

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: IMPROVING ACCESS, QUALITY AND LEARNING IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES IN NEPAL

SANGAI SIKAUN SANGAI BADHAUN (LEARNING & GROWING TOGETHER) PROJECT TECHNICAL BRIEF SERIES # 1

ABOUT THE PROJECT (2012-2016)

THE CHALLENGE:

In the 27 worst-performing schools in Banke and Dang, Nepal, marginalized children in former bonded labor communities had low levels of learning achievement and high dropout rates.

THE GOAL:

Demonstrate an education model in Nepal that enables marginalized children to complete a quality education up to Grade 8.

THE SOLUTION:

A multi-pronged approach to address the entire education continuum from early childhood to Grade 8 with interventions to improve teaching practice, classroom environment, governance and system support, assessment, and parent and community engagement.

THE IMPACT:

- **Learning outcomes** improved at every level from Grade 1 to Grade 10
- **Enrollment** in ECD increased to 93%
- **Attendance** increased at every level.
- **Dropout** declined from 22% to 3% for Grades 1-8

PARTNERS:

Implementing Partners: Backwards Society Education (BASE); Rural Women's Development Center (RWDC)

Technical Partners: Kathmandu University; National Center for Education Development (NCED); Rato Bangala Foundation; Seto Gurans National Child Development Center



This brief explains how Early Childhood Development (ECD) fits within a comprehensive approach to quality learning. By mobilizing the community, building capacity, providing materials, and encouraging parental accountability, the Sangai Sikaun Sangai Badhaun (Learning & Growing Together) Project increased access to and quality of ECD with impacts on learning in the early grades.

In Nepal, the net enrollment rate reached 96.9% in the 2016 school year,¹ but quality often remains elusive: a USAID-supported national Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) baseline conducted in 2014 found that 37% of Grade 2 students and 19% of Grade 3 students could not read a single word.² Subsequent baseline studies focused on disadvantaged areas have revealed even lower levels of learning achievement.

With much focus on early grade reading, the question remains: are the “early grades” early enough?

In order to maximize the impact of the Sangai Sikaun Sangai Badhaun Project activities focused on primary and lower secondary students, and recognizing the crucial importance of ECD in setting children on a positive learning trajectory, one of the project's key aims was to increase access to and participation in quality ECD.

KEY STRATEGIES

In 2013, less than 35% of children entering Grade 1 in the project area had ECD experience. ECD centers functioned poorly with little ownership by schools and communities. The physical classroom conditions were sub-standard; ECD facilitators were poorly trained and lacked motivation; there were no teaching-learning materials; and teachers used mainly rhymes and chanting activities in Nepali. As a result, children did not enjoy attending and parents saw little value in ECD. Most children only attended on half the school days. A complete transformation was needed if ECD was to contribute to learning outcomes.

In order to maximize the impact of activities focused on primary and lower secondary students, the Sangai Sikaun Sangai Badhaun Project aimed to support communities and schools to ensure access to ECD for all pre-primary age (3-4 years old) children in the project area, while also improving the quality of ECD.

World Education, with the technical support from local NGO Seto Gurans National Child Development Services and in coordination with the National Center for Education Development (NCED) and implementing partner Backwards Education Society (BASE), employed the following primary strategies.

MOBILIZE STAKEHOLDERS AND COMMUNITY

The project's first core strategy in ECD was to create the environment and system conditions for improvements and enrollment increases in ECD to take hold.

Activities included:

- » **Conduct agenda-sharing meetings** with community leaders and awareness raising with community members and parents on the importance of ECD.
- » **Form ECD Management Committees** in all 27 school-based and 4 community-based ECD centers and provide training to committee members.
- » **Mobilize ECD Management Committees to map all eligible children;** advocate for additional centers and support and maintain commitment levels through regular meetings.
- » **Build consensus with District Education Offices (DEOs)** on a common model of ECD instruction and a set of inputs needed to improve attendance and outcomes.

