Key Features and Good Practices of Early Literacy and Math (ELM) Project in Nepal

Save the Children

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Intorduction

Background

Early literacy is defined as "the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media" (Department of Education and Skills, Dublin). Early literacy is therefore the integration of listening, speaking, reading and writing for communication and learning to learn.

Early literacy begins with learning language and looking at books in early infancy. This process continues from birth throughout the early childhood years. Literacy learning occurs during meaningful interactions, experiences with a broad range of materials, texts, digital technologies and events.

Early numeracy is more than the ability to add, subtract, multiply, divide and use numbers. This encompasses the ability to use mathematical understanding and skills to solve problems, and meet the demands of day-to-day living in complex social settings. To have this ability, a child needs to be able to think and communicate quantitatively, make sense of data, have a spatial awareness, understand patterns and sequences, and recognize the situations where mathematical reasoning can be applied to solve problems (DES, 2011).

In early childhood, the development of numeracy involves - babies hearing the language of mathematics (in play by singing number rhymes, fitting 'smaller' boxes inside 'bigger' boxes, learning that some things are the 'same' whilst others are 'different', experiencing going 'faster' or 'slower' (Epstein, 2007; NCCA, 2009).

Rationale

The rationale behind the implementation of Early Literacy and Math (ELM) project in Nepal.

- Two out of 10 children repeat Grade one every year.
- Only 60 percent of children in Grade one reach Grade eight.
- Thirty-seven percent of children in Grade two are unable to read a single word (USAID, 2014).
- National literacy rate of parents in Nepal is 67 percent, with only 57 percent of female caregivers being able to read.
- Caregivers lack skills, awareness and confidence to support children's ELM development at home.
- National parenting education curriculum lacks contents on how to strengthen ELM skills through games and other simple activities at home.

- Parents and caregivers play a big role in the learning and development of young children at home.
- It is believed that the wastage in primary education is directly linked with early childhood programs.

In this regard, Save the Children is piloting a project entitled "Testing Innovation and Generating Evidence on Emergent Literacy and Math" in Kavrepalanchok district of Nepal. The project is being implemented in 20 Early Childhood Care and Development (ECD) Centers from 2015 to 2017. The targeted beneficiaries of the project were children of 3-5 years from 20 ECD centers, caregivers, parents and ECD facilitators.

Aims of the Project

The project ambition is:

- To establish high-quality early literacy and math demonstration sites for the government and other partners, and
- To promote wider adoption and integration of ELM resources into national ECD curriculum for ECD centers and parental education programs.

Process of Implementation of the Project

The project is being implemented in close collaboration and coordination with government line agencies specifically Department of Education (DOE) and Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) at central level and District Education Office (DEO) at district level; and ECD Networks and stakeholders. Nangshal Assoication Nepal is implementiing agency in Kavre district. Similarly, Seto Gurans National Child Development Services, a resource organization on ECD, is providing the technical and professional support in the implementation of the project.

The following processes were followed in the Implementation of the Project in Kavre.

Partnering with Seto Gurans NCDS: Prior to the implementation of the project in Kavre, Save the Children partnered with Seto Gurans National Child Development Services to develop resource materials, and provide technical and professional support to implement the project. Save the Children and Seto Gurans NCDS jointly conducted the orientation and training programs.

Organization of orientation programs: In order to make the district level partners aware about the project and develop a common understanding on ELM, at the very out set of the project implementation, a two-day orientation on ELM was organized for Partner Non-Government Organization (PNGO) and DEO officials in Kavre district. The orientation helped

to increase understanding on ELM among the PNGO and DEO staffs for the implementation of program at field level. It has also helped to build DEO's ownership of ELM package (Save the Children, 2016).

Capacity development of frontline childcare workers: Several training programs were held for selected ECD center facilitators, parents and PNGO staff. Orientation programs were organized to build a good understanding on ELM, its importance and project implementation strategies among the partners. Similarly, basic and refresher training programs were organized for ECD facilitators on ELM as an embedded aspect of ECD program. It was not separate from ECD center daily activities but an integrated component in ECD curriculum. Training courses included concept, methods, practical experiences, and development of learning materials from locally available resources and establishment of six learning corners.

Mentoring and continuous support: The facilitators in ECD centers received a kind of mentoring support all through the year from the school head teachers, project program coordinators, social mobilizers, DEO Resource Persons and experts from Seto Gurans NCDS. To a great extent the provision of mentoring and continuous support system has played a big role in successful implementation of the project. Similarly, the parents under the ELM at home program received continued support from the project. Organization of Parenting Education (PE) sessions every month, provision of borrowing books for children and monitoring of parent child interaction and activities at home by facilitators and social mobilizers played a big role in bringing about changes in parents behaviors.

A Milestone of ELM Initiatives in Nepal

1. Organized a Workshop on ECD Curriculum and Resource Materials Revision IncorporatingELM in ECD Curriculum (2017)
2. Conducted a Review of ELM in ECD Curriculum (2016)

   (Consultation with CDC)
3. Developed ELM Trainers /Resource Guide Book (2016)
4. Piloted Training on ELM: ELM at ECD Center in Saptari District (2016)

   (Revision of ECD Facilitators' Training Contents)
5. Implemented ELM Package Piloting in Kavre: ELM at home and ELM at ECD center (2015)

   (A two-day orientation on ELM for PNGO and DEO—Feb. 2015; A four-day training on HEART for facilitators and PNG staffs—24-27 Aug. 2015; A five-day basic training on ELM for facilitators—20-24 Sept. 2015: A three-day materials development workshop for facilitators and parents—13-15 Dec. 2015; A follow

up follow up (Refresher/second phase) training on ELM for facilitators—13-17 Dec. 2015.)

6. Organized Consultation and Sharing of Resource Materials with DOE, CDC, NCED, ECD Promoters (2015)
7. Organized ELM TOT for District ECD focal person, PNGO Staffs (2015)
8. Organized National Level ELM MTOT (2013)

Major Features of ELM Project

The major features of ELM project include: (i) Development of resource materials, (ii) Coordination and cooperation of various stakeholders in the implementation of the program, (iii) Integration of ELM as a part of ECD curricular activities, (iv) Capacity development of all the stakeholders including facilitators and caregivers, (v) Involvement of parents/caregivers in children's learning and development at home, (vi) Promostion of mid-day meal, and (vii) Provision of continuous monitoring and support system.

