

Lived Experiences of ECD Teachers on Teaching Practices and Professional Development: A Phenomenological Study in Rupandehi District, Nepal

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Abstract

Teaching staff for Early Childhood Development (ECD) are essential for providing learning opportunities to young learners, but there is hardly any information regarding the lived experiences of teaching and professional development of the teaching staff in the decentralized educational context of Nepal. In the current qualitative phenomenological study, eight ECD teachers from urban, semi-urban, and rural municipalities in the Rupandehi district of Lumbini province, Nepal, have been interviewed during the period of April to May 2021 for collecting data on their teaching experiences and professional development. The results revealed that the teachers used adaptive, developmentally appropriate pedagogy even though they faced many limitations with regards to availability of resources and institutional support. These kinds of professional development were sporadic and came from outside, unevenly available across different municipalities, and included limited mentoring at schools or any form of professional learning. The results indicate that ECD teachers perceive their job as a series of pedagogical adaptations, requiring professional judgment and emotional involvement and being responsive to classroom environment although lacking institutional recognition. The research adds contextual knowledge about experiences of ECD teachers in Nepal and the importance of continuing professional development, allocating resources equally, and giving more recognition to ECD teachers' profession. Since the research was carried out among eight teachers from one district only, the results are meant to be qualitative and not quantitative.

Keywords: *early childhood development, ECD teachers, professional development, teaching practices, qualitative research*

Introduction

The early childhood development centers impact how a child thinks, communicates, and interacts socially in ways that no other stage of learning will affect the child later on as significantly (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers of ECD in Nepal earn much less than those teaching in the primary school, receive infrequent training if any at all, and hardly have

any supervision; effectively, the centers serve as custody arrangements, where children are left in charge until their parents return from work (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2022). As of the early 2020s, the number of children enrolled in preschool in Nepal had risen considerably throughout all seven provinces (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2021). For example, Rupandehi District in the province of Lumbini is a place where many ECD centers are run in its thirteen local government districts, ranging from Butwal sub-metropolitan city to scattered rural municipalities. However, the rise in enrollment numbers has not been accompanied by investing in teachers. Nepal's official ECD policy tradition begins with the Basic and Primary Education Project in the 1990s, which viewed preschool education as a means towards preparing children for primary school instead of recognizing it as a good in itself (UNESCO, 2010); a policy trajectory of quantity over quality persisted from the School Sector Reform Program (2009-2015) to the current School Sector Development Program (MoEST, 2016-2023). The National Early Childhood Development Framework (2012) emphasizes holistic early development, but has yet to be equally realized due to limited availability in distant or rural areas and resource availability in more convenient urban areas (Daly, 2020). In this study, three theoretical perspectives will help to understand this discrepancy. First, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to what children can do with assistance compared to alone. However, instead of using ZPD as an impartial learning technique, it will be used as a framework within which to consider what teachers must do when they lack training in its application and materials for its proper scaffolding.

Reorganization of the federal government post-2015 has resulted in the devolution of the ECD sector to local governments and has thus created opportunities as well as challenges for providing differentiated service. Local governments gain both the chance as well as the obligation of ECD provision without receiving the corresponding funding, since rural local governments have the mandate to recruit and pay for the ECD teachers while only being able to afford the block grant that is too little even for covering the minimum salary recommended by MoEST (Acharya, 2020). Gender is one of the causes of such subordination of ECD education as gender norms in relation to care work make ECD teachers to be viewed as substitute mothers rather than educators; Arndt et al. (2018) note that more than 95% of ECD teachers across the country are women, which leads to subordination of teachers due to cultural attitudes to natural caregiving of women. There exist research on the above-mentioned structural conditions but it does not provide any analysis of what happens in the classroom in Nepal. Bhandari (2017) provides data on infrastructure and staffing of ECD centers in Lumbini Province, however, no information is provided on how teachers work in these centers. Although Tamang (2025) investigates training programs, they focus on the relevance of the curriculum, rather than on what teachers know and do prior to training, and they discovered that all programs incorporated foreign concepts, as well as play-based learning based on Montessori and Reggio approaches, without considering existing practices, hence making the training abstract and hard to implement for teachers. There is no study that considers the following questions empirically and on the level of

practice of individual teachers: how they deal with mixed age groups; what they use instead of lacking resources; how they create emotional environment.

