Enabling Environment for Early Childhood Development: A Narrative Study of Preschools in Nepal

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Abstract

At present, creating an environment for Early Childhood Development (ECD) has been given great emphasis on Nepal's educational context. However, several challenges are often narrated by the school leaders and teachers in creating an environment to facilitate the development of the children. Hence, this paper aims at exploring what experiences the preschools have assembled in the course of creating the environment for ECD. The paper is based on narrative inquiry where a teacher and two school leaders from three different institutional preschools of Kathmandu Valley were selected purposively as research participants for an in-depth interview. Then, this study explored that school leaders and teachers were having a tough time creating an environment expected to support ECD though they narrated their awareness about the discourse. These challenges were narrated to have been occurred basically because of infrastructural constraints and divergent attitudes of parents regarding how their children had to be learning at school. Moreover, a lack of competent human resources to induce an atmosphere for the development of children was also recounted. Hence, the study implies a collaborative environment between school leaders, teachers, and parents to be created by school leaders to encourage teachers to adopt instructional strategies for strengthening the atmosphere of ECD.

Keywords:

Early child development, Cognitive Development, School-family Collaboration, Instructional Strategies, Narrative Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

Learning is understood as a process that starts as we open our eyes to the earth and continues until we exist. As suggested by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (IMNRC, 2015), children are already learning at birth, and they learn at a rapid pace in their early years. In this sense, the atmosphere we provide to children as supporting mechanisms (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) facilitates them to learn during their early days which contributes to developing a sense of independence in them (Topciu & Myftiu, 2015). Similarly, as stated by Gruber and Voneche (1995) the development of a child's cognition starts with reflection they make upon basic units of instruction which serves as the basis for understanding newer experiences (as cited in Bhagat, Haque, & Jaalam, 2018). It articulates the idea that the socio-cultural environment that we construct enables children to confront a newer and diverse set of tasks of questions (Lantof, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) which ultimately encouraging his/ her cognitive development.

There is great attention paid to creating an appropriate atmosphere for the development of children in conventions in policies. Creating playful atmosphere is identified as an essential strategy in teaching-learning (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2018) while

assurance of amiable infrastructural and social setting for the development of child's personality, talents, mental and physical abilities has been emphasized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner [UNOHCHR], 1990). Moreover, in our context, policies have been made by the state to ensure all aspects needed for the overall development of the child including education, health care and nurturing along with social and emotional support for personality development; both from the part of the family and state (Constituent Assembly [CA], 2015). Besides these, the School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) has highly focused on strengthening consolidated effort between facilitators, parents, school and community to create a more amiable and effective atmosphere for Early Childhood Educational Development (ECED) and Pre Primary Education Programs (PPEP) (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2016). Apart from these, since the year 1948 when ECD began with the initiation of government (Koirala, 2014), the number of opened and operating Early Childhood Development Centers (ECDC) has been increasing (Baral, 2011).

Despite these initiatives, various barriers to the construction of favorable atmosphere for ECD are noted by researchers which mainly include insufficient educational resources, lack of qualified workforce along discriminatory social behaviors like gender inequality (Bhandari, 2018). Besides these, my reflection allows me to consider divergent expectations and attitudes of parents regarding the learning atmosphere at school as a constraint to my

vision of facilitating ECD. Through this study, I wanted to explore the challenges faced by preschools in creating a suitable atmosphere for ECD.

The paper tends to unearth how the teacher and school leaders articulate their experiences of creating an environment for the development of early childhood learners. Recounting my journey of running a preschool in Bhaktapur, I have realized that though promoting the learning atmosphere of children during their early days of development is given huge space in educational discourse, the challenges the schools go while doing so have often remained covered. In our context, while traditional perception about teaching-learning has been replaced by the emerging democratic and instructional norms, infrastructural and socio-cultural barriers are still obstructing practicing the concept of creating a learner-friendly atmosphere. Hence, I opine, the subject of teachers' and school leaders' experience of creating an environment for ECD is a topic worth to be explored. Delimiting the challenges in the aforementioned discourse, the paper has, hence, addressed infrastructural and attitudinal restrains that might limit the vigor of the pre-schools in stimulating cognitive development of children by ensuring an appropriate learning atmosphere.

