

Exploring Pedagogical Practices in Early Childhood Education: Case Study of ECEC Intervention Community School, Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) is the foundation of human learning and development. ECED is compulsory for all children in Nepal; however, it is less prioritised in terms of physical infrastructure and teacher management. Thus, this study aimed to explore the pedagogical practices of ECED community schools intervened by the ECEC Innovation in Education.

Methods: A qualitative case study design was employed for this study. Classroom observations and in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, headteachers, and education officers. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with parents and the chairpersons of the school management committees (SMCs). The interviews and FGDs with the participants were recorded, transcribed and translated to create codes and prepare themes for data analysis.

Results: The study revealed that the welcoming behaviour of teachers in the classroom and school with children enhanced children's learning. Children enjoyed the school environment, particularly the teachers' activities and the effective use of learning resources. Teachers used locally available learning resources. The intervention schools have been transformed; however, most of the ECED classes in the community school lacked trained teachers, adequate infrastructure, and necessary learning resources.

Conclusion: The school fosters a welcoming, loving, caring, respectful, homely environment that enhance positive behaviour among children. The initiatives and collaborative efforts of teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators contribute to transforming the pedagogical practices of ECED of community-based schools in Nepal.

Novelty: This study explored teachers' welcoming behavior, play-based and activity-based learning, small-group teaching, and the use of local materials as chief ECED practices supporting children's holistic development.

Keywords: Activity-based teaching, Hospitality education, Locally available resource materials, Play way method, Small group teaching

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Development (ECED) education in Nepal is poorly managed, characterized by inadequate ECED resources and a shortage of trained teachers ([Buck et al., 2020](#); [Dahal et al., 2022](#); [Shrestha, 2023](#)). ECED teachers in Nepal face numerous obstacles, including low pay and underrecognition for their valuable contributions. ECED is the foundation of higher education and human life. Altogether, there are 41,284 ECED centres in Nepal, where 33,470 (81.1%) are government-funded, 7,814 (18.9%) are private, and 527 (1.3%) are religious ECED centres ([Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, 2024](#)). Moreover, 1,301,428 children were enrolled in ECED, with 618,852 (47.6%) enrolled in government-funded and 682,576 (52.4%) in private school-based ECED centres. The pedagogical practices play a crucial role in students' learning and development. The teachers predominantly apply teacher-centred methods, such as lecture methods and rote learning approaches, in Nepal ([Bhattarai & Basnet, 2022](#); [Dahal et al., 2022](#); [Shah, 2023](#)), which is developmentally inappropriate, unscientific, and traditional for the learner's learning and development ([Charlesworth, 1998](#); [Guarrella et al., 2023](#); [Sanders & Farago, 2018](#)).

Pedagogical practices play a significant role in children's learning. Using developmentally inappropriate teaching-learning approaches and activities harms children's brain, intellectual, and socio-emotional development ([Bjorklund, 2022](#); [Burts et al., 1992](#)). [Rushton et al. \(2010\)](#) reported that ineffective teaching and learning processes and environments may hinder children's brain development. Moreover, the preschool years (0 to 8 years) are a period of rapid brain development, as 85% to 90% of the brain's development occurs during this time ([Bonham et al., 2023](#); [Gajawelli et al., 2020](#)). Teaching through the lecture method with corporal punishment destroys the neural connections of children's brains, and they lose interest in learning ([Burani et al., 2023](#); [Cuartas et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, the dropout rate among students is high in Nepal due to teacher-centred teaching methods ([Dinu, 2015](#); [Thapa & Paul, 2024](#)). Thus, child-friendly and developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices enhance children's growth and development.

However, the literature on ECED reveals few studies, and pedagogical practices in ECED in Nepal have not been extensively explored. Thus, this study aims to explore the

pedagogical practices in the ECEC Innovation in Education intervention schools and identify the pedagogical challenges for implementing ECED effectively.