A description of each component is given below.

i. Development of resource materials

In order to incorporate ELM in on-going ECD program several resource materials were developed and used. The materials included (i) Early literacy and math training cum resource guidebook, (ii) ELM resource book with activities focused in literacy and pre math activities, and science, (iii) ELM at home (includes parenting education contents with special focus on parents' role in using ELM at home, parenting education activity cards, ELM at home facilitators guide).

Early literacy and math training cum resource guide has been developed with reference to Save the Children's training manual and ELM at home material. This learning material was finalized after series of discussion with educationist, ECD experts and DOE officials. The resource materials are being used in ECD centers.

ELM at home focuses to enhance emergent literacy and math skills of children at home environment with their parents. There are eight activity cards included with ELM components. Both literate and illiterate parents can easily use the activities following the pictures as well as directions.

The ELM at home contents and activities align well with existing Parenting Education packages.

The materials developed were thoroughly reviewed by educationists, ECD experts and DOE officials before they were used in piloting in ECD centers.

ii. Coordination and cooperation of various stakeholders in implementation

Nangshal - a local level non-governmental organization implemented the project. The project is running in close collaboration and coordination with government line agencies such as Department of Education (DOE) and Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) at the central level, District Education Office (DEO) at district level, and ECD networks and stakeholders at the local level. Seto Gurans National Child Development Services, a resource organization on ECD, provided the technical and professional support in the implementation of the project. Moreover, the local civil society organizations such as Citizen Awareness Center and journalists were also involved in monitoring the project activities.

iii. Integration of ELM as a part of ECD curriculum

One of the major features of the project was the integration of early literacy that included pre-reading, pre-writing activities as well as pre-math skills into regular ECD classroom activities. The major goal of ECD national curriculum (2006) is to "impart direct or indirect learning experiences through various means of educational activities as per the children's social settings". Likewise, ECD center aims to provide opportunity to improve physical, social, cognitive and emotional skills and also readiness for grade one education. It incorporated the ELM elements in the learning competencies. It provides an opportunity for integration of ELM more prominently.

iv. Capacity development of all stakeholders including facilitators and caregivers

For the purpose of capacity development of project implementers at the district and local levels series of orientation and training programs were organized by the project.

A list of the orientation and training programs organized is as follows:

(i) Orientation on ELM for DEO officials, school head teachers and Nangshal staff members (2-days)

(ii) ELM basic training for ECCD facilitators (5 days)

(iii) Materials development training for facilitators (3 days)

(iv) ELM at home training for facilitators (5 days)

(v) HEART training for facilitators (4 days)

(vi) ELM and ELM at home refresher training for facilitators (5 days)

(vii) Orientation on HEART for parents (1 day)

(viii) Orientation on ELM for SMC/HT and facilitators (2 days).

As an embedded aspect of ECD program, the selected ECD center facilitators were trained on ELM. It was not separated from ECD center daily activities but included as an integral part of ECD curriculum.

Training courses included concept, methods, practical experiences and development of learning materials from locally available resources.

For the purpose of capacity development of facilitators and other stakeholders -(i) organized inter district study visit, and (ii) regularly organized facilitators' mobile meetings.

v. Involvement of parents/caregivers in children's learning and development at home

Another unique feature of the project was that it heavily emphasized the involvement of parents and caregivers in the education and development of their children at home. Importance of parental involvement in care and education of young children has been well emphasized in the educational plans and policies in Nepal. However, no concerted efforts have been made till date to directly involve parents in their children's education and development. So the project developed various strategies to increase the meaningful involvement of parents and caregivers in the education and development of young children at home. Promoting parenting practices that stimulate and support early literacy and math skills at home is one of the important features of ELM project.

vi. Promotion of mid-day meal

The project not only incorporated ELM in ECD center's daily schedule but also supported the ECD centers to launch mid-day meal program as a part of total ELM program package. Under this program the project provided a tiffin box to each child, discouraged the parents and caregivers to give junk food to their children, and encouraged them to provide homemade food items that have more nutritional values. In some ECD centers the schools themselves managed to provide mid-day meal by preparing in the school.

vii. Provision of continuous monitoring and support system

One of the strongest features of the project was provision of continuous monitoring and support system in place all through the project period. Various stakeholders including DEO, project-implementing partners, local school head teachers and technical experts from Save the Children and Seto Gurans National Child Development Services (NCDS) closely monitored the activities of the project and provided necessary support to the facilitators, parents and project implementers at the local level. Similarly, organization of monthly mobile meetings proved to be an effective mechanism of providing continuous support to the facilitators.

Purpose of documenting good practices

The documentation of good practices of ELM project piloted in Kavre is expected to be a valuable reference material for all those who are interested and involved in early childcare, education and development in Nepal. Specifically, it is expected to be useful for:

- Policy makers to include ELM contents as well as pedagogic practices in ECD curriculum and packages of Parental Education;
- Teacher training institutions to incorporate ELM related contents in training programs;
- Local government bodies to include ELM for holistic development of children in the plans and policies formulated at local level;
- International and national NGOs to include ELM in their ECD programs; and
- The interested stakeholders to scale up ELM project.

Processes Followed in Identifying and Documentation of ELM Good Practices

Prior to the documentation of good practices efforts were made to identify the topics of good practices. For this purpose (i) a comprehensive review of ELM documents that included unpublished evaluation report was made, (ii) a list of discussion guidelines was developed based on the review of the documents, and (iii) series of discussions were held with relevant project managers of Save the Children, District Education Officer and School Supervisors/Kavre, experts from Seto Gurans NCDS, and Program Coordinator and Documentation officer of Nangshal Association Nepal.

Based on the discussions, a list of topics of promising and good practices implemented in the Early Literacy and Math Skills project was developed. An observation form and interview schedules were then developed for children, ECD facilitators, parents/caregivers, school head teachers and School Management Committee members. The documentation team visited three locations- Mahankal ECD center, Patlekhet, Dhulikhel Municipality; Himalaya ECD center, Roshi Rural Municipality and Budhanilkantha ECD center, Budhakhani, Mahabharat Rural Municipality, Kavre and necessary information was collected by using the observation form and interview schedules. Moreover, discussions were held with selected children, ECD facilitators, parents/caregivers and school head teachers. Efforts were also made to find out the reasons behind considering each topic as a good practice, and available facts, information and examples were collected by taking photographs and narrative stories.