Setting the Scene: Reflecting on My Schooling

Born as the eldest of the family, grown amidst several expectations of dad and mom, I often recount how I was viewed to be experiencing the most blessed childhood anyone would dream of!

Residing in the heart of the capital was something wonderful and the wonder was the premises where I used to enter every morning with dreams to make dreams of my mom come true. Those lofty buildings, the spacious classrooms, and the well-clad teachers in golden framed spectacles were the things everyone would envy. But it was a journey people had barley figured out; the journey of a curled haired boy of five loaded with bulky books who was struggling amidst expectations of parents and teachers, difficult to find out what he had to be doing actually!

Today, when I look back to the days, I remember how I could rarely enjoy what it meant to be a boy of five studying in grade two. Being in the class for more than eight hours a day, I had started thinking that nothing in the world was more tiring than being in school. I was expected to write beautifully and the teacher from Kalingpong, who used to be my grade teacher would evaluate my writing based on her understanding of how something could be beautiful. I had to remember all those multiplication tables and recall hippopotamus which I had never seen! Moreover, dad and mom would add to the expectation of the school with their repeated remarks on how I had to grow up! I still recall the day when the most favorite teacher of mine, who used to take us to the garden for storytelling shouted on me! The very day, I couldn't figure out the reason behind her anxiety and just kept sobbing. But as I recall the shouting today, I find it as a result of a gap created between my parents' expectation on me to grow studious and

her attempts of keeping me happy while learning at school! I was tired but I tried my best to move on! I tried to adopt all those calligraphies, working hard with my scribbles. I tried to draw the picture of xylophone and grew up thinking, how it is played actually. I appeared to be growing up, but I had been in serious confusion. I started making beautiful writings as my dad had been expecting and for this, I imitated what the teacher from Kalingpong would say. However, day by day, I started getting nervous to express my ideas since I could barely think and create something by myself!

The nervousness to think and express I cultivated during my early pre-primary days continued and it existed till the day I completed my high school. And today, as I see the children at my school giggling in the field or making apples of dough in the kitchen, I recall how my entire personality had been retarded because of the maturity I had to display that was beyond my understanding. The struggle went on, but it was not the exact struggle that I had to make being a boy of five; rather it was the struggle that I had to make despite deserving something else, something more affectionate, more pampering, and more childish.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES
Environment for Cognitive Development in Early Childhood

Cognitive development is perceived as the progression of the ability to think and reason (Semmar & Al-Thani, 2015). In this sense, the cognitive development of individuals starts with the

encounter of an individual with the surrounding with which they move from learning about the surrounding, referred to as 'learning the symbols' to developing to thinking of them logically (Piaget, 1952). This concept is even supported by Sassure who talks about the linkage between the concept or meaning (signified) and the word (signifier) that ultimately contributes to developing a 'sign system' which is connected with how a person acquires language in the theory of structuralism (Gough, 2010). It encourages us to realize that the more appropriately the child is provided with the environment to explore, observe and play (Ernst, 2014; North American Association for Environmental Education [NAAEE], 2010), the more inductive contribution we can make for cognitive development of the child.

Discussing how cognitive development takes place in children, Piaget (1936) mentions that children are born with a very basic mental structure providing a base to knowledge and understanding that is developed through schematization and adaptation (assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration) for which adults can play a crucial role as facilitators. Similarly, where we think that cognitive development takes place takes place in children with maturation, it is found to have been contributed equally by the cultural surrounding (Dasen, 1994) that surrounds them. Moreover, as stated by Oroujoulu and Vahedi (2011), motivation, attitude, and set of beliefs serve in influencing the language learning process which also forms one of the crucial aspects of the cognitive development of a child. Similarly, researches made in the United States and Western Europe indicate the influence of physical infrastructural environment on the cognitive and socio-emotional upbringing of children and adolescents (Ferguson, Cassells, MacAllister & Evans, 2013). It articulates that the atmosphere we provide to the children determines to what extent he/ she is growing and how the individual is learning. Policies and Practices for Early Childhood Development in Nepal