Pedagogic research on the early years classroom in other South Asian nations is consistent in its conclusion that teachers use relationships and embodiment to make up for the lack of materials (Gupta, 2020). With little in the way of teaching aids available to them, teachers relied on songs, gestures, and stories, which were defined by teachers as how children learn there (Shrestha et al., 2021). The lack of commercially produced teaching aids resulted in local improvisation rather than the dearth of pedagogy (Bhandari, 2017). From research into professional development, isolated training sessions have less impact than integrated learning within schools (Hamre et al., 2012; Pianta et al., 2008). Nepali teachers managed to remember training materials soon after but were already back to their old ways of working after a few months, not because of any resistance on their part, but because they lacked an enabling context in their schools to implement the new approaches (Dahal, 2024). Likewise, the federalization process has, theoretically, brought the onus of professional development closer to teachers, as local governments are now free to plan and fund training programs, but Lumbini provinces lack the technical expertise to do so; training is still needs-based and externally initiated, especially for community ECD centers (Daly, 2019). When combined, the literature reviewed leans more towards issues related to policy and governance, while less emphasis is placed on empirical classroom research, as well as external description over description from the perspective of teachers themselves. The works of Bhandari (2017), Gupta (2020), and Shrestha et al. (2021) are closer to being empirical research on teaching practices; however, they use observations conducted by researchers of how teachers operate in their classrooms.

Instead of investigating teacher's reactions to training content, Tamang (2025) explores the ways in which teachers interpret the disjuncture between the assumptions built into their training and the demands of their actual classroom environment. What is lacking, in particular, is a study which considers ECD teachers themselves to be the experts on their experience and examines the way in which these teachers in their diverse urban and rural contexts in Rupandehi interpret, narrate and construct meaning from their teaching practice and professional development, as opposed to assessing these practices by any external criteria of infrastructure, governance, or training design. Three questions guide the research for this study: (1) What teaching and learning approaches do ECD teachers in the district of Rupandehi adopt in promoting children's development through early literacy, numeracy, colors, and play? (2) How are ECD teachers able to create emotionally nurturing learning spaces amid material shortages and lack of institutional direction? (3) What forms of teacher professional development are available to ECD teachers, and how are they influenced by school and local government institutions? Knowing about the actual experiences of teachers in different urban and rural environments of the district of Rupandehi, and how they perceive their profession, provides a grounded perspective of the ECD experiment in Nepal.

Methodology

Research Design

The methodology applied for this study is the phenomenology research approach. In this method, the participant becomes the expert on his/her own experience, with the goal of understanding the significance that he/she attaches to a common phenomenon, in this case, teaching in ECD centers in a situation of resource shortage and lack of organizational support (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research was not intended to evaluate the performance of the teachers against an external criterion of competence nor to generalize the findings but rather to understand their teaching experience and development.

Research Site and Sampling

The research study was conducted in Rupandehi district, which is situated in the province of Lumbini. Considering the presence of thirteen different units in Rupandehi with variations in their degrees of urbanization, ethnicity, and availability of resources, the district seemed appropriate for studying the influence of context on the implementation of ECD practices. In total, three units of Rupandehi district were selected using the purposive sampling method. These three units included a sub-metropolitan city, a municipality, and a rural municipality. The selection of ECD teachers was done purposively from two to three ECD centers per each of the three units. There were a total of eight ECD teachers, including three from the sub-metropolitan unit, three from the municipality, and two from the rural municipality.

Recruitment was done through the local government units themselves, where the researcher initially contacted the ECD/education focal person in the three local government units selected, who identified active centers in the unit and helped make contacts with head teachers and ECD teachers before the data collection period in April 2021. This route of recruitment is based on the governance framework created through the Constitution of Nepal (2072 B.S./2015), whereby it is the local level that holds primary responsibility for school-level education, including the ECD centers within its jurisdiction (Constitution of Nepal, 2015). The local level is, thus, the right, and in practice, the only administratively accessible, gatekeeper for the purpose of recruitment. The teachers were contacted, informed about the study and interviewed only after obtaining their written consent. This route of recruitment is important methodologically because teachers that are referred through the local government might be somewhat more visible in the system than those working in centers that lack links with the municipality, which is discussed further in the Limitations section.

