	16	15.30
Shri Shodasha Devi Secondary School	21	22	18	18.86

Source: Field Survey

An analysis of the data reveals that only Shri Shodasha Devi Secondary School and Shri Radha Secondary School meet the national spatial standard.

Borderline and Deficient Spaces: Shri Suryodaya Basic School misses the target slightly, with its width being 1 foot short of the national requirement. Meanwhile, Shri Panimul and Shri Balmandir Basic Schools feature extremely cramped classrooms, with both lengths and widths falling below 10 feet.

Student Density Issues: At Shri Balmandir Basic School, the available space drops to a critical 9.05 square feet per student, leaving virtually no room for children to move around, interact, or play freely.

From a physical safety perspective, while 2 centers operate in permanent concrete classrooms, 2 are housed in temporary mud-and-stone rooms, and 1 in a semi-permanent space. Furthermore, safety hazards are present in the layout: one center is located on an upper floor, while another, although on the ground floor, has a steep, uneven, and hazardous access path leading to the classroom.

In terms of illumination, one center suffers from a severe lack of natural light. Sitting in a dark, poorly lit classroom not only strains the children's eyesight but also dampens their overall enthusiasm and cognitive capacity to learn.

Seating Arrangements

Traditional high-desk and bench configurations are highly unsuitable for early childhood development centers. To support age-appropriate posture and safe storage of materials, classrooms must feature child-friendly low furniture, storage cabinets, and insulated floor matting or carpets. According to Piaget (1952), a child-friendly classroom environment should give children the physical freedom to sit comfortably, explore, and play.

Table 3

Status of Seating Arrangements in ECD Centers

Seating Arrangement	Number of Schools
Traditional Desk-Bench Setup	0
Carpet, Cushions, Straw Mats (Gundri), or Rugs (Chakati)	3
No Seating Facilities (Completely Unmanaged)	2

Source: Field Survey

While three of the studied schools use carpets or traditional straw mats (*gundri/chakati*) to sit on the floor, the carpets in two of these centers are extremely old, torn, and shredding into pieces. The seating arrangement in the remaining two centers is completely broken down and lacks any physical structure.

Storage is equally problematic: while two centers are equipped with functional cabinets and storage boxes, the remaining three have no designated storage units, leaving toys and educational materials scattered in disarray across the floor. This further highlights how far these centers are from meeting basic, child-friendly standards.

Availability of Playgrounds

For young children, play is the primary vehicle for understanding the world and developing creative

skills. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) explicitly protects every child's right to play and recreation.

Table 4
Status of Playgrounds in ECD Centers

Playground Status	Number of Schools
Adequate and Dedicated Playground for ECD	0
Shared or Inadequate Playground	4
No Playground at All	1

Source: Field Survey

Four out of the five studied schools have some form of playground, but none have a dedicated, secured play area specifically for early childhood students. Younger children are forced to share the same open fields with much older primary and secondary students, which prevents them from playing freely or safely. One school completely lacks any playground space. The total absence of separate play areas and essential outdoor equipment (such as swings and slides) hinders both the physical development of these children and their motivation to attend school.

Toilets and Sanitation Status

From a health and hygiene perspective, child-friendly sanitary facilities are non-negotiable in an ECD environment. International and national standards dictate that toilets for small children must be low-height, clean, and safe.

Table 5
Status of Toilet Infrastructure

S.N.	Toilet Structure	Number of Schools
1	Permanent (Concrete/Pukka) Toilets	2
2	Temporary (Kachchi) Toilets	3

Source: Field Survey

Although all five surveyed schools have toilets, not a single school features a dedicated, child-friendly toilet for ECD students. Young children are forced to use the same large toilets designed for adult teachers and older students. Our field observations revealed a critical lack of water and regular cleaning in these facilities. The fundamental right to safe, clean toilets and health

protection, as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), is severely compromised in these institutions.

Availability of Drinking Water

Safe and clean drinking water is vital to protect young children from dehydration and waterborne infections. As Piaget (1952) suggested, safe drinking water is a key component in maintaining physical stamina and cognitive clarity in active, growing learners.