A description of Topics of Good Practices Including Case Stories

Based on the review of ELM related documents including evaluation report; discussions with district level project implementing partners and local community level stakeholders, observation of ECD centers, parenting education session, facilitators' mobile meeting, and in depth interviews with selected individuals (children, parents, facilitators, DEO staff), the following topics have been identified as promising and good practices of ELM project being implemented in Kavre.

Improvement in ECD Center Management System and Early Childcare and Education Practices

Both the district and local level stakeholders mentioned that, as a cumulative effect of various project activities and affirmative actions taken, there has been a visible positive transformation on early childcare and education practices in ECD centers as well as at homes covered by the project. The major project activities include orientation and training programs for local community people, parents, caregivers and facilitators; provision of frequent monitoring of ECD centers from different organizations; refurbishment of ECD classrooms and establishment of learning corners; availability of various resource materials for facilitators, caregivers and parents; and availability of Mid-day meal and children's access to learning materials both in ECD center and home.

ECD Center before ELM project- Himalaya ECD

A facilitator during the interview mentioned, "the school authorities, Head Teachers (HT) and teachers earlier used to give less importance to ECD class and always gave priority to higher grades. For instance, when there was absence of a teacher, I had to leave my class and teach the upper grade students; but such a practice has been reversed now. The school authorities, HT and all other teachers now give more priority to ECD class and now I do not have to teach in upper grades even when there is absence of primary grade teachers." She further mentioned, "After the implementation of ELM project the school HT and teachers are frequently visiting my ECD class and they provide me support and suggestions for improvement". The Assistant Head Teacher of Himalya School Sipali, said, "ECD experienced children are very cooperative, helpful and resilient than the children who do not have experience of ECD class."

It was also evident from DEO officials, Kavre. The Assistant District Education Officer and Resource Person interviewed expressed their views in line with the facilitator. The resource person who has visited several ECD centers covered by the project said, "By representing District Education Office, Kavre, I have been involved with this project from the very initial period of

ECD Center after ELM project-Himalaya ECD

project implementation. I was involved in organizing facilitator training programs, monitoring ECD centers, and parental education sessions. I have been closely observing all the activities being implemented under the project. With my experience, based on what I have observed and what I have experienced over last two years I would say that the project has been successful to a great extent not only in introducing ELM components but also by changing the whole scenario of ECD centers and early care and education of young children in the project areas." He further said, "The project should not be terminated; rather it has to be expanded to other areas and cover all 496 ECD Centers being run in Kavre district". In the same line, the Assistant District Education Officer interviewed mentioned, "Besides introducing ELM components, the project has been successful in changing the behaviors of the facilitators, school authorities, parents and local community people. It has totally transformed a kind of neglected, dull, untidy, un-stimulating atmosphere of the ECD centers into a more pleasant, clean, attractive environment of the ECD centers". He further said, "In spite of government's several attempts to establish learning corners in ECD centers, most of the centers in Kavre lack learning corners but in all 20 ECD centers covered by ELM project there are learning corners. They are all attractive. Learning corners have also made the classroom environment stimulating for children."

An outdoor ELM activity: Children learning about shapes- Janta ECD

Transformative role of ELM Training Programs for ECD Facilitators and Parents/Caregivers

Training empowers teachers and facilitators to perform their duties and responsibilities better than before. It carries transformative skills in facilitators and teachers who are bearers of change. Training refers to transfer of skills and knowledge, which is subject oriented, and aims at improvement in specific knowledge, skills and attitude (Meyerson, 2013, Rajbhandari, 2015). Teachers/facilitators need to be qualified to receive employment in the School/ECD center. In Nepal, some of the major mandatory criteria for becoming an ECD teacher/facilitator are 90 hours basic training, having school level education, married and local resident (DOE, 2006).

The facilitators working in ECD centers covered by ELM project have received additional training in Early Literacy and Math (ELM), Healing and Education through Art (HEART) and Development of Low Cost Learning Materials at the local level. In this regard, a resource person from DEO who has been closely monitoring the project activities said, "ELM training has remarkably improved knowledge, attitude and skills of ECD facilitators. I have noticed change in their behaviors. They have become more polite with children; they interact well with children and are helping children to learn math and words in meaningful ways." He also appreciated the contribution of Seto Gurans National Child Development Services in ensuring the quality of training provided to the facilitators. This organization was responsible in providing technical support for organizing the training programs, and on-the-spot technical support to the project implementers in the district during the entire project period. The facilitators were trained and mentored frequently by trainers, ELM supervisors and social mobilizers. The same Resource Person further said, "The quality of training was good enough to change the traditional teaching techniques. It has well instilled ELM concept and skills in the minds of ECD facilitators and incorporated ELM contents into the daily activities of ECD centers. Prior to the implementation of ELM project, the facilitators' teaching techniques did not involve any sort of play. They were familiar with such techniques only in theoretical terms. However, after ELM training they became confident to use such methods. And they are easily involving children in learning ELM contents by applying play." A facilitator also said, "ELM training remarkably enhanced my knowledge, skill and changed attitude for quality improvement ".

In this context, a facilitator said, "I always focus on my duties towards helping children to learn in my ECD center. I try to properly manage the classroom, day meal and support parents. I also perform my best, as if I'm doing for my own kids." Regarding her remuneration she was happy to receive some extra incentives. In this regard, she said, "After the ELM training, school management is providing me Rupees 3,500 per month in addition to my regular salary for my work".

The transformation of training contents and methods was vividly visible in the facilitators' performance and teaching learning processes in ECD classroom. During the observation of ECD centers, children were found involved in interactive reading, singing theme songs, telling stories and learning math-by sorting objects, classifying various flowers and writing numbers. The children were also found engaged in dolls play, drawings, coloring, and participating in discussions. It reveals that the facilitators have become competent enough to conduct daily activities of ECD center by incorporating ELM contents based on ECD curriculum.