Research Methodology

This study employed a case study design, which explores the real-life experiences and challenges of ECED school teachers in depth ([Yin, 2018](#)). ECED schools of Belbari and Mahalaxmi Municipality, where intervention by ECEC Innovation in Education was selected as the case schools. The ECED teachers at intervention schools were trained by ECEC Innovation in Education experts and supported in developing and managing teaching materials and infrastructure. Purposively selected 10 parents, 10 chairpersons of the School Management Committee (SMC), 10 teachers, and 2 education officers constituted the study participants. The researchers used guideline questions for the in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observation checklists for classroom observation. The interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken from participant and non-participant observations. The recorded interviews, FGDs, and field notes were transcribed in the Nepali language and translated into English.

The transcriptions were coded, and similar codes were clustered as the basic theme. The basic themes were categorised into organised themes, and these organised themes were clustered into a global theme. The information was transcribed and thematically analysed. In participant observation, we actively engaged in various activities, such as morning circle time activities; sharing, storytelling, songs and rhymes, the utilisation of play way method, active learning approaches, small group teaching, physical exercises, the use of locally available materials, and the process of teaching; introduction; attention grabbing techniques, ways of introducing the concept, main activity (practice time), and the ways of concluding the classes. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before they participated in the study. The participants' privacy and confidentiality were maintained through the use of fictitious names. Authentic data were collected through prolonged engagement in the research field. The participants verified the transcriptions of the recoded audio interviews and FGDs before coding and theme building. The information was triangulated through interviews with multiple categories of participants, including teachers, headteachers, and education officers. The FGDs with parents and the chairpersons of the SMC verified the information provided by the teachers and the headteachers. Moreover, information was triangulated through classroom observations.

Results and Discussions

This section deals with the results and discussions derived from the participants' information. The themes developed from the information were discussed as follows:

Welcoming Behaviour of Teachers in Classrooms and Schools

The children grow and learn better in a home environment with welcoming teachers, a classroom, and a school ([Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018](#); [Endedijk et al., 2022](#)). The teachers and school staff who treat children with love and care foster healthy relationships that develop the children socially and emotionally. Regarding the learner's better learning and

development, [de Muynck \(2025\)](#) reports on hospitable education, focusing on the friendly environment in the classroom and school. From our observations of classroom teaching, we found that teachers and schools welcome the children, treating them with love and care in a tender and respectful manner. Teachers treated the children as their kids, providing intensive care and making it enjoyable. In the same vein, during classroom observations, we found that the teachers encouraged students to present at school, motivating them to play with other children and learn through games and rhymes. Regarding the welcoming behaviour, T1 stated:

I start my classes by greeting and welcoming the children. I take them into the classroom. Then we engage in the assembly. We conduct the assembly inside the school because we do not have enough external space. We share the cultural values and classroom rules for around 5 to 10 minutes.

This statement shows that teachers know the importance of maintaining culturally responsive pedagogy. They create a child-friendly socio-emotional environment in the school, essential for the ECED children's learning. The teachers' love and care boost the children's self-confidence, self-respect, and self-image, which enable them to shape good behaviour as human beings ([Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020](#); [Spilt & Koomen, 2022](#)). The teachers engage the students in fun activities, make them feel welcome and loved, and create a stimulating learning environment. In this concern, participant teacher T5 articulates:

I welcome saying good morning to the children, singing songs, and playing games. Then start teaching and applying the daily routine. I teach a single subject for the whole day, as per the class routine, such as English on Sundays and Mathematics on Mondays, and so on. I teach and ask them to follow me. If they can't, I will encourage them to do so. I show a picture of an apple and ask them to colour it, and I give them joining dots, and I ask them to write.

This statement depicts that the teachers were competent in conducting child-friendly activities and making them feel welcome in the classroom and school. The young children can grow and learn better in welcoming, loving, caring, and stimulating environments.