Participants

However, the eight teachers differed widely in terms of their qualifications, ethnicity, and background. Kamala possesses an I.Sc. (+2 science) degree, and she also has ECD diplomas and is a trainer moving around in other districts. Pramila and Sushila both possess Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degrees. Sita has I.A. from India and I.Ed. from Nepal. Nirmala has a BBS in management. Sunita has passed her SLC exam, Maya has Grade 12 education, and Laxmi has Grade 10 education. In terms of ethnicity, the group consisted of individuals belonging to the Tarai upper caste, disadvantaged Janajati,

Madhesi Janajati, and Madhesi Brahmin ethnicities, a composition that is consistent with Rupandehi's diverse ethnic structure (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

All eight participants were women, as was confirmed by previous research on the almost exclusively female composition of Nepal's early childhood development (ECD) teaching force (Arndt et al., 2018), and all had been taught in government schools. Training experience, elaborated in full in the Findings, included periods from only a few days of municipal training to multi-module courses of diploma-level education; relative to the training requirement set out in the national ECD performance indicators at least, "one month of facilitator training" (MoEST, 2016), in most cases, the training received was below that level, and two participants had never received any training beyond informal teaching experience. The age of participants and their number of years in ECD teaching experience were not tracked systematically during data collection and are therefore not presented here; this gap is recognized because teaching experience likely affects confidence and knowledge of minimum standards for ECD centers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were gathered by carrying out one-on-one semi-structured interviews in the participants' ECD centers. The five open-ended questions that were used in guiding the interviews covered: training history and school-based professional development activities; teaching methods on early literacy, numeracy, colors and shapes; play and reading resources; creation of learning environment and storytelling; and methods for establishing affective trust with children. This kind of open-ended interview gave the participants an opportunity to explain their experiences and raise other issues that were not foreseen in the interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The interviews were conducted audiotape-recorded with prior permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim in Nepali language, which were further translated in English language by the researcher. The thematic analysis was done following the six steps mentioned by Braun & Clarke (2006), which included; becoming familiar with the data through multiple readings; creating initial codes; looking for themes; reviewing themes against the whole dataset; defining and naming themes; and writing up the report. The analysis process progressed in an inductive manner by moving from participants' words to thematic interpretation, with analytic memos made throughout. Data saturation, when additional interviews did not yield any more themes, was achieved at eight participants.

Face-to-face interviews using the five questions were done for each teacher at their ECD center. The criterion for saturation was through constant comparison of the emerging codes. This entailed comparing the new codes after each interview with the codes that had already been established by the researcher in her analytic memos. The criterion for stopping data collection after the seventh and eighth interviews was based on the fact that no new codes had emerged from the previous six interviews but only elaboration of the already identified codes.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

There were several approaches that contributed to the reliability of the analysis following the recommendations by Creswell and Poth (2018). Credibility was ensured by verbatim transcription and prior familiarity of the researcher with the research setting. Confirmability was ensured by memoing of the analysis and explanations made by the researcher while coding the data. This audit trail is presented below. Dependability of the findings was ensured by an explicit and systematic use of the six phases method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), described above. Member checking and investigator triangulation were not performed in this study, and this represents its two shortcomings described below. Position of the researcher as a Nepali-speaking person unfamiliar with the particular early childhood development centers and familiar with the wider context of Nepali education system influenced the rapport during interviews and translation process.

Ethical Considerations

This research received approval from the Ethical Review Board of Nepal Health Research Council (ERB No. 2078-56/2021). All procedures followed in the study were consistent with the guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was taken from all the participants prior to the interview process. The participants were made aware of the aims of the study, and it was assured that their confidentiality will be respected. It was made clear to the participants that their involvement is optional. It was made clear to the participants that their answers will be used in a non-identifiable way only for research purposes and they may leave at any point without facing any consequences. All the interviews took place individually to ensure the respect of the confidentiality and allow the participants to open up.

Results

Three major themes arose from the data analysis, reflecting the research questions asked: (1) pedagogical resourcefulness despite material limitations; (2) affective labor and creating emotionally safe learning spaces; and (3) professional development as an extrinsic and episodic experience instead of intrinsic to schools. Variation within each theme based on urban versus rural settings was important for analysis.

Pedagogical Resourcefulness Under Material Constraint

The eight teachers all taught in different environments with one thing in common; their physical and material environment was not designed for early childhood education. The situation at Sunita's school was similar to what many others were experiencing; the classroom she used for teaching the ECD curriculum served as a storehouse, shared by three classes and had no teaching aids for teaching. When the children make noise, the teachers of the other classes protest.

