



Early Childhood Learning Practices During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of the ECCD Centre in Bhutan

Nipaporn Sakulwongs* and Dago Rinzin

Curriculum and Instruction, Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University, Thailand

*Corresponding author, E-mail: nipaporn.c@rsu.ac.th

Abstract

The study was framed in the Bhutanese Early Child Care and Development context, where inclusion in early childhood education has been incorporated into public policies through educational blueprints and curricular guidelines that seek to meet the Bhutanese education system's right to education for all. The objective of the study is to examine the early childhood learning practices in Wanakha Village Early Child Care and Development Center during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period. Qualitative methodology with an interpretative approach was used. The researchers prepared questionnaires and posted them through Messenger and WeChat to parents, learners, and the ECCD facilitator. Researchers used both verbal and written text as a mode of communication because most parents and learners can't read the text. The data were analyzed through content analysis and descriptive interpretations based on information received through questionnaires and oral communications. The result indicated that even prior to COVID-19 pandemic challenges, the incorporation of varieties of games and fun activities was on track to uphold the concept of 'learning through play'. On the other hand, the demand for content-focused learning by parents has made ECCD facilitators modify some content in the curriculum, which contradicts the literature on childhood learning. The study also revealed the challenges in conducting virtual classes due to limited ICT facilities with learners and ECCD facilitator's reach out to individual children due to the high ratio of ECCD facilitators to learners.

Keywords: ECCD Center, ECCD Facilitator, Learners, Parents, Bhutan, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The early years for children aged three to five (Bhutan) are considered critical for the holistic development of a child, and with the country's goal of having a high performing education system, it is deemed to strengthen and enhance the Early Child Care and Development (ECCD) programs. The main educational documents of the country, Bhutan Education Blue Print 2014-2024, mentioned the research-based result of the positive impact of learners who participated in quality ECCD programs, as less likely to repeat grades and dropouts, which reduces the overall cost of the education system and also the positive impact on learners in terms of school readiness, hence, the Bhutanese government is investing a lot in ECCD programs. Further, as per the Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024, Early Childhood Care and Development was institutionalized in Bhutan in 2002 by Save the Children, in close partnership with the Ministry of Education and UNICEF.

The Annual Education Statistics published by the Policy and Planning Division (PPD) of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoE&SD) of Bhutan indicated the government's focus on ECCD programs as it showed the increased establishment of ECCD Centers. Never the less, the trend in continuous fall in learners from 2018 to 2020 resulted in the conduct of a case study in a center that is located in the vicinity of the authors to find out some of the findings, though they may be limited to bias for general recommendations. The Bhutan Education Blue Print 2014-2024 accepted the fact that inadequate facilitators' training and a poor state of the physical environment even in a normal situation resulted in doing case studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is far more challenging in the conduct of educational programs.

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**Table 1A** Summary of ECCD Centers in Bhutan

Year	Government	Private	Total
2018	282	58	340
2019	319	60	379
2020	432	63	495
2021	432	60	492
2022	422	69	491
2023	442	83	525

Source: Annual Education Statistics, PPD, MoE&SD of year 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023

Table 1B Summary of Learners in Centers in Bhutan

Year	Government			Private			Total		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
2018	3434	3421	6855	861	783	1644	4295	4204	8499
2019	3556	3631	7187	746	810	1556	4302	4441	8743
2020	3420	3503	6923	516	587	1103	3936	4090	8026
2021	4396	4519	8915	798	949	1747	5194	5468	10662
2022	4331	4494	8825	983	1064	2047	5314	5558	10822
2023	4810	4905	9715	1568	1729	3297	6378	6634	13012

Source: Annual Education Statistics, PPD, MoE&SD of year 2018,2019,2020,2021,2022,2023

This study report provided research-based evidence on the links between theory and practice in early childhood settings, especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study mainly highlighted three thematic areas, such as learning and pedagogy, the nature of knowledge and assessment, and document practices in early childhood settings in a Bhutanese context. Furthermore, it also elaborated on the analysis of research in early childhood contexts in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and specifically Bhutan.