One of the necessary inputs identified in the consensus building process with the DEOs was a way to identify out-of-ECD children. Once ECD management committees were trained, they conducted mapping of all ECD-age (3-4 years) children in the community, helped out-of-ECD children enroll, and did advoca-

cy work to lobby for establishing new ECD centers to ensure access for all eligible children in the community. Based on the mapping and advocacy with community members, Village Education Committees, and District Education Offices, the government agreed to open 7 new ECD centers and hire facilitators in each of the project's 27 communities. To establish more support for ECD and ensure access to ECD for eligible children, the project led quarterly meetings with members of ECD Management Committees, formal meetings with the DEOs every six months, and many informal meetings with Resource Centers.

BUILD SKILLS OF ECD FACILITATORS, GOVERNMENT TRAINERS, AND RESOURCE PERSONS

Once systems were in place to support the provision of ECD, the project provided professional development to ECD facilitators as well as the people supporting them.

Activities included:

- » **Build capacity of ECD facilitators** through training and coaching. The SSSB project provided intense training (96 hours) using the ECD package developed by the Government. Later, 30 hours refresher training focused on pre-literacy and pre-numeracy further deepened facilitators' skills. Training topics for both ECD facilitators and those managing them included child development, children's rights, the importance of ECD, pedagogy, materials development and use, prenatal care for mothers, and early stimulation of pre-literacy and numeracy skills.
- » **Train ECD Management Committee members and Principals to support and manage ECD centers and facilitators.** In order to ensure continued support for facilitators, the project also trained school principals, ECD Management Committees, and government officials, including Resource Persons, ECD Focal Persons responsible for ECD at the district level, instructors from the district Education Training Centers responsible for training teachers and ECD facilitators, and a member of the Regional Education Directorate. ECD facilitators were then provided with regular technical support from project staff and the Resource Persons in their centers.
- » **Ensure ECD facilitators follow the government's ECD curriculum.** The project also revised an official government training manual for ECD and used it to train five Government officials. It is now being used in Government training programs for ECD in other districts.
- » **Motivate and enable ECD Facilitators to use the children's mother tongue (Tharu) as a Medium of Instruction.**
- » **Bring ECD Facilitators together for regular mobile meetings.**

¹ Government of Nepal Flash Reports 2016–2017 (2073 BS)

² Sitabkhan, Y. and DeStefano, J., (2014). *Education Data for Decision Making (EdData II): Nepal Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Study*. Washington, D.C.: USAID.

KEY STRATEGIES

ENSURE CENTERS HAVE ADEQUATE MATERIALS

To support ECD facilitators and create more child-friendly classrooms, the project employed the following strategies:

- » **Provide support to upgrade ECD classrooms** to make them suitable for teaching-learning activities.
- » **Support basic teaching-learning materials** to ensure ECD centers were materials-rich including materials in Tharu.
- » **Train parents and facilitators to produce a wide range of materials using local materials.**

Material support for the ECD classrooms has motivated facilitators to apply the skills they have learned from the training. Engaging parents in creation of materials has helped instill a sense of ownership, while materials-rich classrooms make parents feel they can see the benefit the children get by attending. At the close of the project, all ECD centers are now using these locally made teaching-learning materials.

ENCOURAGE PARENTAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Even supportive systems, skilled facilitators, and materials-rich classrooms are not enough to unlock the benefits of ECD if parents do not see the value of it for their children. To increase children's attendance and learning outcomes parents were engaged in a number of strategies:

- » **Involve parents through orientation sessions when their children join ECD.**
- » **Engage mothers in regular sessions with ECD facilitators to understand ECD activities, child development, and how they could support at home.**
- » **Parent Education supported parents to learn about a range of topics of concern to parents.**

Parent Education focused on raising parents' awareness of their roles and responsibilities for their children's learning and development. Other school stakeholders, including teachers and School Management Committee (SMC) members, also participated. Participants identified gaps in each school and developed further plans to overcome those gaps. These Parent Education sessions also became a platform for advocacy around the importance of mother tongue as the language of instruction, as parents often wish to see their children learning in Nepali



RESULTS

The project successfully increased access and attendance of eligible children in Early Childhood Development with age appropriate cognitive development. Compared to the start of the project, the proportion of ECD-age children enrolled in ECD increased substantially. Not only are more children enrolling in ECD, those enrolled now attend more regularly and benefit from better instruction and learning environment.