This deserves to be dwelled upon rather than glossed over: It is not just the absence of material in Sunita's room, but also the fact that her authority within the room is subject to the tolerance of other teachers. Her ability to conduct classes is subject to a colleague's complaint, not pedagogic assessment. The store-room label is no coincidence; it clearly shows where ECD stands within the hierarchy of spaces within

the school, below the primary grades with which it shares a building. This hierarchy echoes, in softer terms, throughout some of the other accounts: Sita and Pramila's unequal access to the same school's training allotment (see below), as well as Nirmala's observation of the children seeming happier with her than with substitute teachers, are indications of an ECD teacher's status, which is claimed rather than granted through relationships.

No teaching materials are available in the school. I teach whatever is available on the wall. We have to keep up with the other two different classes in the same room.

Within this constraint, Sunita improvises: she takes children outside and asks them to draw in the dust what they see around them. The environment itself becomes the curriculum. This is not a best practice as described; it is an adaptive necessity. What is analytically significant is that Sunita's improvisation embodied, outdoor, observational aligns precisely with approaches that developmental literature associates with active learning, yet it arises not from training but from material scarcity.

The scarcity extended past materials for numbers and letters to play and reading materials generally:

We have no reading and playing materials for them. No organization has provided teaching materials or play toys.

By contrast, Kamala, teaching in an urban private school in the same sub-metropolitan unit, operates in a resource-rich environment: television sets, Montessori materials, word and number charts, art and craft paper, and internet connectivity. Her teaching is more structured and explicitly multimodal, with letter cards, spindle boxes, TV demonstrations, and take-home projects linking classroom color lessons to objects found at home, as she described:

We have various techniques to teach the alphabet; we teach through letter cards, and we have a chart with the alphabet and words. We have a TV in each class, and we also use the internet to teach the alphabet. We teach color through TV demonstrations and object shows, and then we give a project where they have to bring an object from home based on the color we teach the next day.

Her account of the center's stock of materials reinforced the same contrast:

We have sufficient learning and play materials. We have TV and wooden materials. We have expensive Montessori teaching materials, too. We have sufficient word and number charts. We use reading materials provided by EGRP.

The gap between Sunita's and Kamala's material contexts is not a gradient; it is a chasm. Both are teaching in Rupandehi District's sub-metropolitan area, a kilometer apart.

What the full dataset reveals is that the form pedagogy takes is largely a function of what is available. Pramila, with a B.Ed. and Montessori training, has a dedicated playroom; she teaches the alphabet through rhymes, numbers through counting materials, and colors through song followed by question-and-answer. Sita, in the municipality, has stones and pieces of wood:

We teach the alphabet by showing pictures and writing on the board. Teach numbers by counting stones or wooden pieces. Teach colors by showing objects on the classroom wall.

Maya, in the same unit, has a football:

We have football; we bring it out to play football. They hide and find handkerchiefs. We do not have books in ECD; we give homework.

Laxmi, teaching from a room in her own home, has a TV, a pen drive, and a game of hide-the-handkerchief. The resourcefulness is consistent; the resources are not.

For all eight teachers, some practices were common regardless of any contextual considerations concerning the materials involved: Hand over hand for letter formation, counting with fingers, using body and songs to learn numbers and colors, and grouping students based on their level of development. These are not pedagogical practices that the teachers acquired from any training programs; in fact, most of them pointed out that they had never had any school-based training.

Differentiation in Mixed-Age Classrooms

Of the eight teachers interviewed, six stated that there were classes where there were children of different age groups. In such situations, there was no KG class to which the bigger children could be shifted once the classes got over. As Nirmala explained the situation, "The biggest problem being that we do not have a KG class and we have students of different age groups." What Nirmala did about the problem is that she tried keeping the troublesome kids near her while teaching. She tried using stories and fun to involve everyone and knew that while the little ones might not understand, the bigger kids would definitely get it.

The most systematically differentiated technique was demonstrated by Pramila, who categorized her class into three groups according to their levels of understanding and employed the stronger students to mentor those that were not doing well.

There are various age groups and differing capacities among the children. There are three different groups that I have divided depending on their level of intelligence. The talent category will assist me in teaching the average students while the weak students will get my time through various methods such as holding the hand with a pencil.