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, all ECCD centers across the nation of Bhutan have remained closed since March 5, 2020. Nevertheless, we had the opportunity to work closely with the Wanakha Village ECCD Center under Naja subdistrict, Paro, in Bhutan through virtual electronic means and conduct a comprehensive study on some of the principles and practices of early year settings. Therefore, in this paper, the authors examined the practices of the ECCD center during the pandemic by focusing on Wanakha Village ECCD Centre as a study site and presented the findings to address the study objectives as mentioned earlier.

1.1 Literature Review

Early Childhood Care and Development refers to a program that facilitates the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children from birth to eight years. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) believe that the care and stimulation that a child experiences during childhood are critical to learning and development. Experts have identified three thematic areas that address the principles of early year settings: learning and pedagogy; the nature of knowledge; and assessment and documentation.

One of the basic principles in early childhood pedagogy is the 'importance of play' to children's learning and development. Children's development is catered to through a specific play time where children in groups are thoroughly engaged in activities. This play time would enable the growth of both physical and psychosocial motors. According to Krecker (1977), play and learning are the most common and necessary approaches in early education. Moyles and Adams (2001) assert that play based activities enhance the development of mature forms of knowledge, skills, and understanding. When students become more actively



involved in learning through play, they take more responsibility, creating a positive and productive environment in the classroom and demonstrating a high level of social interaction and communication skills. Froebel, too, states that play is "the work of the child" and a part of the educational process. Play is the principal means of learning in early childhood. Hence, play pedagogy incorporates cognitive, psycho-motor, emotional, and social aspects of child development.

In the UK, according to "Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)", the distinct discourse of early childhood education emphasizes the importance of young children's learning through first-hand experiences within a 'child-centered' learning environment. The curriculum of Australia known, as the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), shows that learning and pedagogy have been framed through the construction and discourse of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), which requires the genuine relationships and partnerships of families to underpin and enable productive learning to occur. The early childhood curriculum in New Zealand is known as Te Whāriki. It highlights play-based learning environments as best for children and identifies children's interests as a major source of curriculum. Soler and Miller (2003) claims that it is a highly regarded curriculum as it values the learner's autonomy, exploration, and participative style of pedagogy. In Bhutan, Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) are based more on learning through play, with a focus focuses on partnership with parents.



Figure 1 Nature of learning before the pandemic (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)



Figure 2 Nature of Learning During the Pandemic (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)



Figure 3 Welcome to the normal session after the Pandemic, year 2022
(ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)

Understanding of the nature of knowledge in early childhood settings is critical to the development of curriculum models that suffices all round needs of a child. Anning and Edwards (1999), point out that a child is a rich, strong, and competent source of knowledge. It is evident that the choice of knowledge appropriate for young learners' education should be child-centered. Hence, for a child to develop a love for learning, the interest of the child, the local funds of knowledge, the community of practice, collaborative partnerships, and the complexities of relationships in constructing knowledge must be considered.

Therefore, let us discuss the practice of different curricula in different countries. The practice of designing a curriculum for young children in the UK has been focused on following the 'interests of children' that emphasize the importance of partnership with parents, learning through play, and a balance between adult- and child-initiated activities in order to have a desirable outcome.

In Australia, the framework is essentially grounded in developmentally appropriate practice and misses the richness of a socio-cultural orientation to inform programming. However, there is no national early childhood curriculum. Nevertheless, the curriculum in Australia is evolving through research in some states and territories. Observations and planning are acting as catalyst for change from DAP domains to a broader socio-cultural framing of knowledge.

In New Zealand, the holistic approach to curriculum planning has melded with socio-cultural principles and the project approach to promote interest-based programming. The five strands – well-being, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration are considered.

In Bhutan, Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS) are based on programs and services that concern the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children from 0 to 8 years old. It is based on three strategies; family-based approaches (sound parenting), ECCD centers (Early learning opportunities), and Primary school (Enhancement of knowledge). ELDS also focuses on six domains such as physical wellbeing, health and motor development, social and emotional development, language, literacy, and communication, approaches to learning, cognition and general knowledge, and spiritual, moral, and cultural development.