INCREASED ENROLLMENT IN ECD TO FROM 77% TO 93%

Data from ECD mapping conducted by the ECD Management Committees of all ECD-age (3-4 years old) children in the catchment area for the 27 project schools showed the enrollment rate increased in each VDC to 91% or more from 2014 to 2016. Overall 93% of eligible children were in ECD across the project area by 2016. By the end of the project, the remaining small number of children (7%, or 68 children) not enrolled in ECD is to be expected: some children live too far away from centers to travel at such a young age; some children cling more to their mothers, etc. The biggest factor contributing to increased access was the establishment of 7 new ECD centers (3 school-based and 4 community-based) as a result of advocacy by communities.

ECD CENTERS ARE OPEN MORE OFTEN AND STUDENTS ATTEND MORE REGULARLY

The baseline study conducted in 2012 showed that ECD centers operated an average of 199 days per year. The records collected in 2016 show that average operating days reached 232. Schools have set themselves new targets to have children attend 240 days per year, which is far above the government's minimum 220 days annually and are making progress toward this goal.

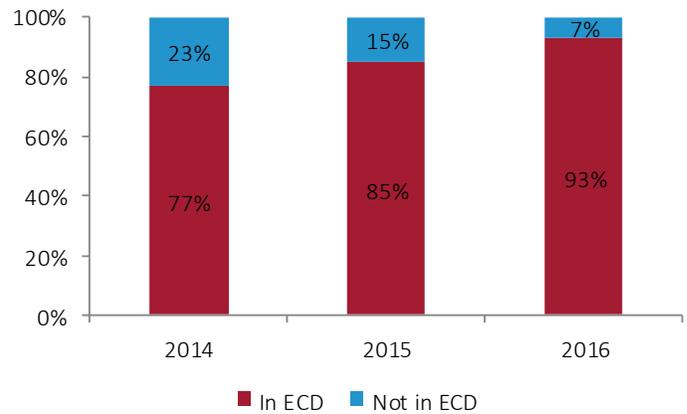
Not only are schools open more days, but students are attending more regularly. Data collected from school records on a quarterly basis showed a gain of 19 percentage points in average attendance, from 51.74% (indicating that children only attended about half the time) in 2012 to 71.02% in 2015 (most recent complete school year).

ECD FACILITATORS SHOW POSITIVE BEHAVIOR CHANGE

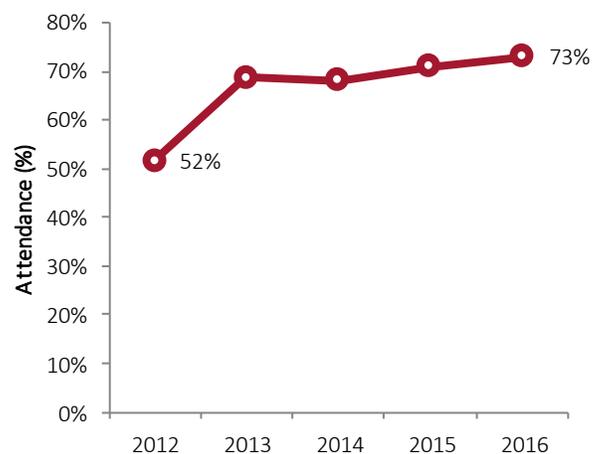
ECD facilitators are applying training in the classroom. The project measured Fidelity of Implementation (FOI) for facilitator training in June 2016. The study drew the following conclusions:

- » On average there is 87% Fidelity of Implementation for ECD. This means that facilitators are faithfully applying the skills they learned through trainings.