Turning the pages of history in Nepalese education, Nepal Education System Plan (NESP), 1973 marks the initiation of focus on primary education and facilitation of government (MOE, 2010) for ensuring that it reaches the door of each Nepalese. Similarly, with an adherence to the concept of Education for All (EFA), strategies for enhancing programs for ECD was further forwarded by the state which included collaborative effort between government and communities to enhance health, nutrition, sanitation and educational activities of the children (Ministry of Education and Sports [MOES], 2003). In the later days too, the programs for ECD have been made more rigorous which have been centered towards the aspects of cognitive and psychosocial development of children (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2008.).

Focusing on creating a suitable atmosphere to support ECD, the Government of Nepal (GON) has developed a framework to guide the schools to impart education based on children's capacity and aptitude (MOE, 2010) to make them child friendly.

Further, MOE has even defined what child- friendly schools mean by outlining their characteristics as:

"(i) children receive a safe and healthy environment, physically, mentally and emotionally, (ii) children's aptitude, capacity, and level are respected and provision is made for necessary environment and curriculum for their learning accordingly, (iii) teachers bear the full responsibility for assessing the learner's achievement in terms of learning, (iv) children are encouraged to enroll in school without any discrimination on grounds of their caste/ ethnicity, sex, financial status, physical and mental frailty, and are treated without discrimination both within and outside school, (v) special attention is paid to their health and security needs, (vi) children, parents and communities take part actively in policymaking, planning, implementation and evaluation of activities in the schools, and (vii) all types of physical, corporal and mental punishment are prohibited, and constant efforts are made to protect children from abuse and harm" (2010, p. 6-7).

Coming to the School Sector Development Program (SSDP), strengthening basic education under ECED/ PPE programs has been given space which targets to serve children to learn in enabling environment by reinforcing quality standard of the human resources serving in ECED, enhancing collaboration between school, parents, and community and increasing the access of program to a diverse group of children (MOE, 2016). Parallel to the programs initiated by the state, pre-schools which are increasing over the years is seeking for the more appropriate environment for their learning, drifting away from purely textbook instructions (Pandey, 2014 June 13) while the statistics of 36,568 Community based and 6,120 Institutional PPE and ECD Schools distributed over the seven provinces in the year 2074 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MOEST], 2017) gives a glimpse of optimism we can cultivate regarding assurance of a more conducive learning atmosphere for the children. Despite these, the question that has remained unraveled is, can we be sure about the facilitating atmosphere for these schools with the growth in their number? The next thing that may require strong probing is, is the growing number of children in the ECDs synonymous with growing support of parents about the environment for their development? The study, hence, is aimed towards bringing into light the paradoxes the preschool leaders have been experiencing in the course of creating an environment for ECD.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study has attempted to explore the challenges school leaders and teachers of institutional preschools in Kathmandu have experienced in the course of creating an enabling learning atmosphere for early childhood learners. The entire process of research was guided by my ontological stance that different challenges the school leaders and teachers narrate might be different since their perceptions are influenced by their embodied knowledge, experience, and cultural background (Creswell, 2014).

To understand the realities the teachers and school management had constructed in their minds (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) about challenges in the creation of a supportive environment in their schools, I involved in the process of narrative inquiry. In this course, purposive sampling was used to choose a teacher and two school leaders from three institutional preschools in Kathmandu valley, who, I believed, could align with my research objective (Palys, 2008). Since I have been collecting experiences of challenges in running preschool as an individual, I wanted to find out what other school leaders similar to my context experience. The choice I made about my research area and participants were also guided the feasibility of time and distance to conduct the research.

I generated the knowledge of understanding of school leaders and teachers about challenges in creating an atmosphere for cognitive development of early childhood learners (Willis, 2007), for which I involved in the dialogical process that allowed me to make constant and active communication and engagement (Karimova, 2014) with my research participants. Furthermore, the methodological process of narrative inquiry even facilitated me to generate my understanding which was contributed by the reflection I made over my research participants' insight (Seiki, 2014).