Monitoring Form		Date: 3rd week	
Day, etc. week	Activities	Action taken	
1. Educational activities	1. introducing the shapes cone and heart 2. drawing the shapes cone and heart 3. colouring them	1. introducing of primary facts (Apple, mango, honey watermelon, peach, etc.) 2. Drawing of apple, mango, peach. 3. colouring them.	Done
2. Parenting session	All done	Done	Done
Submitted by Phub Uthom		Prepared by Phub Uthom Wanaka ECCO facilitator	

Figure 4 Plan for online lesson (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)

Assessment in an early childhood setting is central to the early childhood teaching and learning process to encourage teaching and learning. ECCD facilitators must collect data in a variety of forms and examine the data to determine what it tells about students' learning as well as their teaching. The National Curriculum Implementation Guide for the ECCD Center Program in Bhutan (p.44-46, 2019), states that assessment in an early childhood setting is the process of observing, recording, and documenting the work of children in terms of how they learn and communicate with the environment. From socio-cultural perspectives, documented assessment can be carried out in three ways, which are community, continuity, and competence.

To further discuss the assessment modes in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Bhutan. In the UK, assessment has been driven by the Standard Agenda, and Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), which focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic using tools like observation, where an individual child's attainment is reported annually to their parents. In Australia, each state and territory have its own assessment tools. South Australian education and some parts of Victoria draw upon Learning Stories, while in West Australian they use preschool profiles to map the literacy, numeracy, and social context of all indigenous preschool children. In New Zealand, there has been a limited tradition of assessment in early childhood education. However, they have assessment practices like learning stories, the use of portfolios, and documentation of children's experiences. In Bhutan, however, the assessment is process-oriented, formative, and collective orientation, where the learning process of children is observed and documented without an exam.

2. Objectives

To examine the Early Child Care and Development practices in the Wanakha Village Early Child Care and Development Center during the COVID-19 Pandemic Period.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Location of the study

To study the implementation, Wanakha Village ECCD Center, Naja, Paro District, was selected as a study setting. It is located 3 km away from the author's neighborhood. During the period of study, there were only 25 young learners and 1 facilitator.

3.2 Population Sample

The study focused on 25 regular young learners who studied at the center, an ECCD facilitator, and the parents of the learners. The learners were around 3-5 years old and of mixed genders. They lived in the village near the Early Child Care and Learning Center. It is located 35 km south-west of Paro District.

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3.3 Study methods

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, ECCD centers too remained closed. Nevertheless, we have had the opportunity to work closely with the ECCD facilitator at the Wanakha ECCD Center. She had been kind enough to furnish the details for the study through virtual electronic means such as Messenger and the WeChat application, which was the most convenient channel in Bhutan.

Following the protocols of COVID-19, we were constantly in touch with the ECCD facilitator through available social media platforms like Messenger and WeChat to interview her using interview questionnaires. For hours, we interacted through messages and phone calls regarding the pedagogies used in her classroom setting. We also interviewed ten parents of the learners and twenty five learners of the center. Furthermore, we collected sample lesson plans, assessment records, and recorded evidence of videos to get authentic insights into how learners were meaningfully engaged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Study tools

The researcher had prepared questionnaires and posted them through Messenger and WeChat to parents, learners, and the ECCD facilitator. The mode of communication used was both verbal and written text, as most parents and learners can't read the text.

4. Results

4.1 Observations and findings

The ECCD center was attended by 25 regular pupils with a single ECCD facilitator. Till 4th March the ECCD center functioned conventionally. It was an insightful journey to pursue a study on the functioning of the ECCD Center during the COVID-19 period. We are pleased to share some of the best practices and challenges that we have observed in this study report.

One of the important pedagogical approaches that ECCD centers across Bhutan implemented is "learning through play". Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ECCD facilitator had incorporated a variety of games and fun activities designed for the learners, which were evident from the lesson plan samples and recorded video clips.