As a result of facilitators' training and training of parents, there has also been a significant improvement in the relationship between school and parents. The meaningful interactions and discussions that took place in PE sessions were considered highly successful in helping children learn language and math at home.

Learning Corners/Areas

In an ECD center/classroom, learning corners are created for children to play, work, draw, color, read and write based on their interest. Each learning corner consists of relevant learning and play materials. Depending on the curriculum and planning of the facilitator, learning corners are created. There could be different learning corners such as science corner, language or book corner, math corner, music corner, drama or puppet corner, blocks corner and creative arts corner. Learning corners in the classroom provide opportunity for each child to be engaged, to experiment, play and learn according to his/her individual interest and capacity.

learning corner (Creative)

In the observed ECD centers almost all children were found engaged in different learning corners. In this regard, a parent said, "My daughter enjoys holding baby doll on her back and acts like me. I don't have play materials in my home. So I borrow books and play materials from the learning corners".

The project has encouraged the school authorities and facilitators to establish learning corners in ECD classroom. All the ECD centers covered by the project have established six learning corners, namely (i) science corner, (ii) math corner, (iii) book or language corner, (iv) block or construction corner, (v) creative and art corner, and (vi) role play corner.

Each learning corner has adequate number of play and learning materials. The available materials include the commercially purchased materials as well as the locally made low cost or no cost materials. Mostly, the locally made materials included corncobs, pebbles, seeds, bottle caps,

learning corner (Language)

learning corner (Math)

Competent facilitator, good teacher

Rajani Tamang, a resident of Roshi Rural Municipality ward no. 6 (Sipali Chilaune), is 32 years old and she is a facilitator of Himalaya Child Development Centre. She has been working in this centre for 12 years. She has two children. Her first child is physically disabled– who is studying in the 3rd grade in school. Rajani has passed the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) this year.

Rajani has undergone training of all sorts given by the District Education Office – including the basic and refresher trainings on early child development centre. Besides, she has also taken part in the training organized by Nangshal Association with the technical support of Seto Gurans National Child Development Service and the financial support of Save the Children. The trainings include *Healing and Education through ART training*, *Early Literacy and Math Basic training, Early Literacy and Math refresher training* and *ELM at Home*. There are 22 children enrolled in her child development centre (13 girls and 9 boys). She runs class from 10 AM to 3.30 PM.

According to her, before being trained through *Healing and Education through ART training, Early Literacy and math Basic training, Early Literacy and Math refresher training and ELM at Home* training, she used to soothe (appease) the children, teach them ABCD (alphabets) and क, ख, ग, घ in traditional style. She had a difficulty in retaining the children due to this practice, as she expressed. She said that children used to cry a lot, quarrel and were not willing to come to ECD centre. She could not comfortably ensure their stay in the centre for the period of four and half hours. As she said, she was not aware about the technical aspects of running the ECD centre such as the daily working table, learning according to the content matter, preparation and use of learning materials, management of learning corner, etc.

After the training, she was able to manage the learning corners in the centre. She understood how child friendly classroom can be prepared. She also learnt to prepare the materials and use them for children's learning. Nowadays she runs her class according to the daily work plan, and learning activities are organized according to the contents of teaching in her class. The training made it easy to run activities after understanding the feelings of the children. She said that clarity of understanding is developed among children by using the local materials in the class.

After early literacy and mathematical knowledge training, she felt easy to engage the children in recognizing the alphabets. She clarified that children's competence in speaking has developed more and they can easily recognized numbers, and there has been a smooth development of the ability of recognizing shapes among children. Children can easily grasp the mathematical skills like classifying things, comparing them etc. It has also been easier to develop the skill of storytelling in the children, she explains. According to her, the activity of Today's Letter and Today's Number (आजको अक्षर म, आजको अंक २) (game) has helped a lot to enable the children recognize the alphabets and numbers within a week.

bottles, cups, various spices, grains, pieces of clothes, and paintbrushes. The materials purchased from the market include building blocks, letter and number cubes, puzzles, animal toys, and children's pictorial storybooks.

The facilitators, local school teachers and in some cases the parents were involved in the preparation of local materials available in learning corners. In the process of preparing locally available learning materials, the facilitators and children worked together in coloring some of the materials like coloring seeds and cutting the corncob into small pieces. With regard to purchasing the learning and playing materials, the project provided some grants to ECD centers to buy those materials.

Learning corners/areas in an ECD center (Mahankal ECD Center, Patlekhet)

While observing ECD classes the children were found going to different learning corners spontaneously and were found engaged in individual and group work. Children were found happy and accustomed to work and play at different learning corners. An hour-long time allotted in daily schedule for children to play and work at learning corners was found as the most pleasant and productive time for children.

The discussions with the school head teachers, facilitators and other stakeholders revealed several benefits of learning corners.

According to the facilitators, the establishment of learning corners has provided an opportunity to all children to play at a time in different learning corners one after another. It also helped them to easily deal with children in the classroom. It made the facilitators' job easy. It has also helped the facilitators to identify the individual interest of each child and plan lessons accordingly. The facilitators also found it useful for them to observe the activities of children and maintain individual child's portfolio records.

Children are reading story book

With regard to the situation of learning corners in ECD centers covered by the ELM project, the Assistant DEO categorically explained, "The government is well aware about the importance of establishing learning corners in ECD centers as well as in early primary grades. The government is also providing certain amount of money as annual grants to establish learning corners to each and every ECD center. However, none of the ECD centers in Kavre has established learning corners due to the lack of proper monitoring and effective support system. I visited many ECD centers covered by ELM project and all of them have established

six learning corners. The learning corners have in fact changed the classroom management system. It has changed the look of the centers. It made the centers more child-friendly, attractive and stimulating."

The establishments of learning corners have also helped to meet the indicators related to learning materials as mentioned in the National Minimum Standards of ECD Center (MOE, 2010).

Strong Monitoring System

There is a lack of provision of monitoring system of ECD centers in the country in general. But interestingly, in ELM project sites monitoring of ECD centers as well as its ELM at home program was found one of the most successful endeavors in the implementation of ELM project. The relevant school head teacher, social mobilizer and program officer of the project were involved in monitoring ECD centers and ELM at home program on regular basis.