It's a similar concept to the ZPD scaffolding concept by Vygotsky (1978), which is carried out by a teacher, who referred to it in terms of 'I can give time to the weak students,' rather than theoretically. The coincidence between her practice and the theory that she might never have heard about in theoretical terms is no coincidence at all.

Sushila's classroom illustrates a cruder but functionally similar strategy for the same underlying problem, rotating small groups to the front while containing the rest, and borrowing materials from older grades to hold attention:

When two students come to the front of the class to study, I tell the others to stay quiet. I also control others while teaching those who are in front of the class. Sometimes I give all in one book to make it engaging. I tell

stories from upper-class books and other books. Yes, I raise questions based on the book. Only some students can answer.

Unlike Pramila's grouping, which explicitly targets weaker students for individual support, Sushila's method manages attention across the room as a whole differentiation by containment rather than by design, but differentiation nonetheless.

Storytelling recurred across accounts as a device for holding the room together, though teachers varied in whether they followed it with questions. Kamala embedded it within a broader rhyme-and-action routine:

We create an action-oriented learning environment with rhymes. We apply action with letter, action with letter. We tell them stories and ask questions based on the story.

Sushila and Nirmala both told stories but reported uneven comprehension across their mixed-age rooms, consistent with the same developmental-range problem that shapes every other practice described in this section.

Affective Labor and Emotionally Safe Learning Environments

The answer provided by each of the eight teachers on how they make sure that the children are not scared of them was more or less the same: that they don't beat the children, that they love them, and that they know it. Sunita: "I never hit them; I love them, they go with me; and all the children are like my kids." Sita: "No child is scared of me. I never hit them." Nirmala: "I love them like my child. I try to satisfy their individual needs. They are not happy when other teachers come in the classroom and look at me." They request me not to send another teacher when I am absent.'

What is analytically notable here is not the statements themselves, which could reflect social desirability in an interview, but the specificity of the behaviors teachers describe. Kamala explained that her class operates on what she called a democratic style:

Sometimes we adopt a democratic style to allow them to freely express their individual interests. We create a parental environment. An environment where the children will not be afraid to express their interests and likes in front of the teachers.

Pramila described never getting angry when children make mistakes, and encouraged children to come to her for reward stars unprompted:

I never get angry with them. I encourage them even if they make mistakes. They come near me and ask for stars. They do not hesitate to come and stay with me.

Sushila gave children permission to be noisy, a deliberate loosening of control that functions as affective permission rather than pedagogical disorder:

I give a chance to make noise, too, sometimes. I love them; they are not afraid of me.

Across accounts, this affective work was consistent and effortful and was described in remarkably similar terms by teachers who had never met one another, suggesting it is a recognized professional norm within Rupandehi's ECD community rather than an idiosyncratic personal style. What that norm means theoretically is taken up in the Discussion.

The comparison with Laxmi bears mentioning. Laxmi teaches her class in the room at her home, and she doesn't tell the children any story because the parents want the children to produce something written; therefore, Laxmi stresses writing. This is the only situation when the teaching practice is driven by the wishes of the parents rather than by developmental reasoning. It suggests the bigger dichotomy of the desires of the families affected by the current educational system (something written).

Professional Development: Episodic, External, and Unequal

The professional development activities were varied from almost non-existent to very extensive and were related to the following: school type and, to some extent, teacher's initiative but not to any institutional provision of these activities.

Kamala is an outlier. She has both junior and senior ECD diplomas, she has undergone training several times with municipality funding, and now she has become a trainer of other ECD teachers, going to Rolpa and Palpa Rampur to provide training, as she explained:

I have taken junior and senior diploma level ECD training programs. Indeed, the municipality provides us with training once in a while. I provide training for ECD teachers as well. The school authorities send me to other schools to conduct training programs. Recently, I was sent to Rolpa and Palpa Rampur to provide training.

Her professional identity is that of a practitioner-expert operating within a network. Maya, in the same municipality, has received four days of municipality-funded training. The municipality thus appears to have a functional, if limited, professional development infrastructure.

By contrast, Sunita has received one week of private training and one week of district-level training, but nothing from her school:

I had completed a one-week ECD training at a private organization before teaching at this school. Further, I have completed a one-week training program conducted by the district education unit, Rupandehi. No training has been given by this school.

Sushila's history followed the same shape: one private course, one municipal session, nothing from the school itself:

I had taken Montessori training before coming to this school. I have also taken a one-time ECD training provided by the municipality. The school has not provided any ECD training.