Attention grabbers and gambits were frequently used to motivate learners, and they were also provided immediate feedback through voice chats to sustain the interests of the young minds.

The ECCD facilitator was able to reach out to the learners via chats and videos, where she demonstrated nursery rhymes and songs. It was known that learners responded well to nursery rhymes and songs.

To promote the creativity and psycho-motor skills of the learners, they were encouraged to express themselves in the form of simple drawings and paintings that were shared via Messenger and WeChat.

Regarding the assessment part, the ECCD facilitator recorded the learner's work, such as drawings and paintings, in a soft copy portfolio. To keep track of the learner's progress during the pandemic, the ECCD facilitator made a deliberate effort to visit the pupil's residence by following proper COVID-19 safety protocols.

To foster the parent's role in the child's learning, the ECCD facilitator helped the parents prepare a learning schedule. She often interviewed some parents to comprehend their child's behavior at home.

4.2 Parents concept of the Early Child Care Development Curriculum:

As per *Operational Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Development Centers* (2019), Ministry of Education, Thimphu Bhutan, education within the ECCD center should align with the individual capacities



of each child to advance in cognitive, psycho-motor, and also broaden their range of social and moral behaviors, as well as personality traits. Therefore, ECCD center are ensured to be in an environment that makes children able to experience the sense of joy, safety, love and acceptance, and freedom that is necessary for them to learn actively, which is through play. Learners are to be provided with freedom of opportunity to engage in activities preferred and chosen by them. Learners are also to be provided with activities that can be mastered with a certain amount of effort and subsequently experience the joy of success, which is free from threats such as those posed by a cane, giving instructions in a loud and harsh voice, or expecting complete silence.

But on the other hand, the ECCD facilitator is pressurized by parents' demands for their children to be able to read and write (content- focused) when they pass out from the center. Parents want their children to do homework after coming from the center. This demonstrates that the parents have the wrong concept about early childhood care and development.

To meet the demand of parents, the ECCD facilitator had to make some modifications to the curriculum, focusing more on learning areas like numeracy and language rather than the six domains mentioned in the curriculum guide. If such a trend continues, in the long run, it may have a detrimental impact on the young learners, as they are likely to develop an aversion to school life. Thus, timely intervention strategies are highly valued in this approach.



Figure 5 Some of the activities in ECCD Center (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)

4.3 Challenges during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

During normal situations, ECCD centers typically operate with a structured program designed to support the holistic development of young children from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. (half day schedule) in government ECCD centers and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Full day schedule) in private ECCD centers (National Curriculum Implementation Guide for the ECCD Center Program, 2019). The activities were designed to promote cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and creative development through free play based structured learning activities such as outdoor play, art and craft, music and movement, storytelling, and group games. Assessment and monitoring are conducted in the ECCD centers itself, which includes informal observations,



formal assessments, developmental screenings, and documentation of learning milestones that lay a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development.

But during the COVID-19 Pandemic situation, the classes had to be carried out virtually, which made it difficult for the ECCD facilitator to reach out to individual children, as learners did not own individual smart phones. In some cases, learners did not know how to operate the devices. Uneducated parents who could not provide support and guidance to their children. Network issues and financial implications to support the continuation of online classes were seen as some of the hardships associated with online learning.

Of course, there is no denial that parents play an important role in a child's learning. But in a remote setting like Wanakha Village ECCD Center, Naja, Paro in Bhutan, where the majority of parents are illiterate, parents are not competent to provide the appropriate support and guidance required to foster a child's progress and development during the COVID-19 Pandemic. So, the delivery of structured and holistic development programs through virtual classes was a great challenge for the ECCD facilitator.