Various stakeholders at district level such as officials from District Education Office and District Development Committee, Kavre, journalists, Program Officers from Save the Children Kavre,

Joint monitoring (Officials from different agencies)

Sharing meeting with monitoring team at Janta ECD Center

and officials from Nangshal (the local project implementing partner) were involved in conducting joint monitoring of the project activities.

A facilitator informed that the school head teacher, social mobilizer and project staff are regularly monitoring her ECD classroom activities. She also informed that the individuals involved not only observe her activities but also provide valuable suggestions to her for further improvement, and some have even helped her prepare some local learning materials for children. At the initial period she found being observed a bit uncomfortable but afterwards she gradually became used to it. More importantly she mentioned, "Later I came to know that they are not only judging my work but they have come to help me to improve my work. And nowadays I don't feel

Facilitator Sharada BK shares her learning corner experience

Sharada BK is a facilitator working in the ECD center run by Mahankal Lower Secondary School. She is 26 years old and a local resident of Patlekhet. She has been serving in the center for a year.

She has received a 12-day training on early childhood development. There are 19 children in her ECD center; among them 11 are girls and 8 boys.

She says "It was difficult for me to keep the children in the classroom for three hours a day. Children were 'taught' traditionally – mathematics and science were taught during the scheduled classes. But after the training, I set up learning corners in the classroom; then it was easier for me to manage children's learning. As children can go to the learning corners they wish to play, color, and talk together, they have begun to learn with fun. I can easily recognize each child's individual and collective interest. It also helps me make lesson plan. I consider interest of the children and engage them for participation in activities accordingly. I can observe and assess their personal capability and achievement by watching their activities in the learning corners, and then keep their personal records accordingly. This has been easy after establishing the learning corners.

uncomfortable; rather I feel good whenever there is someone observing my class." This was one of the positive outcomes of monitoring system in place. During the observation it was found that a primary school teacher entered into the ECD class, and she started to play with some children, while other children were busy on their own.

The Assistant District Education Officer (who was interviewed during the process of documentation of good practices) said, "Monitoring is lacking in other ECD centers in the district. We are aware about how important is monitoring for improving the quality of delivery of ECD services to young children. But somehow we are still unable to conduct monitoring of all the ECD centers being run in the district." Regarding the monitoring system of ELM project he further said, "I have visited and monitored nine out of the 20 ECD centers covered by ELM project. I observed that the facilitators have started to feel more responsible due to monitoring from different sectors and different people. The project has demonstrated how monitoring is important in promoting ECD centers." With regard to the joint monitoring system he further said, "Along with Resource Persons from DEO, Local Development Officer, program officers from District Development Committee, staffs from Nangshal Association Nepal and journalists, I took part in conducting joint monitoring of ECD centers and ELM project activities."

Regarding the benefits of the joint monitoring he further said, "What I found was that it has not only made the facilitators and local authorities more responsible towards their job but it has also given an opportunity to various stakeholders to learn more about ECD, ELM and importance of investing on ECD. The awareness that it has created among the relevant district level officials has been instrumental in raising voice towards the importance of giving priority to ECD at different fronts in the district. There is a strong demand and people are lobbying for sustaining the project activities and expanding it to other parts of the district."

Mobile Meeting: A Continuous Support for Capacity Development of Facilitators

One of the unique provisions made by ELM project is organization of the facilitators' mobile meeting. Mobile meetings are held once a month to discuss about the best ideas, new initiatives taken and to address the issues faced by the facilitators. Based on the geographical locations of the ECD centers, all the 20 centers are clustered into 4 groups for organizing mobile meetings. Once a month the facilitators from each cluster gather at one ECD center on rotational basis. The duration of a meeting ranges from two to three hours. During the meeting the facilitators interact among themselves, share their experiences, discuss their problems and learn from each other.

Mobile meeting (Discussing on pertinent issues)

Each meeting proceeds with five different stages — (i) discussing the theme of the month; (ii) sharing the children's learning materials developed by each participant and developing a new set (of materials) for all as well as discussion on their use, (iii) observing the classroom and teaching learning practices, (iv) discussing any issues, challenges, problems faced, and finding out solutions; and then (v) summarizing, winding up and fixing the agenda for next meeting.

In the mobile meeting held every month, the facilitators discuss on a specific topic or theme. The major themes or topics discussed are: Different behaviors of children and how to deal with those children; Use of activity cards related to literacy, math, science and ELM core activities; Maintain children's Continuous Evaluation Form; Theme-based material production; Use of rhymes, songs and games and facilitation techniques; Preparation of theme-based big book; Preparation and use of daily lesson plan and annual theme calendar; and Organization of PE

They openly present their ideas and opinions including the problems that they encounter while working in their respective ECD center and community. They also discuss how they tried to resolve their problems and also the success they have achieved. The facilitators attending a meeting said that they had to face many challenges in convincing parents to secure their involvement and support in proper care and education of their children at home. But, by learning from each other, they were able to sort out the problem to a great extent. The facilitators were found discussing on various matters—e.g. about the relationship between various stakeholders, relationship among parents, head teachers, teachers and facilitators.

The second regular agenda of the meeting is related to the preparation of a new learning material for children. They all bring the materials they developed, and they spend time in preparing similar materials. They also discuss how to use the materials for child's learning. It gave a feeling to all the facilitators as if the event was the continuation of refresher training rather than just a meeting. The facilitators found this as one of the most exciting and encouraging parts of the mobile meeting.

The project program coordinator and social mobilizers also have attended the meeting in most cases. The meeting also took advantage of communicating important information, upcoming events, deadlines etc. to the facilitators from the project. Moreover, it gave an opportunity for every participant to raise their concerns and discuss on any issues, challenges and problems faced. The participants not only raise the issues but also try to find out the solutions collectively.