Games and Play as Means of Learning

The ECED period is often referred to as the "age of play." Children grow and learn more effectively through the play way method rather than lecture-based teaching ([Aguilar, 2024](#); [Konantambigi, 2013](#)). The play way method allows the children to have fun, meaningfully participate, engage, and interact with one another. Kindergarten pedagogy emphasized the play way method ([Ekeh et al., 2022](#); [Lunga et al., 2022](#); [Synodi, 2010](#)), which helps children to play, develop, and learn effectively. Observations of classroom teaching and interviews with the SMC revealed that teachers could facilitate the teaching-learning process by applying the play way method, which a chairperson of the SMC had noticed. Concerning this issue, SMC 2 shares:

In my observation, students learn with fun by the play way method. They learn practically by playing, singing, and doing. The students are polite and friendly with their friends. I am happy to see the students' smiles as they learn at school.

This statement suggests that students learn in their own free time with pleasure, fun, and games. At the same time, children are learning acceptable behaviours and values, such as politeness, kindness, and empathy. Moreover, they are happy in the classroom and at school, where they play, learn, and grow through the play way method. The play way method for the children enhance socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. For the effective use and implementation of the play way method, teachers need training and workshops.

Addressing the play way method, participant teacher P1 articulates:

Teachers and children sing and rhyme together in the classroom. We used to teach word-by-word, making the student follow the teacher's words, such as "*kapuri ka*", or "*Kharayo kha*". There is no stick in the teacher's hand, but sweets and dolls with the teacher. Children are allowed to play with their friends. They are taught through play in a meaningful way. The teachers manage children happily in the classroom, engaging in meaningful play, games, and activities.

The statement shows that teachers apply the play way method when engaging with children for their learning at the ECED centres. The play way method helped teachers teach without corporal punishment and engaged students by applying meaningful plays and games in the classroom. Regarding this issue, T5 states:

Children's development takes place through singing and play way methods. I sing meaningful songs and rhymes with children and play meaningful games that develop their social and emotional competency. I tell stories to the children to build their fun, social, emotional, and holistic development. In my class, I ask the children to colour the paper, draw pictures, and give them freedom.

This statement indicates that the teachers prioritize a friendly environment through the use of songs, rhymes, and storytelling. The teachers emphasize play, fun, and freedom, which are essential for the ECED children's learning, growth, and development, motivating the children to come to school and learn better.

The utilisation of the play way method facilitates pedagogical transformation in ECED centres, which is made possible through teacher training, need-based workshops, continuous follow-up, monitoring, and classroom support for teachers.

Activity Based Teaching Learning

The ECED children grow and learn by actively participating and engaging in hands-on, sensorial, and physical activities. According to Piaget's Cognitive Theory, ECED children typically progress through the sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years) and the preoperational stage (2 to 7 years) ([Berk, 2022](#); [Piaget, 1964](#)). At this stage, children learn through movements, pretend play, and sensory activities, such as tasting, touching, listening, watching, and smelling ([McLeod, 2020](#)). Likewise, young children learn at their own rate through sensorial and hands-on activities in a well-structured environment ([Lillard, 2019](#); [Montessori, 1919](#)). The constructivists, such as Dewey and Vygotsky, also emphasized activity-based teaching and learning, which resulted in active learning ([Pardjono, 2016](#)). Therefore, ECED teachers need to engage students in hands-on activities to promote growth and better education. Children need opportunities to manipulate concrete objects, play, and engage in social activities for their

overall development. The ECED teachers were equipped with knowledge of learning theories and their practical applications through teacher training and workshops. They were encouraged and supported to apply those learning theories by conducting the hands-on activities, sensorial activities, physical movements, music, and plays.

The observations of classroom teaching, interviews with the ECED teachers, head teachers, and education officers, and FGDs with the parents and chairpersons of school management committees found that instead of emphasizing writing, the teachers engaged the students in different activities, games, and movements for their growth and learning. Regarding this issue, a participant teacher T1 shares:

We offer dance classes and a variety of indoor and outdoor games. They love to act. Then we conduct arts and crafts activities, such as drawing, pasting lentils, and tearing paper to create pictures of rabbits and umbrellas. We tell two stories every day. Sometimes, we ask them to read the storybooks. I tell the stories according to their mood. The children love to listen to the story. I ask them to sing songs and rhymes related to time, dates, days of the week, and months, and involve the students. I conduct morning and afternoon circle time, performing activities such as sharing about food and engaging with the children.