4.4 Gap Between Literature and Reality

General literature, including our Bhutanese's ECCD curriculum guide, says that the focus of learning areas should be on the holistic development of learners, but in the real world, the curriculum guide is modified by the ECCD facilitator to focus on learning areas like numeracy and language to meet the demand of parents wanting their children to read, write, and learn subjects. This makes learners of a young age lose interest in attending ECCD programs, which is evident from the decline in learners from 2018 to 2020. Literature also claims that the main aim of the ECCD curriculum is to make learners ready for schooling and not to let the center be a school (*National Curriculum Implementation Guide for the ECCD Centre*). Ministry of Education, Bhutan (2019), however, in reality, learners are experiencing school life as they need to read and write alphabets, numbers, and sentences. Furthermore, the literature says that it is important for both parents and the ECCD facilitator to work collaboratively so that the ECCD facilitator gets relevant information about the child's home and family life in order to provide appropriate care and learning experiences for each learner. Whereas in reality, parents think that it is the duty of ECCD facilitators to teach their children, so they rarely give support to the ECCD centers.

4.5 Recommendations

After having done the comparative study of literature (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Bhutan) and experienced the ground reality, there are certain mismatch points in the learning areas focused on the ECCD curriculum guide and the center because of the pressure given by the parents. It is important for concern agencies to provide advocacy on Early Childhood Care and Development program to parents. Ministry of Education needs to provide frequent professional development programs to ECCD facilitators to build confidence and self-esteem to run the center effectively. Concern stakeholders also need to provide additional ECCD facilitators to the center to maintain the ratio between learners and ECCD facilitators at 15:1 as per the ECCD policy guide. Due to the lack of frequent visits of education personnel to the ECCD center for monitoring, the ECCD facilitators take the liberty of modifying the curriculum to meet the demands of the parents. Therefore, the concerned person should visit the ECCD centers and monitor the implementation of the curriculum as many times as possible.

4.6 Limitations owing to the pandemic:

As expressed earlier, the year 2020, being unprecedented, posed numerous challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the study conducted in a unique setting may have biased findings as the first-

hand information and observation were compromised. Information was mainly gathered through virtual means. Furthermore, the findings were solely based on the Wanakha Village ECCD Center, and they were subjected to a limited sample.

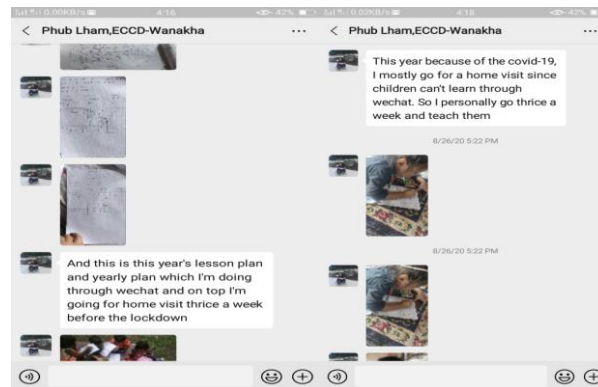


Figure 6 Lesson and Assessment (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)



Figure 7 Parenting to make aware of the importance of the ECCD Center (ECCD Facilitator, Wanakha Village ECCD Center)

5. Conclusion

It is an accepted fact that the early childhood years provide the foundation for all later learning and the development of life skills; therefore, investing in Early Child Care Education has become paramount importance before young learners join mainstream schooling. Hence, it is of utmost importance that educators and parents understand the underlying principles, such as learning and pedagogy, the nature of knowledge, and the assessment and documentation practices of early years setting. All stakeholders must prepare to mold the intellectual, emotional, and physical capacity of all children. Therefore, this study has helped us to obtain an insight on how the principles of early year setting work in a typical ECCD center in a Bhutanese context. Lastly, we remain obliged to the ECCD facilitator of Wanakha Village ECCD Center, the 25 learners of the center, and the parents who have been patient and resourceful in providing necessary support and information. Principal, Wanakha Central School, Paro in Bhutan, for granting approval to conduct an in-depth case study in the Wanakha Village ECCD Center.



Figure 8 Activities during ECCD learners' graduation day in an ECCD Center (Wanakha Central School's Facebook Page, 2023)

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