Maya (identified as Teacher 5) has received no training and notes that she has only done teaching practice:

No training. The school has also not conducted any training. Only I have conducted teaching practice.

Laxmi has received four days of municipality training, and nothing from her school:

I have taken 4 days of ECD training given by the municipality.

This is similar to the results found by Dahal (2024) and Tamang (2025) in other districts of Nepal where professional development is external, temporary, and not institutionalized in any form within the education system for further follow

up. If any professional development ever took place, then it would have been an event rather than a process.

It wasn't just about institutional differences but also about differences inside the institutions themselves. Even though Pramila had a B.Ed. degree and private training in Montessori, there was one issue that she pointed out which highlighted the entire situation: no one had ever bothered to send her for any training, but rather,

Others are teachers too.

It wasn't because she was not qualified enough for it; it was just the way the school chose to distribute the scarce opportunity. The case of exclusion for Sita is quite different, as she got her training from outside the school completely.:

I was trained for ten days through ECD training at the Bhairahawa Training Center by the Rupandehi District Education Unit. There has been no training conducted for this particular school.

The bias towards distribution of training, whether it denies a trained teacher from the school or ignores the school altogether, brings additional unfairness in the system, on top of the inherent unfairness existing between them. In the case of Nirmala, there was an exception to the general rule, as she got two days of training from her school.

10 days of ECD training from Bhairahawa. Two days of ECD training from School.

However, it is the sole example in any of the eight cases where the school has provided some training time, and that too in a very minor capacity in relation to the external input. It does not break away from the pattern but proves it instead.

In addition, the rural municipal school teachers (Sita and Nirmala) revealed having the poorest professional development track records and least resourced classrooms. It is clear from the above converging factors-rural setting, low qualification cut off mark, lack of resources and poor training-that constitute an even greater challenge to the federal devolution process in Rupandehi.

Discussion

The present phenomenological research focused on the experiences of ECD teachers with respect to the teaching practices and professional development in urban, semi-urban and rural contexts in Rupandehi District. In particular, the research was aimed at exploring the experiences of teachers with regard to their everyday professional activities in different contexts. Despite the limited number of the participants (eight) and location (one district), the results obtained from the research are analytically valuable in terms of understanding how ECD teachers operate pedagogically and emotionally in the context of Nepal's federal education system (Daly, 2019; Acharya, 2020).

Teaching was not seen as the application of instructional methods but as an ongoing process of adjustment. Learning activities were changed depending on the developmental level, interest, and learning needs of the child, irrespective of any variation in classroom equipment. Music, stories, movement, questioning, playmates, and local materials were all used as means of engaging the children in participation.

Even though there were hardly any references to education in professional terms by teachers, their approach to teaching corresponded quite well to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural view of learning. The participants explained that they were engaged in constant assessments of developmental needs, adapting teaching techniques, organizing classrooms, and making decisions about curricula. Similar issues have been raised in relation to teachers in Nepal, as practices of recruiting ECD teachers, remuneration, and job roles often put them at a lower status than primary teachers due to the complicated nature of their role (Acharya, 2020). The adaptable teaching approaches revealed during this research also relate to prior Nepali studies of how ECD teachers cope with poor learning facilities and learning materials by improvising with local materials (Bhandari, 2017).

Emotional involvement, being patient, encouraging children and non-coercive interactions were considered integral components of the teaching process by all interviewees. Children's willingness to take part in the activity, to pose questions and be outspoken was considered an example of successful teaching, not just desirable classroom behaviors. According to phenomenological interpretation of data, these statements prove that interviewees perceived emotional relationships and teaching as interrelated aspects of professional activities, where emotional support became a basis of effective learning process. This is where Hochschild's (1983) idea of emotional labor comes into play. It allows us to understand the experience of teachers, who consciously controlled their emotions and responded sensitively to the needs of children. This analysis shows that the process of emotional labor has not only pedagogical but relational purposes. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socioculture, emotionally secure relations made it possible for teachers to see the growing competencies of children, determine their developmental needs and offer suitable scaffolding. So, we may say that emotional labor was both relational and pedagogical. This understanding contributes to a bigger discussion about the undervaluation of caring professions, which is based on the assumption that caring actions are natural feminine traits and not acquired skills. According to Karabay and Aras (2025), caring professions are devaluated because of it. However, the experience of participants demonstrates the opposite.

