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## Early Childhood Education and Development in Nepal: Access, Quality and Professionalism

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*Wczesna edukacja i rozwój dziecka w Nepalu:  
dostępność, jakość i profesjonalizm*

### SUMMARY

In Nepal a national system of Early Childhood Education and Development provision for all is a vision that has yet to be realised. This article highlights issues of access, quality and professionalism within the Early Childhood Education sector in Nepal. In particular, I discuss issues of accessibility to kindergarten education in rural areas in contrast to the accessibility of well-resourced kindergartens in urban areas. I also consider the lack of a proper infrastructure, insufficient educational resources and an unqualified workforce as key problems faced by the government-funded kindergarten centres with implications for the future of Early Childhood Education and Development in Nepal. Gender and caste discrimination are also barriers to the development and accessibility of the early childhood education and development.

**Keywords:** early childhood education; development; access; quality; professionalism

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. Country background

Nepal is a small and landlocked country, bordering with China and India, with an area of 147,181 square kilometres from the east to west (Nepal Millennium Development Goals Final Status Report 2016). Geographically, the country consists of three regions; Mountain, Hill and Terai region, but the Department of Education has divided

the country into four eco-belts for the ECD/ Pre-primary Classes namely: Mountain, Hill, Valley and Terai region (Department of Education 2015). The Mountain and Hill areas are considered as rural areas, whereas the Valley and Terai regions are considered as urban ones. According to the census of 2011, Nepal has a population of 26,494,504 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). The population is not equally distributed among the three zones, as the Hill areas are less populated than the Terai region. Nepal is divided into 14 geopolitical zones and 75 districts, and each zone and district has its own headquarters. From the district headquarters the local administration service is available for all people who are residents in that particular district for example, District Education Office is responsible for the education service, District Health Office is responsible for the health service, etc. Nepal is populated by people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds from the east and west. Traditionally, people have been categorized into two main groups: upper and lower castes and different ethnic communities, a situation that continues to the present day. Within this system there are 126 caste/ethnic groups reported in the census of 2011, and 123 languages are spoken as a mother tongue (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). This diversity is reflected in the saying “Nepal is a beautiful garden full of many colourful flowers”; from the east to west and from the north to south Nepal is inhabited by people of different colour, race, caste and religion.

## 2. Early Childhood Education

Early childhood is considered a crucial period of human life which lays the foundation for the future (Kopila 2009). Nonetheless, early childhood education and development (ECED) services are not fully developed within the Nepali context. A key factor is that the geographical structure creates rural and urban divisions that affect the education of young children. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2012), “Literacy rates are substantially higher in urban areas (64%) than in rural areas (36%)”. So, the school attendance rate for rural areas is also lower compared to urban areas despite the fact that every child is entitled to attend school free of charge. The fact that school attendance is not mandated or enforced is a probably explanation for this fact. Traditionally, gender discrimination, illiteracy, persistence of poverty and traditional social beliefs have also acted as barriers to Nepalese children’s educational development (Pant, Nepal 2010), these barriers persist in rural parts of contemporary Nepal.

According to the Department of Education, there are 35,991 Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary classes in operation (Department of Education 2015). In rural areas the number of kindergartens is low, either government-funded or the kindergartens run by the private sector. There are only 3,412 Early Childhood Development and Pre-Primary classes in operation in the Mountain region (Department of Education 2015). Similarly, in the Hill there are 15,671 and in the Valley

– 1,989 Early Childhood Development and Pre-primary classes in operation with government support and private sector (Department of Education 2015). In the Terai area, there are 14,929 Early Childhood Development and Pre-primary classes in operation supported by the government and private sector. However, kindergarten education provided by the government and private sector creates social gaps as public kindergartens are mainly Nepali-speaking, whereas private kindergarten education is mainly provided via the English language which is highly prized as the language of social mobility. Thus, while in the private kindergartens “the cost of attending is a major barrier to access” (Education International 2010), many parents want their child to learn English and make every effort to enrol their children in private kindergartens. In this article, I discuss what constitutes the quality in early childhood education and development within the Nepali context, barriers to its development, and the reasons why professionalism within the ECED workforce is a vision that has yet to be realised.