Table 6
Source and Availability of Drinking Water

Source of Drinking Water	Number of Schools
Direct Pipe/Tap Water	4
Carried from Natural Spring Source (in Jarkians)	1

Source: Field Survey

Four schools have piped water systems, while Shri Radha Secondary School relies on water carried by hand in plastic jarkins from a distant natural spring to serve its students.

For the four schools with tap water, three draw their supply directly from raw, untreated natural spring sources. Most concerning, not a single school has any water purification or filtration system in place. Only one school has constructed a child-friendly tap at an accessible height; in all others, children must drink raw, unsafe water directly from high pipes or unhygienic storage containers.

Boundary Walls and External Safety

A strong perimeter boundary wall is crucial for both the internal and external safety of young children. It prevents them from wandering onto nearby roads and protects them from stray or wild animals. The *National Minimum Standards Guidelines 2075 (2018)* considers a boundary wall to be a mandatory safety requirement for any early childhood learning environment.

Table 7
Status of Boundary Walls

Boundary Wall Status	Number of Schools
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Fully Secured (Permanent Wall and Gate)	2
Partially Enclosed (Incomplete Wall)	2
No Boundary Wall at All	1

Source: Field Survey

Out of the five schools, only two have a fully secured, permanent concrete boundary walls with a gate. Two schools have partially built, incomplete boundaries, and one school completely lacks any form of enclosure.

In the schools with incomplete or missing boundary walls, stray cattle, local animals, and unauthorized individuals frequently wander directly into the school courtyard and classroom doorsteps. This leaves these young, vulnerable children in a state of constant safety risk.

School Gardens

Connecting learning with nature is highly beneficial for early childhood development. Greenery and flower gardens play a vital role in calming child psychology and inspiring creative thinking. Jean Piaget emphasized that a clean, stimulating, and natural school garden environment is essential to spark a child's cognitive growth.

However, our field study revealed that four out of the five schools have no trace of a garden. Only one school has made a preliminary attempt to establish a small garden area. This widespread lack of greenery shows that schools remain largely indifferent toward building eco-friendly, artistic, and stimulating environments for their youngest learners.

Internal Classroom Environment and Learning Corners

To promote self-directed, hands-on learning, an ECD classroom is required to organize its space into six distinct learning corners:

- Language Corner (Reading/Book area)
- Mathematics Corner
- Science Corner
- Creative Corner (Art/Drama)
- Construction Corner (Building blocks)
- Self-Reliance Corner (Practical life skills)

Table 8
 Management of the Six Learning Corners

Learning Corner (Area)	Good	Satisfactory	Weak / Non-existent
Language Corner	2	1	2
Mathematics Corner	2	3	0
Science Corner	2	1	2
Creative Corner	3	0	2
Construction Corner	2	1	2
Self-Reliance Corner	2	3	0

Source: Field Survey

Analysis of Learning Corners and Material Management

The functional management of these six learning corners is largely unsatisfactory across the surveyed schools:

Inconsistencies Across Corners: While the Language, Science, and Construction corners are rated "good" in two schools and "satisfactory" in one, they are completely weak or entirely unallocated in the remaining two schools.

Relatively Stronger Areas: The Mathematics and Self-Reliance corners show relatively better management (rated "good" in two schools and "satisfactory" in three). The Creative corner is well-managed in three schools but remains completely neglected in the other two.

Learning Material Management

Out of the five centers, only two have attractive, organized, and properly displayed educational materials in line with national standards. One center has partial organization, while the remaining two centers keep their materials in complete disarray, scattered carelessly on the floor.

Across almost all centers, there is a glaring shortage of the standard physical, mathematical, scientific, dramatic, and self-reliance materials mandated by national ECD guidelines.

Stakeholders' Roles and Performance in Physical Management

The strengthening of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers heavily relies on the proactive roles of the School Management Committee (SMC), headmasters, ECD teachers, and the local government (municipality). However, this study reveals several critical shortcomings in their performance and execution of duties.