This statement indicates that teachers are implementing an activity-based teaching and learning process in the ECED centres. The teachers continuously provide opportunities for the children to engage in these activities, allowing them to grow and learn better. However, each activity has its own procedure for conducting it effectively. It was observed that some of the teachers had difficulty performing the activities professionally. Providing them with continuous support, motivational training, and workshops would be better. The headteachers are also well aware of the activity-based teaching and learning at the ECED centres. In response to this issue, participant headteacher H1 articulates:

During the regular school days, we have assembly time to allow students to have refreshment time through songs, dances, and jokes. We enable students to interact, tell stories, participate in drama, and engage in arts and crafts activities during class. We have child-centred activities after the students' circular arrangement. Our students are pretty happy in their classes.

This statement indicates that teachers and headteachers are informed and working to transform pedagogical practices at the ECED centres. School leaders and administrators also play an essential role in changing pedagogical practices. The school leaders were also trained and equipped on the learning theory and pedagogical practices at the ECED centres. It was observed that the school leaders who attended the leadership training and workshop supported the ECED teachers. However, the school leaders who did not participate in ECED-related training and workshops hindered and discouraged the teachers from conducting the activity-based teaching and learning process. Therefore, all school leaders and administrative staff need be allowed to attend ECED-related training and workshops, enabling them to learn more effectively and, in turn, support and encourage teachers to implement developmentally appropriate practices at ECED centres. It was found that the education officers take ownership

of the Model School Development Intervention Programmes because they were well-informed and aware of the teaching and learning activities at the ECED. Concerning this issue, an education officer, EO1, highlights:

Teachers used to teach in the past, but now they make children learn. When we say learn, it means being creative. There is a difference between teaching and learning. They used to teach only what was in the book, but after the training, the teachers became more creative, enabling the children to learn and become more innovative. They are making children think inquisitively. Monitoring, materials support, motivation, feedback, and familiarity with the curriculum have enabled teachers to become more creative and adapt their teaching methods. Now they teach through songs, role-play, and drama. Now they make children understand, but in the past, they just used to teach whatever was in the book or whatever they knew. They used to teach until they had sore throats, but they made the children learn and participate in activities. They taught in the past, but now they let children play and learn.

The statement of the education officer demonstrates that teachers can change their traditional lecture-based approach and facilitate learning through activity-based approaches. Moreover, he shared that the teachers emphasise the students' learning rather than the teaching, which is necessary for the students' growth and development. If teachers focus solely on teaching, students may not learn effectively. Therefore, the students' learning, growth, and change in their behavior need to be emphasized for the successful implementation of ECED and children's learning.

It can be summarised that ECED teachers, school leaders, and education officers must be equally aware, informed, and equipped regarding the developmentally appropriate and child-friendly activity-based teaching and learning process. Child-friendly teaching and learning activities can help transform pedagogical practices at ECED, which is supported by learning theories and scientific research.

Small Group Teaching and Learning

Small-group teaching fosters the overall development of children. ([Adl-Amini et al., 2024](#)). The teachers need to conduct small-group teaching for the students' growth and development equally at the ECED. Students learn better in small groups with their pairs. It can be considered one of the components of the transformation of pedagogical practices at ECED centres. It is based on Vygotsky's learning theory of social constructivism, which emphasises the socio-cultural interaction for better learning ([Kraatz et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 2019](#)). If the teacher conducts small-group teaching and learning, the children can have enough opportunities to interact with their friends and learn collaboratively. The teachers can also support and pay attention to all the students equally, strengthening teacher-student and student-student relationships and learning.

Observations of classroom teaching revealed that teachers can effectively conduct small-group teaching and learning, leading to improved learning outcomes for ECED children. They were aware and equipped for small group teaching and learning. Addressing this issue, T2 highlights:

I start my class with Circle time activities. I sing, play games, and share my feelings and opinions with the students. Then, I teach for 10 minutes and conduct the small-group activities. I divide the class into four small groups and allow them to write to one group, while the other three groups play card games, build with blocks, and read stories.