## HISTORY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NEPAL

ECE in Nepal began formally six decades ago. According to Shrestha et al. (2008, p. 16), “The first Montessori school established in 1950 at Kathmandu, the capital city of the country, is considered as the first ECE School in Nepal”. Twelve years later, the Nepal Children’s Organization (NCO) was established (Shrestha et al. 2008) with the aim of providing ECE in all seventy five districts of Nepal. In the 1980s, in order to support ECE in the rural areas of Nepal, two programs were implemented with support from the Agriculture Development Bank: the Small Farmers Development Program and the Ministry of Local Development Credit for Rural Women programme (Pande 2009). From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, international organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO have also been supporting the establishment of ECE institutions by working with the government and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The government of Nepal continues to establish early childhood education, in 1997, the Department of Education started the Shishu Kaksha Program under the Basic Primary Education Programme to establish a number of ECD Centres (Shrestha et al. 2008). Since 1997, the government of Nepal has been implementing policies to support early childhood development such as the Education for All National Plan of Action (2001–2015), Tenth Five Year Plan (2002–2007) and School Sector Reform Plan (2009–2015). These policies are supported by International Non-Government Organizations and fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. Through different programs, the government of Nepal have enabled the establishment of the current 35,991 CED/PPC centres nationwide.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Early Childhood Education is provided by the government of Nepal and the privately owned kindergartens across the country. According to Education International (2010), there are two types of ECED in operation in Nepal run by the government these are: school-based pre-primary classes (for 4–5-year-olds), and community-based early child development centres (for 3–4-year-olds). There many privately run kindergartens which cover that age (0–3-year-olds), such kindergartens are not supported by the government in terms of funding. The gap between rural and urban areas in terms of population hassled to significant differences in living standards as most facilities are located in urban areas. Work opportunities and the availability of good schools means that people are migrating from rural to urban areas. The migration system influences the ratio of attending early childhood education and development, the children ratio in the rural area is low as compared to the urban area. Accessibility of early childhood education and development is not similar in urban and rural areas. *The Flash I Report* published by the Department of Education (2015) shows that there are 3,412 ECED/PPC in operation in the Mountain area, whereas in the Hill area it is 15,671, and in Terai – 14,929. There are three types of early childhood education and development / Pre-primary Classes which are in operation across the country they are:

1. School-based pre-primary classes: are in operation in Mountain, Hill, Valley and Terai regions. They are funded by the government and are free of charge for all children. Textbooks are provided by the government, the medium of instruction is in Nepali but the government has given freedom to use mother language as a medium of instruction. A kindergarten facilitator is appointed by the government and resources are also government-funded. However, problems relating to inadequate infrastructure, high child-teacher ratio, insufficient educational materials, inappropriate class-room arrangements, and inadequate health care are on-going challenges.
2. Community-based kindergartens: are run by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-governmental organization co-ordinations (NGOs) with the involvement of the government and local people. Kindergarten facilitators are appointed locally but are required to meet qualification criteria set by the government. Their salaries are paid partly by the government and partly by the INGOs, or by NGOs with a contribution from parents.
3. Private kindergartens: are mainly found in urban areas; in district<sup>1</sup> headquarters and big cities of Nepal. There are 5,543 private kindergartens/institutional PPCs in operations across the country. Private kindergartens charge fees and they are relatively expensive. A feature of these private kindergartens is that they “often

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<sup>1</sup> Nepal is divided into 14 zones and 75 districts and each zone and district has its own headquarter.

also provide ECE for children aged 0–3 which public schools-based ECE centres do not offer” (Education International 2010, p. 56). The private intuitions follow English as a language of instruction which is a great attraction to the parents.

## ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Access to early childhood education is blocked by number of factors in Nepali context, some of them are “a lack of ECE centres in certain parts of the country, and in particular, for private ECE centres, the cost of attending is a major barrier to access” (Education International 2010, p. 56). In addition, the caste and gender discrimination is another factor which is affecting accessibility of early childhood education.