During the mobile meeting the facilitators also observe the ECD classroom of the host facilitator. The facilitators interviewed have also mentioned this activity as one of the most exciting and encouraging events of the meeting. A facilitator said, "When I host the meeting I feel so proud to show my work to my colleagues. Similarly, when we go to the other ECD centers, they also feel the same. I have learned a lot by visiting the other ECD centers while attending the mobile meetings." When asked her to give some examples of what she has learned, she further said, "They are mainly related to development of local learning materials. While visiting the ECD center of one of my colleagues, I saw her using paper flowers. I learned that skill from her, and I have also prepared and used paper flowers in my ECD center." Another facilitator said, "One of the benefits of the mobile meeting is that previously most of us were hesitant to speak in the meetings, especially with new people. But after attending the meetings we are now confident to speak even with anyone." The same facilitator further said, "The mobile meetings have also helped us to add more teaching and learning materials in our ECD centers. Earlier, every facilitator used to bring one material as a gift to the host ECD center. But later we started to prepare children's learning materials in the meetings. This has contributed to have adequate teaching and learning materials in the ECD classrooms."

Usually the host facilitator runs the proceedings of the meeting; and she also summarizes the discussions held and wind up the meeting after they decide the theme for the next meeting.

The facilitators interviewed have also mentioned that they are committed to continue the mobile meeting even after the termination of the project. As one of the facilitators remarked, "It's less expensive but it gives much." Another facilitator said, "We have made commitments to continue most of the reform programs that we have initiated including the "mobile meetings" at different forums/fronts. But if we don't keep our words in the upcoming days, that would be a shame on us."

Mobile meeting of ECD facilitators

Schedule of a meeting

S.N.	Activities	Method	Time
1	Observe the ECD and Sharing of Status of own ECD	Observation, sharing and discussion	1 hr
2	Follow up last action plan	Sharing and Discussion	50 min
3	Practice on ELM class activities	Discussion and Group Work	30 min
4	Personal Action Plan	Individual plan	30 min
5	Closing of the Meeting		10 min

Development and Use of Resource Materials

Availability of resource materials that support learning plays a big role in successful implementation of any reform program including childcare and education program. One of the prominent efforts made in the implementation of ELM project is related to development and use of resource materials. Before the implementation of ELM project Save the Children conducted a baseline survey of the project site and ECD centers. The survey result showed that the ECD centers lack basic required resource materials including reading materials for facilitators, learning materials for children and non-existence of learning corners in the classroom. The classrooms were not stimulating for young children and were not properly managed.

Learning to count by using locally made learning materials

The resource materials include reference materials and teaching aids for facilitators, learning and play materials for children; and supporting reference materials for parents are crucial for implementing ELM and ECD program both at home and school. Keeping this in mind, in order to support children in their learning and development, ELM project has produced several quality resource materials targeted to ECD center operation, facilitators, parents and children.

A description of the major resource materials developed and made available to each ECD center and families covered by the project is given below.

❖ *Facilitators' resource materials*

Several resource materials for ECD facilitators were developed and made available to all the facilitators and ECD centers covered by the project. The resource materials for facilitators include: (i) ELM Resource Book for trainers and facilitators (in Nepali), (ii) ELM in Child Development (in Nepali), (iii) Daily Diary Planning Book, and (iv) Posters (Theme calendar, Daily calendar of ECD center, Annual syllabus, etc.)

❖ *Parents' resource materials*

Resource materials were developed also for parents to help them understand and facilitate them to support children at home in their learning and development. Such materials included (i) ELM at home Manual (ii) Parenting activity cards, (iii) Children's pictorial storybooks, and (iv) Playing materials.

Locally made learning materials (Colored seeds)

❖ *Children's learning and playing materials*

Children's learning and playing materials included both the commercially purchased materials from the market as well as locally made low cost or no cost materials.

Locally made learning materials (Pebbles)

Making various resource materials available to ECD centers, parents and children was considered as one of the good practices in the implementation of ELM project by most of the respondents representing NGOs, DEO, school supervisors and ECD facilitators interviewed in the process of documentation of ELM project. Many of them believed that the development of resource materials is a key to the success of the project. The resource materials such as ELM resource book and ELM at home manual have helped to develop a common understanding among various stakeholders and implement the program without any ambiguity.

The poor situations of ECD center/classroom in terms of availability of resource materials and management of the centers/classrooms as revealed by the baseline survey have been completely reversed after the ELM project implementation. The observation of ECD centers revealed that the classrooms have been completely transformed after the implementation of ELM project. There are now plenty of resource materials available for the facilitators and adequate number and types of learning and playing materials for children. Moreover, establishment of learning corners in all ECD centers has created a good stimulating learning environment in all the ECD centers covered by the project. On observation it was found that the learning materials were well managed in the ECD centers.

Locally made learning materials (Bottle caps)

Locally made paint brush

Facilitators were found following the daily schedule based on ECD curriculum with focus on ELM and holistic aspect of child development. A facilitator shared her experience with smiling mood, "Earlier (prior to the implementation of ELM), it was difficult to engage children for three hours. But after getting the training in ELM, I started to follow the daily calendar and maintained daily diary book, which made it very easy for me to engage children in various activities."

Regarding the use and benefit of daily calendar the facilitator of Mahankal ECD center (showing the daily calendar hanged on the wall) said, "When I didn't have this calendar it used to be so difficult to pass three hours because I didn't know what specific activities I am supposed to conduct. Now, I always refer to the calendar and I don't even notice how quickly the time passes."

All the facilitators interviewed mentioned that the Daily Diary Book is useful to plan and conduct activities according to the plan; it is effective and practical. All the facilitators are maintaining it. Supervisors and social mobilizers are also monitoring it.

Parental Involvement

A parent helping her child to learn at home

Parental involvement is crucial in every child's development. Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. Their efforts are characterized by their involvement in young children's education as a fundamental right and obligation (ICDI, 2012). Parenting refers to the attitudes, values, and practices of parents in raising young children (UNICEF, 2006). One of the major objectives of ELM project was to involve parents in early learning activities at home. In order to achieve this objective parents are trained by involving them in parenting education (PE) sessions. The ECD facilitators organized PE sessions in the presence of ECD trainers, supervisors and social mobilizers. In order to make the facilitators competent to organize PE sessions, they were also provided parenting training focused on ELM at home. Parents of the children enrolled in ECD centers attend the PE sessions organized at ECD centers once a month.

A parental education session- Mahankal ECD Center

Training the parents on ELM was one of the factors that motivated and empowered parents.