The teacher's statement indicates that the teacher applies a child-friendly method in teaching by using small-group instruction. The teachers can effectively articulate the importance of small-group teaching, writing, reading, table games, and free play. Furthermore, we observed that the teachers performed well by conducting small-group teaching and learning, as well as assigning tasks to the children. The children were happy to participate in various activities, and the teachers were able to help them equally. It was found that the teachers could balance activities, such as small group, large group, outdoor, indoor, teacher-led, student-led, guided, and free play. Regarding this issue, T5 shares:

I teach by singing songs. I divide the class into different groups and let them do various activities simultaneously. We tell stories in teaching time. They love story time. They interact, encouraged to listen. We use and treat according to the love language. I decorate the classroom, arrange the corners, engage in various activities in different areas, and jump and hop to recite the letters or numbers aloud. Sometimes I involve them indoors, and sometimes outdoors.

The statements show that the teachers emphasized the fun and pleasure of the children. Activities, such as reading, writing, table games, art and crafts, and free play fall under the category of small group activities. Moreover, the teachers were equipped to love, care for, and value the children based on their individual love languages, such as physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service ([Chapman & Campbell, 2008](#)).

It can be concluded that teachers can transform pedagogical practices at ECED centres by conducting small-group activities and balancing them with large-group activities, including teaching, student-led, guided, free play, and indoor and outdoor activities.

Use of Locally Available Materials

The locally available materials help familiarize the children with them. Locally available materials are considered resources of the local community or environment, such as materials collected from waste and natural materials, which are also regarded as 'low-cost and no-cost' materials ([Khan, 2006](#); [World Vision, 2015](#)). The collection, preparation, development, and utilisation of locally available materials as teaching aids can enhance students' learning and make teaching more child-friendly ([Okudo & Omotuyole, 2013](#); [Paudyal, 2020](#); [UNICEF, 2010](#)). If teachers have the motivation and competencies to collect, prepare, and utilize locally available materials, it would be instrumental in transforming pedagogical practices at ECED centres. Given the importance of locally available materials, ECED teachers were trained to collect, prepare, and utilize them in their teaching and learning processes. Concerning locally available materials, T1 from Mahalaxmi Municipality shares:

We have collected and used local materials, such as rubber bands, beads, pen caps, biscuit covers, toothpaste, and other items we discarded at home. We use such low-cost

and no-cost materials. I use them to teach numbers and to make drawings, lines, cats, and flowers.

This statement reflects the teacher's competencies, which include being well-informed and aware of locally available, low-cost, and no-cost materials that can be used as teaching aids in the classroom. It was observed that they took the initiative to collect and manage waste, and were quite cautious about the students' health, hygiene, and safety. They could collaborate with the parents to collect the locally available materials. The headteachers are also taking the initiative and supporting teachers in collecting and utilizing locally available materials. When talking about this issue, H1 articulates, "We have been using local materials, such as *Jamaraa*, *Tika*, *Diyo*, etc". The collection and use of locally available, no-cost, and low-cost materials can transform the pedagogical practices at the ECED centres. The teachers and stakeholders require continuous support, motivational and professional development training, and workshops on collecting and utilizing locally available, no-cost, and low-cost materials as teaching aids. However, it was observed in the class that the teachers struggled to apply the play way method, active learning approaches, and conduct small-group teaching due to the large number of students, an inappropriate classroom environment, and a lack of teaching materials. Therefore, the authorities need to maintain a suitable teacher-student ratio, manage a child-friendly classroom environment, and ensure sufficient teaching aids, while also motivating the teacher and promoting continuous professional development.