In all regions, the enrolment rate is only 0.21% (Department of Education 2015) of children who suffer from different kind of disabilities, which is very low in number. It is because of lack of good infrastructure; many of the ECED centres are not disabled-friendly which means that such children are precluded access to early childhood education.

In urban areas, there are many public and private kindergartens in operation, where children can get kindergarten education. Another aspect of access to early childhood services is affordability, with those with better economic resources having greater access to such services.

Private kindergartens have well-arranged classrooms and are fully supplied with toys and teaching materials, English is the language of instruction and the books are in English except for one compulsory Nepali textbook. In a globalised age many parents see that English is very important and, thus, want their child to learn English from an early age so that they will be capable of undertaking higher education anywhere else in the world. The cost of private kindergarten is relatively high, therefore, many parents they cannot afford the fees so such kindergartens are not accessible to all.

### **1. The influence of gender and caste discrimination on accessibility of Early Childhood Education**

According to Subedi (2010), the Nepali son is by birth recognized as coparcener of the family’s ancestral property while the daughter, in order to be eligible as coparcener, must be 35 years of age and remain unmarried. This law on ancestral property, which is based on gender discrimination, also affects the education system. It is a very bitter reality that most parents want to have boys rather than girls. Gender bias between boys and girls is rooted in tradition and dates back to many centuries. In some parts of Nepal (both in Terai and in rural areas), to have a girl is perceived as a burden rather than a blessing and social norms dictate that there is no equal behaviour towards boys and girls from their parents or guardians. Boys are getting chance to attend school from an

early age, and parents encourage them to attend school but girls have to engage in household tasks, farming, caring for siblings and so on. Girls who come from the poor family background have no chance to attend school. However, this is not the case in urban areas where parents are educated they send their daughters to school from an early age.

The culture of Nepal is very diverse by caste, ethnicity, geographic areas and gender. The traditional caste system still exists and there are many places where it is strictly followed both in rural and Terai areas. "Caste discrimination is referred to as discrimination on the basis of descent and work because each caste is restricted to one kind of work" (Tamrakar 2005, p. 1). For example, people who work with leather, iron, tailoring and so on, are called *Dalits* and counted as lower caste people, most of them are illiterate. In the past and still in many places they are not allowed to enter the house of upper caste people. Usually, because of very low social economic status, only few Dalit children attend school; the rest of them are busy helping their guardian/parents. As reported by the Department of Education (2015, p. 27), "in 2015–2016 in ECDs/PPCs 17.9% are Dalit and among the Dalit children enrolled, 18.6% are girls and 17.2% are boys" which is very low as compared to other casts.

## 2. Early Childhood Education and Development affected by the earthquake

In April 2015, the devastating earthquake killed more than 9,000 people and left thousands of people homeless; more than one million children were out of school (UNICEF 2016), since the disaster "destroyed or severely damaged over 35,000 classrooms". Many school and ECED centres were damaged and children were out of classroom for a long time. People were relocated to temporary housing and "Children living in such temporary shelters and still unstable environments are also vulnerable to various risks, including trafficking" (UNICEF 2016). In such conditions, they have poor access to educational materials and hygiene. Thanks to the support of the international community and the government of Nepal, the reconstruction of damaged educational centres was initiated, but the process is very slow and still not completed, therefore, there are many children who are unable to go back to school.

## QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Education International (2010, p. 57) pointed out that in Nepal, the quality of ECE centres is limited due to a lack of adequate infrastructure and facilities especially, the government-funded kindergartens are facing such problems. Classroom for the children are not well equipped with educational resources; toilet facilities, drinking water and sanitation awareness is also missing to maintain the quality in government-funded kindergartens. In those institutions, the high child-teacher ratio is a key problem, "It shows, on average, one ECD/PPC is serving 27 children. The highest ECD/PPCs and children

ratio is in the Valley (1:55) followed by the Terai eco-belt (1:33) and the lowest is in the Mountain (1:18) and the Hill eco-belts (1:20)” (Department of Education 2015, p. 24), when a teacher has to handle in such situation it is very difficult to maintain the quality of education and facilities in ECED centres. A key note pointed in the *Joint Evaluation of Nepal's School Sector Reform Plan Programme 2009–16* highlights that “investments in teacher training, material and infrastructure are also required to increase the quality of education” (p. 17). Moreover, training for the established workforce is not available on regular basis, there are some training programmes offered by the District Education Office for a few days, however, they are not sufficient to enhance teachers’ confidence. In the absence of clearly defined guidelines for quality practice, parents make judgements about quality on the basis of the visible infrastructure of the buildings or the perceived academic performance of the children. Thus, parents expect their children to be involved in academic activities from the time they start kindergarten.