PERCENT OF CHILDREN IN AND OUT OF ECD



ECD ATTENDANCE (%)



- » Based on observations, FOI for ECD Center management skills was 100%. These skills include establishing learning areas, making proper seating arrangements for the children, preparing lesson plans, and conducting the class with materials.
- » According to the observation checklist developed and used by the project, 26 facilitators out of 32 have been using the children's first language in the classroom as the medium of instruction. Out of 32 ECD centers, only one school does not require use of a local language as all its children understand and speak Nepali.

In addition to the FOI evidence for improved practices by ECD facilitators, the facilitators' personal investment in their work and commitment to improving learning can be seen by the fact

RESULTS

that they began organizing mobile meetings on their own initiative. 28 facilitators participate regularly in the meetings. During these meetings, facilitators discuss monthly activities and processes, progress, best practices and challenges, involvement of the parents, and parenting education sessions. Hosting duties rotate among schools, giving facilitators the chance to observe and provide feedback to each other. Facilitators also use locally available materials to make new learning materials, which they leave with the host ECD center as a gift. This system ensures that learning materials, which naturally wear out due to use by small children, are regularly replenished so centers have a sustainable supply.

EXPOSURE TO ECD IMPROVES LEARNING IN EARLY GRADES

In 2015, the World Education Learning Assessment (WELA)³ conducted by the project found a statistically significant difference in mean total reading scores between students with and without prior ECD experience in all three grades. In addition, more years of ECD also correlated to higher math scores.

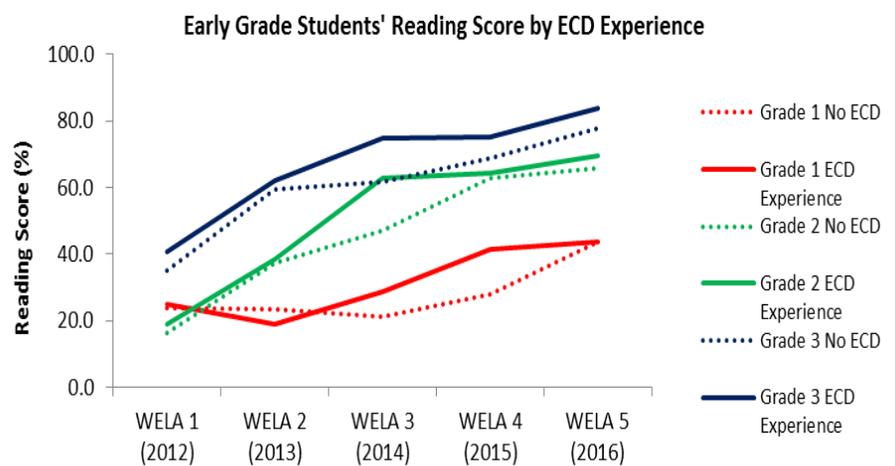
In 2016, grade level analysis again showed students with ECD experience have better mean reading scores, though the difference was statistically significant only in the case of Grade 3 students (6 percentage points higher).

As the chart shows, reading scores increased over the course of the project for both ECD experienced students and those who had not attended ECD. Even as scores increased overall, students with ECD experience generally maintained an advantage over those students who had no ECD experience.

Of note is that the vast majority of students surveyed in WELA 1 and 2 would not have had any interaction with project-influenced ECD. Furthermore, by the time of WELA 5, nearly all students surveyed, especially in Grades 1 and 2, had ECD experience. The increase in enrollment resulting from the intervention means that by 2016, the number of students without ECD experience in the sample is quite small and may partially explain the narrowing gap between students with and without ECD experience.

“We had theoretical knowledge about teaching, but the training provided chances to do it practically and helped us to prepare learning materials. This way, we can actively apply the knowledge and skills in ECD centers.”

— Priyanka Shrestha, ECD facilitator, Baijapur



INCREASED COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT WITH AND OWNERSHIP OF ECD

In addition to the quantifiable results above, government and community engagement with and investment in ECD has increased. The fact that ECD centers have set themselves a goal for operating days that is 10% higher than the government's standard suggests that the project's efforts to build awareness around the importance of ECD and build commitment on the part of leaders and government stakeholders have been effective. At the conclusion of the project, District Education Offices are supporting ECD Centers regularly and the local VDC governments have allocated budget on a yearly basis for purposes of ECD improvement. District Education Office staff are providing ongoing support to the centers, and the number of monitoring visits conducted by the Resource Centers has increased. Finally, the government has committed to continuing to use the revised manual developed by the project.