Parents involved in the program were playing the role as advocating agents in the community. In PE program there are altogether eight sessions related to ELM. Parents read book for children and interact with them. According to the facilitators, parents are very active and they talk and read books for children. Parents borrow storybooks for their children. A parent from Himalaya ECD center, Roshi said, "The facilitator is very cooperative. She visits us to support at home. She also enquires about the reasons when my boy misses his class." Another parent of the same ECD center said, "The facilitator is the one who taught us all the skills needed to prepare children for reading and writing by using play methods. When I miss the steps my daughter corrects me now. So my daughter and myself are benefitting from the ECD program." She further said that parents meeting should be continued.

A child learning to count at home

A view of PE session- Bhumeshowr ECD

over the involvement of parents. One of them said that parents' support is incredible. These parents are bringing their children to ECD centers regularly, providing day meal to them as per the menu suggested by ECD center, and participating in the PE sessions on regular basis. They are showing positive attitude towards the program.

PE played a big role in supporting children to learn at home. The lessons learned during the PE sessions have been practiced at home. There has been increase in parents' visit to ECD centers; and there have been more positive interactions between the facilitator and parents. The facilitators also mentioned that the parent have become more responsible.

Putting children and parents together in PE session was found as one of the most effective ways of providing hands-on-experiences in taking care of children properly and involving them in ELM related learning activities at home.

Coordination and Involvement of Various Stakeholders

Involvement of various stakeholders in the implementation of the project was found one of the good practices of ELM project. The project was implemented by Nangshal Association Nepal, a non-government organization. However, its partner organizations included several other important agencies at the central, district and local community levels. The project was well managed and implemented by coordinating the activities of major stakeholders responsible for promoting early childhood education and development.

At central level, a techincal team was formed by involving the representatives from Department of Education (DOE), National Center for Educational Development (NCED), Curriculum Development Center (CDC), Save the Children (SC) Nepal and Seto Gurans National Child Development Services and ECD experts. The members of the team worked together in designing the project and necessary program packages by forming a techincal team.

At district level, District Development Committee, District Education Office, District Child Welfare Board, District Level Women and Children's Office, Save the Children's District office and civil society organizations such as Citizen Awareness Center and journalists were brought together. A two-day orientation program was organized at district level to familiarize the district level stakeholders with ELM project, its objectives, strategies and expected outcomes as well as to seek their involvement in the implementation of the project.

Anju revels in role play

Five years old Anju goes to Mahankal ECD centre. In her family there are three sisters, her mother and father. The activities she likes to do the most in the ECD centre are playing with the play materials, making garland, singing, drawing and coloring. As she is not very physically active, she likes playing and doing other activities sitting at certain place. She becomes happy to wear the garland made by herself. The string of small pieces in the garland is her favorite thing. In the same way, she enjoys playing *Bhadakuti* (play with kitchen utensils). She exactly imitates her mother's style of cooking, feeding the family members, and arranging the kitchen utensils. She also enjoys listening to stories, producing the sound of animals, knowing how many eyes, nose, legs and ears some animals have, and acting the roles of different family members.

Anju likes reading with her sisters at home and helping her mother in the kitchen like bringing firewood to the kitchen, and preparing vegetables. Doing these things, Anju has learnt counting (how many pieces of firewood she brought). Using *Nanglo (a flat round woven tray made of bamboo)*, she learned that it is a round-shaped object. She collects sticks with her mother and learns counting. Along with counting, she isolates big and small sticks. She arranges the corncobs in the same way, and keeps the larger leaves separate from smaller ones. She counts pebbles; and plays in sand by making different figures and shapes.

As learned from ECD centre, she is keeping good hygiene habits - she brushes her teeth in the morning, washes her face, and hands before and after eating or after touching dirty things.

A story of Kabita Humagain (a parent)

Kabita, 30 sends ther daughter Sujata to the ECD center. She has her own farmland where she grows tomatoes and other seasonal vegetables. When Sujata was just two, she carried Sujata on her back and walked 30 minutes to drop her at the ECD center. Kabita's household chores and the farm kept her so busy that she could hardly find the time to care for her young daughter. This year Sujata has been formally enrolled in the ECD and walks alongside her mother to go to the center. The road is narrow and slippery and passes through a river but the mother and the daughter duo enjoys walking together to the center.

Kabita is very happy with her child's desire to go to the ECD center every day. She prepares day meal for her daughter and puts it in the tiffin-box. She not only cares but also takes interest in the daily activities of ECD. She never misses the parenting training session. The NGO staff member appreciated the devotion that Kabita has towards care and education of her child in spite of her of household chores.

Everyday she discusses with her child about the daily activities in the center. As learned in parental sessions/meetings, she interacts with her child during cooking, bedtime, gardening and tending the cattle. She reads book for her child at bedtime. In the time of visit to her house and discussion with her, she expressed her satisfaction towards the good behavior and hard work of the facilitator, and better learning environment of the ECD center. She also expressed a sense of satisfaction towards implementing parenting education program and initiating ELM at home.

At local community level, the project was implemented through the community schools where the ECD centers were already running. Here again, the project activities were implemented in coordination with Village Development Committee, School Management Committee (SMC), Parent Teacher Association, Village Child Protection Committee, Mothers Group and Child Clubs of the particular schools. Bringing together all the stakeholders for the cause of early childhood development is considered as a good practice. The multi-stakeholder involvement in initiating reform program as in the case of ELM project in Kavre, on one hand, keeps all the stakeholders aware about the need for concerted efforts in promoting ECD; and on the other hand, it directly helps to sustain the program.

Involvement of central level agencies in the implementation of ELM project helps to incorporate the successful ELM contents into the national ECD and parental education curricula.

As a result of the involvement of relevant stakeholders at district level, there has been a growing demand especially from DDC and DEO to expand ELM project in all other ECD centers.

Assistant DEO's speaks about Monitoring ECD Centre

According to the Assistant District Education Officer of Kavre district, joint monitoring has been effective in program implementation. Having worked for two years in the district, he has been involved in the various activities of Early Literacy and Mathematics project including trainings and being in the monitoring committee. Out of the 20 centres in which the project has been launched, he himself has monitored nine.

Involving people from different walks of life (including those from District Development Committee, District Education Office, civil society, and mass media) in the monitoring has yielded lots of benefits. According to him, this attempt has raised awareness about ECCD and made the concerned people more responsible by making them more active in their roles.