Role of the School Management Committee (SMC)

During the study, the role of the SMC toward ECD centers was found to be highly passive. The committee has shown minimal initiative in the construction, reconstruction, or physical reinforcement of ECD spaces.

Specifically, the SMC has failed to coordinate effectively with the local government or external donor agencies to secure clean drinking water, proper toilets, play equipment, and safe classrooms. They have not led efforts to mobilize internal resources or budgets, and have been entirely unsuccessful in mobilizing community members, philanthropists, and local representatives for financial aid. Furthermore, the SMC's preparedness for safety monitoring, regular institutional sanitation, and disaster management (emergency evacuation) remains fragile. It was also found that they do not organize regular meetings between teachers, parents, and the community, nor do they prioritize the capacity building of ECD facilitators.

Role of the Headmaster

As the primary administrative and managerial leader of a school, the headmaster plays a pivotal role. However, headmasters in the sampled schools do not prioritize ECD centers on par with primary or secondary levels.

Only two headmasters showed active involvement in managing drinking water and toilet cleanliness, while active involvement was extremely low in the remaining three schools. Headmasters demonstrated very little interest in creating child-friendly classrooms, procuring appropriate low furniture, utilizing local resources, or establishing the six learning corners. Additionally, institutional

mechanisms to monitor teacher and student attendance and the daily learning process are largely ineffective. Headmasters also play a weak role in providing refresher training or professional incentives to ECD teachers.

Role of the ECD Teacher

ECD teachers are the primary link to the children. While two out of the five teachers made partial efforts to create educational materials and maintain cleanliness, the performance of the teachers in the remaining three centers was weak.

Teachers pay very little attention to crafting handmade toys, illustrations, or audio-visual aids using cheap or free locally available resources. Although they try to remain alert to safety hazards inside the classroom, they lack the necessary safety equipment. The most significant shortcoming is their indifference toward conducting parental education programs or holding regular consultative meetings with parents.

Role of the Local Government (Municipality)

Under the Constitution of Nepal, the responsibility for basic education lies with local governments. However, the Education, Youth, and Sports Branch of Mangalsen Municipality has limited its role to issuing operational permits, showing minimal involvement in regular monitoring, evaluation, or physical strengthening.

Apart from the federal government's annual allocation of NPR 500 per child, the municipality has not allocated any separate budget for ECD centers. Teachers reported that while minor capacity-building programs have been conducted in partnership with donor organizations, the local government has completely failed to assist with building repairs, child-friendly painting, appropriate furniture, educational charts, toys, or visual materials. There is also a distinct lack of a clear municipal policy or strategic roadmap for the upgrading of ECD centers.

Major Problems Faced by Community School ECD Centers

Based on quantitative data, direct field observations, and interactions, the core issues plaguing these centers have been categorized into three major domains:

Physical and Infrastructure Problems

Lack of Independent Buildings: Without separate facilities, tiny children are forced to share buildings with older students. Three schools still run classes in highly temporary, mud-and-stone structures.

Uncomfortable Classrooms: Classrooms feature unvarnished window shutters, shredded pieces of old carpet on the floor, and a complete absence of climate control (fans or heating) for extreme summer/winter weather, which directly risks children's health.

Lack of Furniture and Storage: A severe shortage of cabinets, racks, and tables means educational and play materials cannot be stored safely.

Shared Playgrounds and Toilets: Sharing playgrounds and toilets with older, larger students prevents young children from using facilities comfortably and playing freely. There is also a severe lack of regular cleaning in these toilets.

Safety and Water Hazards: Security risks are extremely high in schools lacking boundary walls. Additionally, not a single school has laboratory-tested or filtered drinking water.

Financial Problems

ECD centers are suffering from a severe financial crisis. Beyond the meager annual allowance of NPR 500 per child, there are no external, governmental, or local sources of funding. Because the schools' internal income is also weak, SMCs and headmasters lack the budget for basic interventions like building sports infrastructure, purchasing educational materials, repairing buildings, or installing proper windows and doors.