#### PROFESSIONALISM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A NEW PHENOMENON IN NEPAL

Although professionalism in early childhood education is a much developed concept in the European and American contexts (Urban, Dalli 2008), the concept of professionalism in early child education is a new phenomenon in the Nepali context. ECE depends on a range of factors including workforce qualifications comprising academic knowledge, professional training and experience in early childhood education. As the “School Sector Reform Plan 2009–2015” noted, one of the major challenges for ECED implementation in Nepal is to obtain the services and retention of qualified and competent facilitators. In fact, unqualified workforce in early childhood education centres is a major challenge given the lack of sufficiently qualified people within the country (Education International 2010). There are few kindergarten facilitators with qualifications background in early childhood and “in some cases the government even appoints students with a high-school certificate” (Education International 2010, p. 57) which are not considered good enough to work in ECD centres, as compared to the government ECD workforce which is more qualified and work in private ECD centres (Education International 2010).

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF ECED IN NEPAL

The previous sections have outlined some key challenges facing the ECD sector in Nepal, particularly as they relate to contemporary global trends to professionalise this critical part of the education system. Against this background of challenges, it is important to consider priorities within Nepal’s ECED policy agenda:

1. One area of immediate policy concern is the need to minimize the gap between rural and urban kindergarten education.
2. The government policy should be aimed at improving the quality of government kindergartens.
3. The government should establish sufficient kindergartens in rural areas.
4. To improve and maintain quality in government-funded kindergarten, sufficient budget should be allocated to improve the infrastructure and provide adequate educational materials for children.
5. The government should encourage practitioners to enrol in early childhood programs based in universities so that the qualification levels of the early childhood workforce are raised and the country can start to produce specialized early childhood teachers.
6. Early childhood education should be understood as a means of ensuring children's rights.
7. The government should continue policies and programs to discourage caste and gender discrimination.
8. The government should focus to construct the ECED centres damaged by the devastating earthquake.
9. The government should focus to establish ECED centres which are friendly for children with disabilities.
10. Finally, the government should monitor and regulate early childhood education programmes.

## CONCLUSIONS

As discussed above, much work is required to improve access of early childhood education within the Nepali context. By respecting the children's right to education, there should not be any kind of discrimination inside the classroom on the basis of caste, gender and race. Improvement of infrastructure, reconstruction of damaged ECED centres as a result of the earthquake, and effective implementation of government plans/policies might help to improve the quality of early childhood education. Similarly, the available workforces who are already working in early childhood education sector, should be encourage to attend seminars, workshops, discussion, educational tours to become more professional.

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## STRESZCZENIE

Narodowy System Wczesnej Edukacji i Rozwoju Dziecka w Nepalu kreuje wizję do realizacji. W artykule podkreślono kwestie dostępu, jakości i profesjonalizmu w sektorze wczesnego kształcenia w Nepalu. W szczególności zostały omówione kwestie dostępności edukacji przedszkolnej na obszarach wiejskich, kontrastujące z dostępnością do dobrze wyposażonych przedszkoli na obszarach miejskich. Brak odpowiedniej infrastruktury, niewystarczające zasoby edukacyjne i niewykwalifikowaną siłę roboczą autor traktuje jako główne problemy, z którymi borykają się finansowane przez rząd ośrodki przedszkolne, co niesie konsekwencje dla przyszłości Systemu Wczesnej Edukacji i Rozwoju Dziecka w Nepalu. Dyskryminacja ze względu na płeć i pochodzenie stanowią kolejne bariery w rozwoju i dostępności do wczesnej edukacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wczesna edukacja dziecka; rozwój; dostępność; jakość; profesjonalizm