The major tool that I used in information generation was an in-depth interview while open-ended questions were used to explore the experiences of my research participants (Kvale, 1996). As an interpretive researcher, my entry into the field for finding what is happening, listening to what is said, asking them through interviews, and collecting documents contributed to collecting narrative information (Hammersely, 2017). The stories that I collected were restored and reorganized by telling chronologically and coherently (Creswell, 2014) which were further analyzed thematically.

FINDINGS

This section of the paper unpacks the experiences of teachers and school administration regarding the creation of an atmosphere for children at an early stage of development thematically. The basic findings made from the research are presented as:

Teachers as ECD Learning Facilitators

The story of Smita as a role model among her students was interesting. As a facilitator, she had entered into academia for about five years ago and since then, she has been engaging in classroom activities, experimenting with newer and interesting ways to facilitate the socio-cognitive development of her learners. As she recalled, ample affection she has been showering has established herself as a loved teacher among the kids while her engagement has brought a great deal of change in the way the students think and act while learning.

I still recall the day when I had entered the class with a little anxiety. But as I continued with my journey with affection and enthusiasm, I found myself being adored by my kids. Even the learner who was

not willing to come to the school the very first day rushes towards his class happily, and, the way he comes with suggestions to me to make paper crafts fascinates me. (Smita, Personal Communication, 2019, April 12).

Keshav, the school leader who has been running a preschool in the suburbs of Kathmandu for about a decade had a similar experience of his teachers' role in the classroom. Putting his experience of seeing students being inspired by the classroom facilitator with the story of a daughter who learns from her mom, he acknowledged how encouragement the teachers provide can be magical in enabling students to create new ideas.

I have seen the small kids running away from their mom's arms towards our teachers and waving 'See You' to their parents happy. It has been possible only because of the way teachers present themselves in the classroom. While the school manages the resources required for teaching-learning, my experience has enabled me to realize that it is in the hand of teachers to utilize them to create a supportive learning atmosphere in class. Since teachers in my school sing, dance, play, and create new things with the students, students also try to come with newer steps. It must be because of the active participation and compassionate treatment of teachers towards students that my school earns trust for its atmosphere for early childhood learners. (Keshav, Personal Communication, 2019, April 13)

Praneeta, a lady of 37, working as a coordinator at a preschool in Bhaktapur had similar acknowledgment of teachers' role but she narrated the different stories of how she had faced obstacles when she entered the field as a teacher. As she recounted, involving in teaching-learning as an instructional teacher- leader was not easy when she had attempted as a classroom facilitator. She had to be decisive regarding changes in classroom planning and activities which was not entertained. Moreover, at present when she encourages her teachers to be participatory, the parents expect them to be more textbook centered, which, as she recalls is paradoxical to the atmosphere she is trying to create in the classroom to facilitate early childhood development.

When I had entered the classroom as a trained ECD teacher at the age of twenty-two, I couldn't execute the activities that I knew could help me create an amiable atmosphere for my learners. I was considered to be breaking the hierarchical norms of the school since the school had a different set of methods to be applied beyond my awareness about ECD. Today, when I encourage the teachers in my school to practice learner-friendly methodologies for the children of preschool, I get regular complaints from the parents for engaging them much into playing and ignoring the value of reading and studying! (Praneeta, Personal Communication, 2019, April 13).

Above mentioned stories presented the instinct of facilitating ECD as a teacher role model. However, the narration of Praneeta's story allowed me to rethink upon if it is a teacher who doesn't get ready

to act instructional all the time, or he/ she is instigated by the circumstances to do so!

Concerns of Resources and Teacher Retention

Using resources, either physical or abstract is what I have been doing to help children in the classroom to acquire ideas and reconstruct them. However, though I am pretty aware of the resources that are to be used, getting the resources as per need gets difficult sometimes and it creates a buzz…. (Smita, Personal Communication, 2019, April 12).

Smita's account of hardships was not the adversity she faced alone in the course of creating an environment for the development of children in different stages. It was the hurdle that Keshav as a school principal and Praneeta as school coordinator had observed on their way. Not only the lack of physical infrastructures but even lack of teachers' retention is a serious challenge in fostering a learning atmosphere for early childhood development, as Keshav narrated.