Due to joint monitoring, all the ECD stakeholders have got the opportunity to know and observe the improvements brought about by the project in the district. It is as a result of this monitoring that voices have been raised from different sectors for the extension of this project to other ECD centres located at different parts of the district and for continuation of the improvements initiated by the project in the ECD centres where it was implemented.

At local level, a good coordination was found among the SMC members, head teacher, teachers, parents and ECD facilitators. All they were involved in some way in implementing the program basically in the areas of infrastructure and children's learning material development, running mid-day meal, monitoring the program and implementing ELM at home program. Now, coming to the end of the project implementation, many stakeholders both at the district and local level are more concerned about sustainability of the project and its expansion to other ECD centers. It has been reported that some of the local government agencies and municipalities have also allocated some funds for ECD.

A School Management Committee member mentioned that they are concerned about the sustainability of the project. When asked about how it could be sustained, she replied, "Well. We have discussed about this in our meetings several times. We are first planning to request Save the Children to support for continuing the program for a few more years. If that is not possible, then we will look for some other organizations to support us. Even if we couldn't get any support from outside, we are committed to continue the reform programs initiated by the ELM project."

At district level, DEO officials have become more concerned about how to sustain the good practices of ELM project and expand the project to other locations.

At national level, conduction of a review on Emergent Early Literacy and Pre Math: The Gap to be bridged through ECD curriculum; Organized of a two-day long workshop on Early Childhood Development (ECD) Curriculum and Resource Materials Revision and the Way Forward; preparation of a report on possibility of incorporating ELM in ECD curriculum; and several sharing and consultative meetings held at the central level have been instrumental in raising the concerns and awareness among the relevant officials and individuals on the importance of incorporating ELM in ECD curriculum.

Mid-day Meal

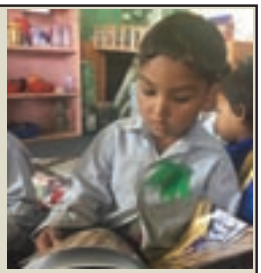
Having a provision of mid-day meal not only improves the nutritional status of young children but it can also result in better performance in their learning, school attendance and overall development. ELM project has encouraged its partners at local level to make necessary arrangements for providing mid-day meal for all the children attending ECD centers.

The project encouraged to parents to provide the day meal for their children by applying two different arrangements, which include — (i) wherever possible, mid-day meal was provided by preparing fresh food at ECD center, (ii) where it's not possible to provide food at the center, parents were encouraged to send food for children. In both arrangements the ECD centers prepared a routine of the day meals, and the routine was strictly followed in order to maintain the balanced diet for children.

In some ECD centers the school authorities were able to generate funds for providing mid-day meal. For example, in Mahankal ECD centers visited in the course of documentation of this report, it was found that school has partnered with Asia Child Support to provide mid-day meal to all the school children including the children in ECD class. However, in Himalaya and Budhanilkantha ECD centers there were no such provisions. Here, the parents were found sending meals for children in tiffin boxes. The Head Teachers of both of the schools said that they have totally banned providing junk food to the children and encouraged the parents to send home-made fresh nutritious food. The Head Teacher from Mahankal said, "In order to maintain good nutritional status of children, the school has prepared a daily routine of day meal. The school prepares the food and provides accordingly".

According to the head teachers and facilitators, the provision of mid-day meal has not only improved the children's nutritional status but it has also increased children's daily attendance and regularity in ECD centers. Further, a facilitator has also said, "…the program has also relieved the parents from responsibility of preparing day meal for their children at home. They don't have to worry about the food for children when they are at the ECD center nowadays."

A story: Samir started to talk, Batuli learnt to write



Batuli and Santosh's five years old son Samir has been going to the ECD center for the last one year. He likes to play with the ball and ring, and wants to run with his friends. He enjoys listening and reading storybooks, and can make sounds of cat, dogs, rat and other animals. He can show and name the things like flower, fruits, animals and so on. Samir can read the book elaborating the picture presented in *cha cha hueee…….. (a Nepali book)*. He said that he likes to go to ECD to play in the room with his friends Ganga and Sagar.

His mother Batuli said, "Samir was shy and he was not able to speak properly like other children his age. He was not very active and didn't respond to others." A year in the ECD has changed Samir.

She adds, " He talks a lot, brushes his teeth, washes hands before and after eating, is not afraid of others, sings songs with movement and expression. Singing taught my child many things. ECD class is Samir's favorite place. The facilitator helped him to write A B C D, 1 2 3 4 in sand. I am satisfied with the changes in my child. We both were illiterate. The ECD center facilitator taught me to write my name by holding the pencil with my right hand. Now I sign my name and do not need to sign with a thump print". Batuli continues her story -"I am attending the PE training/meeting regularly. Also following the learning activities related to reading, writing (padhane, lekhne), doing math (hisab) during cooking, in kitchen garden and work places. The program is good for both of us".

Conclusion

It is envisioned that this document will be useful for the Government, I/NGOs, ECD practitioners, parents and facilitators to learn more about ELM initiatives undertaken in Nepal, specifically the good practices of ELM project implemented in Kavre district. The document will be a good resource for advocating ELM and scaling up ELM activities in Nepal. It is expected that the document will be a good resource material for incorporating ELM contents and good pedagogical practices in ECD curriculum and daily teaching learning activities of ECD centers.

Similarly, parents' active involvement in the project especially the skills that they (even the illiterate parents) have developed in relation to supporting children's learning through everyday activities at home could be a good lesson for everyone. It is envisioned that this document will be useful for incorporating early childhood care and education components in the package of parental education program.

The capacity development of the frontline childcare workers especially facilitators and school head teachers; development of important resource materials and children's learning materials including establishment of learning corners/areas have been instrumental in transforming a non-interactive ECD centers into more stimulating and child friendly ECD centers. The new teaching and learning approaches applied, resources and facilities available in ECD centers reveal this fact.

The growing demand for continuation of the ELM project and its expansion to other areas on one hand, and confidence of the facilitators, parents and school head teachers to sustain the reform initiatives that they have started on the other show the positive signs of sustainability of the project inputs even after the termination of the project.

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