Discussion

The intervention schools' practices, teachers, and school administration welcome the children in the classroom and throughout the school. Treating children in loving, caring, and respectful ways enhances their learning. [Britto et al. \(2017\)](#) stated that young children grow and learn better in a stimulating, welcoming, and loving environment rather than one that fosters fear, threats, and corporal punishment. Likewise, teachers and school leaders could apply the play way method in ECED classes, attracting students to school and motivating them to learn better. The study found that the teachers were quite professional in conducting the activity-based teaching and learning process. They conducted various activities, including songs, rhymes, music, role-play, pretend play, constructive play, free play, imaginative play, art and crafts, table games, storytelling, indoor and outdoor physical exercises and games, and circle time activities, as well as sharing and sensorial activities. Effective play ways and active learning approaches foster children's learning ([Lerkkanen et al., 2016](#); [Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008](#)). This study demonstrated that ECED children learn through play, physical movement, hands-on activities, and the manipulation of concrete objects. The parents, school leaders, headteachers, SMC chairpersons, and education officers have also noticed the benefits of teaching through play and active learning methods.

This study found that ECED teachers and school leaders could conduct small-group teaching and learning processes professionally after participating in the intervention programs. However, the studies ([Mashburn & Pianta, 2006](#); [Pianta et al., 2002](#)) reported the inefficacy of small-group teaching due to teachers' incompetence and insufficient materials. This study concluded that teachers' competency in conducting small-group teaching and learning activities is

the most complex, yet essential. The students got the opportunity to think, interact, play, and grow, and learn in small group activities. Introverted and shy students can also feel comfortable and learn in small group settings. The teachers could also facilitate and support all the students in small-group teaching, which is only possible in this setting. Moreover, the ECED teachers are competent and confident enough to balance various activities, such as large and small group settings, teacher-led and student-led approaches, guided and free play, engaging and more interesting activities, as well as indoor and outdoor settings.

The study found that teachers and headteachers are aware of utilising 'no-cost and low-cost' materials while conducting teaching-learning activities at ECED. They were collecting and using the locally available materials as teaching aids. The teachers need to be aware of and cautious of harmful objects that could harm the children. Pedagogical practices would be less effective and inappropriate without the use of locally available, no-cost, and low-cost materials ([Maxwell et al., 2008](#); [Whitebread et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, Maxwell et al. (2008) emphasized that the teacher needs to consider, while collecting, preparing, and utilizing those materials, such as not harming the children, durability, study, aesthetic, and multi-purposefulness. Similarly, teachers need to keep these materials in a proper place in an organized form by labeling them properly. Conducting the child-friendly, hands-on, and practical activities without teaching materials is almost impossible. Competent teachers may also struggle to conduct developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive activities without using teaching aids. Therefore, the collection, preparation, utilisation, and organisation of the locally available no-cost and low-cost materials need to be prioritised when selecting the teaching materials.

Conclusion

The school fosters a welcoming, loving, caring, respectful, homely environment that enhance positive behaviour among children. Teachers engaged the students in meaningful activities and fun without fear, threat, and corporal punishment, unknowingly attracting children to school and learning. The teachers emphasised the small group teaching -learning activities based on the context, needs, and interests of the students, such as large group and small group, guided and free play, engaging and more interesting, teacher-led and student-led, and indoor and outdoor activities that promote children's socialisation and adjustment in school.

The teachers collect, prepare, and utilize locally available, low-cost, and no-cost materials, which help conduct a developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive teaching-learning process. The initiatives and collaborative efforts of teachers, school leaders, and teacher educators contribute to transforming the pedagogical practices of ECED of community-based schools in Nepal.

The intervention school transformed its pedagogical practices. However, most ECED classes in the community school lack trained teachers, adequate infrastructure, and appropriate learning resources. Thus, governmental institutions and concerned authorities need to allocate a budget for the infrastructural development of ECED classes and a teacher development and training program. Continuous professional development, along with salary increases and better facilities, boosts teachers' confidence, promotes their feeling of agency, and prepares them to perform more effectively, ultimately transforming pedagogical practices.

Moreover, the ECED policy makers and concerned authorities need to determine the teacher-student ratio for effective classroom management. This study was conducted in an ECEC Innovation in Education intervention community schools; therefore, exploring the pedagogical practices of both public and private ECED centres may be a potential area for future research.

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