Last year, in between the academic session, I faced a serious crisis since three teachers whom we had given adequate training left the school for going abroad and still, we are investing rigor in preparing the teachers similar to them, not knowing yet, whether we will be able to keep them motivated or not! (Keshav, Personal Communication, 2019, April 13).

Praneeta, while telling her story of the challenges she has been going through in creating an environment for ECD added to Keshav and Smita's remarks in a similar way. As she said, it is difficult to arrange infrastructures for running effective ECD programs. But the more difficult it is getting the teachers willing to continue with the program in the long run.

All say, finding a teacher in Kathmandu is easy. Yes, it might be easy to find a teacher. But getting teachers who are committed to working in this field is the most challenging job I have counted so far. Every year we have to think about two things, coming to the end of the academic session. The first one is, are we going to get a good teacher and the next one is what to do with the resources that have been damaged due to reckless use! Had the school got a dedicated teacher working for a longer time, the limited infrastructures could also have given a better way of classroom facilitation (Praneeta, Personal Communication, 2019 April 13).

The narration made by Smita, Keshav, and Praneeta all give us similar insight into 'infrastructural inadequacy' and 'problem of teacher retention' in a fostering environment for early childhood development programs. Moreover, even my reflection allows me to agree with them since having access to these resources and seeing them being managed well have become troublesome many times.

Parents' Expectations of Seeing Different Children Growing Alike

Last night, sitting alone after my works at the office, I pondered at the sky and recollected how I was expected by my mom to grow exactly in a similar

way as my buddies had been growing during my childhood. At the same time, I reflected upon how Praneeta had sighed, talking about how parents' expectation of seeing their children better than their neighbors'. Praneeta had had enough troubles coming to the day as a school coordinator because of over expectations presented by parents. As she narrated, parents came from different social background and they had their strong arguments about how their children should have been growing, which was seriously hindering the development of children.

The children, though look similar might have different ways of perceiving ideas which the parents rarely admit. I have often encountered really difficult times, trying to persuade parents about different learning abilities. All want to see their children learning overnight and they come with their fixed approaches which they think we should execute. It is disturbing in creating a learning atmosphere for the early childhood development program we have (Praneeta, Personal Communication, 2019, April 13).

The varying but rigid attitude of parents about how their children should have been learning was distorting for Smita as well. As she went on unveiling her story, she talked of how parents stress imposing one shoe should fit all at school, though they come with the promise of being supportive to help the child learn as per global standard at first. Parents love seeing their children growing mature and more responsible than their age and amidst this, even if we tend to manage different atmospheres for children of similar needs differently, it gets difficult to be executed! Parents want their children to learn and even act globally but they are resistant to accept a globally accepted notion of educating a child (Personal Communication, 2019, April 12).

Both the stories of Smita and Praneeta allowed me to think of the learning atmosphere that is often violated because of parents' notion of school should be imparting like this! I even put together the experiences shared by the teachers of my school which I found aligned with parents varying attitude and their alike expectation about untimely maturity of their children.

DISCUSSIONS

Keshav's experience of starting his career as an academic facilitator and moving towards academic entrepreneur cum leader encouraged him to internalize teachers' potential to influence his/ her peers, contribute to the development of instructional resources and to enhance students' learning achievement (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Teachers in the classroom as a role model, facilitator, and mediator (Espania, 2012) were narrated to be influencing the learners to adopt learning and adapt in the learning community by Praneeta, Smita, and Keshav respectively. However, acting as an instructional leader to promote an atmosphere for a child's development, though carries greater significance, was stated to be challenging in the context of the participants. The challenges echoed in the words of Praneeta who had

experienced a great deal of difficulty in her professional career due to structured top-down hierarchical notion, lack of parallel relationship between the school principal and herself as a teacher leader and insufficient opportunities to learn and build a relationship with the outer world to attain global perspective (Crowther, Kaagen, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002; Espania, 2012; Gimbert & Nolan, 2000; Lortie, 1975; Silva,). It even allowed me to recount my own experience during pre-primary school days and say to myself, "The teachers that I had found less motivating in the classroom must have gone through similar challenges!"