Moreover, it was found that most of the professional development of teachers took place via city-based or privately run organizations and not via mentoring and collaboration in school institutions. The professional development of many teachers was viewed as something that was related to experience in class or training rather than institutional support for the same purpose. This study is consistent with previous research carried out in Nepal which showed that professional development was episodic and external (Tamang, 2025; Dahal, 2024). The variations amongst municipalities serve as yet another indicator to show that while there are chances for innovations in professional learning due to decentralization in the federal structure, the same process has not brought about equity between municipal governments in the professional development of teachers (Acharya, 2020). Teachers working in urban municipalities stated that they had access to more professional training and instruction than those

working in rural municipalities because of lack of material and qualification resources. Unbalanced implementation of reforms by the federal government of Nepal has been observed in other education reforms in Nepal as well (Daly, 2019). The findings of the research align with current studies conducted internationally, as per the findings of Firat et al. (2024) where they claim that professional capital is created through collegiality and reflection and that as per Nezhad & Stolz (2025) the professional learning of teachers is shaped mainly by their organizational setting.

On the whole, the findings revealed that the participants negotiated the issues of developmental diversity among children, their well-being, scarce resources and unfavorable professional context without neglecting the aspect of learning in children. In other words, good quality ECD teaching does not necessarily imply good institutional conditions from the point of view of the participants, but the capacity of teachers to rely on their professional knowledge and judgement in less than ideal conditions. The core of the participants' experience can be identified through the ongoing interplay between pedagogical knowledge, emotions and contextualization. The phenomenological analysis has enriched the existing research into the professional knowledge of ECD teachers by proving that professional knowledge is attained through the practice and not solely through the qualifications and skills of teachers. Hence, in order to develop early childhood education in Nepal, it is crucial to recognize the existing professional knowledge of teachers and foster it by creating favorable institutional conditions: fair resource allocation, professional development within schools and proper professional recognition.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications

The research had many advantages. First, purposive sampling of ECD teachers from urban, semi-urban, and rural local government areas allowed for various experiences in various locations. Phenomenological methodological approach proved to be very effective as far as gaining deep insights on the experiences of teachers are concerned. Anonymity and ethics approval from Nepal Health Research Council improved the ethical aspect of the research. Interpretation of the findings based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Hochschild's emotional labor theory helped to understand how pedagogy and professionalism of ECD teachers are interrelated in the context of federal education in Nepal.

There are various limitations that need to be taken into account regarding the results of the study. Firstly, the study was carried out on eight teachers from one single district and thus cannot be considered as having generalizable results. The data for this study was gathered through interviews and therefore the results of the study reflect the perspective of teachers about their experience. Observation in the class room and also perspectives of other stakeholders such as school administrators, parents, local government officials, and children could have contributed towards triangulation of data. Secondly, since the research was carried out in the Nepalese language but translated into English, the result might be biased in this respect as well.

Indeed, there are several implications for practice from the findings of this research. First, one can say that the findings from this study suggest that the ECD teachers must not be considered only as very competent specialists who work in this field but as specialists who conduct not just childcare but also differentiations and developmentally appropriate instructions. Second, it is necessary to understand that professional development should not be considered as short-term external training courses but as ongoing professional development through mentoring in schools. Third, it is necessary for local governments to invest in teaching and learning resources particularly in rural municipalities where investments in such resources are needed more than in any other municipality.

Conclusion

This phenomenology study focuses on the experiences of ECD teachers regarding teaching and professional practices in the Rupandehi district of Nepal. From the findings of this study, it can be noted that the ECD teachers behave in a complex manner in their professional practice, adapting themselves in accordance with the development of children despite the fact that the resources available to them are limited and there is no equal institutional support. They describe teaching as a balancing act in any circumstances between the developmental requirements of children and professionalism.

However, such problems as the fragmented nature of PD programs and the lack of external PD initiatives as well as the resource imbalances remain inherent in local government agencies. Nonetheless, such structural problems do not limit but restrict the professionalism of the teachers. It follows that one may conclude from the findings of the study that any improvement in the early childhood education area depends on treating the ECD teachers as professionals who are to get opportunities to develop their professionalism. Such continuous efforts as school-based PD, resource allocation, positive learning environment creation, and professionalization will be needed to make Nepal's achievements qualitative.

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