Monitoring and Evaluation Problems

Regular inspection is the primary tool for measuring early childhood program effectiveness and upgrading physical conditions to match the curriculum. However, outside of the respective headmasters, there has been no institutionalized or regular monitoring and evaluation from either the Municipal Education Branch or the SMC. This regulatory gap has allowed

classroom environments to deteriorate day by day, directly hindering the learning climate.

Voices from the Field (Stakeholder Perspectives)

The direct statements gathered from key stakeholders during this study clearly highlight the grim physical and financial realities of these community school ECD centers:

From a Headmaster:

Our school has no internal sources of income, and nobody gives us a budget. Infrastructure, classrooms, and materials all require financial investment. If we had those resources, we would develop a model ECD center. If the municipality allocated dedicated funds for ECD, and if other organizations provided physical support, we would build a truly child-friendly center.

From an ECD Teacher:

If they gave us playing and dancing materials for the kids and set up a beautiful classroom, we would feel much more motivated and energized to do our work.

From an SMC Chairperson:

We feel that the teachers understand the problems of the ECD centers best. We try to take initiative when problems arise, but it would be so much better if we received a budget from somewhere. We want to do great work, but we don't have a budget, and nobody supports us.

These statements make it clear that while stakeholders possess the underlying willingness, a lack of policy clarity, funding, and technical knowledge keeps these centers neglected.

Proposed Solutions and Recommendations

To transform the physical and internal environment of community-school-based ECD centers into result-oriented spaces, the following measures must be adopted immediately:

Standard-Compliant Infrastructure Development: The municipality and school administrations must

collaborate to build concrete, well-ventilated, and brightly lit classrooms, separate child-friendly toilets, clean drinking water systems (with filters), and mandatory boundary walls in line with national minimum standards.

Mobilization of Local Resources and Community: SMCs and headmasters must take the lead in holding local citizens, philanthropists, political parties, and social organizations accountable, establishing a dedicated local fund to support ECD activities.

Provision of Play and Learning Materials: Centers must procure a rich variety of sports, musical, writing, and learning materials; either purchased or locally hand-crafted; and manage them properly within the six designated learning corners using secure storage cabinets.

Capacity Building and Parental Education: Regular refresher training, orientations, and workshops must be organized for ECD teachers, headmasters, and SMC members. Concurrently, parental education programs should be run at the community level to align home and school environments.

Active Coordination and Monitoring: The school's internal leadership (headmaster, teachers, and SMC) must work in unison to maintain consistent communication with the local government and donor organizations. Additionally, the municipality must establish a system of mandatory periodic monitoring and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the physical management of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers operated within community schools of Mangalsen Municipality, Achham District, is in a highly fragile and challenging state. The complete lack of separate, independent buildings, the confinement of all classroom activities to single cramped spaces, and the severe shortage of appropriate, comfortable low furniture indicate that the national minimum physical standards prescribed by the Government of Nepal are not being met in practice.

As highlighted by pioneering educational theorists like Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, a child-friendly physical environment is critical for

fostering cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, the acute shortage of child-friendly toilets, purified drinking water, and safe, enclosed playgrounds in Mangalsen's ECD centers directly compromises both the learning quality and the physical safety of young children. The critical barriers to physical improvement stem from a profound lack of coordination among key stakeholders (local government, SMCs, and headmasters) alongside an extremely meager federal budget allocation of only NPR 500 per child annually. Consequently, these centers have been reduced to executing mere "formalities" rather than functioning as environments for the holistic development of children.

Recommendations

To address these systemic issues, the following actions are highly recommended:

Dedicated Budgeting for Infrastructure: The local government must allocate a dedicated municipal capital budget to construct separate, safe ECD buildings and install low-height, child-friendly sanitary toilets.

Standardization of Classrooms and Corners: Schools must equip classrooms with adequate play-based materials and low-level furniture to make the "six learning corners" functional, stimulating, and accessible.

Institutionalized Monitoring: The Municipal Education Branch must transition from a passive administrative role to an active regulatory role by implementing periodic technical inspections, on-site monitoring, and support systems.

Community and Resource Mobilization: Headmasters and SMCs must organize regular interactive forums with parents and community leaders to promote local ownership and raise additional funds through local resource mobilization.

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