Living in a country where lack of affordability (Panthi & Belbase, 2017; Pierce & Ball, 2009) forms an obstruction in each sphere of an individual's life, getting resources as per necessity is more like a dream coming true in many educational institutions. Similarly, the lack of supporting mechanisms to facilitate the technological familiarity of teachers (Gareage, 2015; Panthi & Belbase, 2017) was observed as another challenge in fostering the learning atmosphere as per changing scenarios. Apart from this, the utilization of natural settings (Ernst, 2014; Miller, Tichota, & White, 2009) was discussed less by the research participants which had added to their adversities.

The insecurity about teachers' retention that I observed in the preschool leaders who is not a mere educational discourse; rather it forms an avalanche that is resulting in the springs of the nation to dry up! A study on surging number of Nepalese going abroad during 2017 showed the number to be 1750

leaving the country daily ("More Nepalis", 2017) while repeated remarks made by many individuals about the queue they see in front of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) for getting passports can allow anticipation of the number growing even rapidly.

Furthermore, despite growing demand for the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that is even stressed by national policies (MOE, 2013) for encouraging the use of instructional methodologies in teaching-learning, it is very less utilized by the teachers who come basically from the rural areas contributing to 80% of the total population (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011; Rana, Greenwood, Turnbull, & Wise, 2018). They are found to have less access to technical support for enhancing their skills (Rana et al., 2018; Salehi & Salehi, 2012). In this scenario, commitment and innovative expertise of the teachers supported by the appreciation from school administration (Qutoshi & Poudel, 2014) could serve in enabling the learning willingness of teachers which might help in making the environment for cognitive development of children more empowering.

Studies have it said that learning takes place as a process, starting with the association mechanism among young children that gradually transforms into internal mediation (Kuhn & Pease, 2006) as the child starts growing up. As put forward by Gardener's theory of multiple intelligences, each individual is gifted with nine varying intelligences which include verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical- rhythmic, bodily-kinesthetic,

interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalist and existential (Hajhashemi, Caltabiano, Anderson, & Tabibzadeh, 2017), and according to these varying abilities of individuals, learning atmosphere for a child has to be created. However, varying abilities of the learners to learn and develop remains undermined most of the time due to the parents' assumption of 'one shoe fits all!' which even my research participants recounted. Where adoption of learning theories like Bloom's Taxonomy (1954) and an acknowledgment of socio-cultural diversity where a child grows up (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009) is highly advocated to address children's cognitive development, lack of parents' support to this seems to be creating abruption!

As coined by Episten (1995) and Keyes (2000), regular communications between parents and school involving teacher invitations, meetings and conferences can be helpful, not only in knowing about the atmosphere at home and school but also in identifying the gap that may appear due to socio-cultural diversity and to solve it. However, the way I longed to be T a child being a child during my school days among the educated community, the complains that I reflect about my parents' lesser visits to the school and the gap it has created in my experience about life has made it explicit, endeavoring demand of accommodating to newer values (Bainbridge, 2013) in educational discourse should start with a readiness to adopt the change and then assimilate it for avoiding all sorts of disturbances it might come with.

CONCLUSION

Engagement with the teachers and school leaders running programs for early childhood development revealed that teachers and school leaders are applying more rigorous efforts for creating an atmosphere for Early Childhood Development. For this, the role of teachers in making instructional utilization of available resources was acknowledged by the research participants. However, insufficient resources and the lack of retention of teachers capable of making their effective utilization were narrated as the challenges. Moreover, since the teachers and school leaders added about greater expectations of the parents, constructing a playful and child-friendly environment amidst this was recounted to be tough.

IMPLICATION

Though several theories advocate the significance of creating a friendly environment for early childhood learners, materializing the concept seems to be tough until and unless a collaborative effort is made between school leaders, teachers, and parents. Hence, the study implies steps to be taken by the school to induce a collaborative environment where parents and the entire school aligns with a similar vision. Similarly, teachers can make utilization of natural settings around them which might help reduce the challenges created due to infrastructural constraints. Apart from this, motivating teachers to work as instructional leaders can also help create the atmosphere for early childhood development.

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