³ The World Education Learning Assessment was based on the internationally used Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA) and approved by the Education Review Office (ERO) of the Ministry of Education. The reading component tested nine areas of reading skills: listening comprehension, letter recognition for consonants and vowels, simple word, vowel sound (*matra*), joint word, word meaning, paragraph reading, and reading comprehension.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

Combine ECD and Early Grade Learning interventions to maximize impact.

As the WELA results indicate, the project's early grade reading interventions successfully elevated reading achievement over the course of the project for all students, but students who had ECD experience prior to entering primary school could read better than students who did not. These results suggest that there is value in combining ECD and Early Grade Learning interventions in order to maximize the value of investment in each area. Students who enroll in ECD will continue to have quality learning experiences after ECD, while early grade teachers with improved skills will have a greater impact on students who have higher levels of school readiness thanks to ECD participation.

Engage communities in mapping exercises to build ownership, catalyze government investment, and ensure access.

Raising awareness and engaging community members were critical elements behind the project's success. By building the capacity of ECD Management Committees, the project gave local leaders the tools to convince parents of the importance of ECD, identify and enroll children not in ECD, and present data to the government. The mapping provided evidence that children who did not have a ECD center close to their home were less likely to enroll. This, too, is a lesson from the project: adequate geographic distribution of ECD centers is necessary to increase enrollment. As a result of the evidence provided by the mapping, local governments agreed to establish seven new centers, which also contributed to the project's success in increasing enrollment.

Quality training of facilitators, regular technical support and provision of quality teaching-learning materials promote teacher behavior change.

As the Fidelity of Implementation results show, the project successfully effected behavior change on the part of ECD facilitators. The project coupled training with regular technical support, which was provided by both government personnel and project staff. Along with the face-to-face training, continuous on-site technical support and exposure helps to improve the professional skills of facilitators. In addition, providing materials and teaching communities to make quality materials with local resources gave facilitators more tools with which to enact the teaching methods they learned through training. This multi-pronged approach can be replicated in other contexts to ensure that training content is not simply delivered, but actually put into practice in the classroom.

Engagement of parents increases enrollment and attendance of children and enhances learning outcomes.

ECD enrollment increased to near 100% over the course of the project. In addition, attendance increased from 52% in 2012 to 71% in 2016 even as the number of days ECD centers were open increased. Project staff and partners attribute the increased enrollment and attendance to successful engagement of parents. Other programs should consider similar strategies of conducting parenting classes and training ECD management committees to raise awareness and engage parents, especially those with children not enrolled in ECD. Parents are dropping off and picking up their children from the school, sending lunch, and observing children's performance and interaction with the teachers. All of these are the results of parental engagement initiatives.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

Quality ECD creates an appreciation of ECD, which may increase demand for both public and private ECD.

An unexpected outcome of the project was that increased quality of ECD and increased awareness about the importance of ECD resulted in higher enrollment, not only overall but also in private ECD centers. As parents gained better understanding of the benefits of ECD and could see the impacts of early learning on children, they became more willing to invest their own resources in early learning—in many cases by paying tuition for private ECD centers. Experience with other projects suggests that the flow of students from public to private schools may reverse itself as government centers continue to demonstrate consistent quality, but that reversal did not occur within the timeframe of the current pro-

Mother tongue instruction improves learning environment and effectiveness.

Use of children’s first language in the class proved a very effective approach to ensure learning in ECD. Children became more interactive and engaged when the facilitator began to use their mother tongue. “Earlier the children used to urinate and defecate in the classroom but didn’t ask me to go out to the toilet,” says Ram Kumari Tharu, an ECD facilitator in Bajjapur VDC. “Now that I use Tharu language (children’s first language) in the classroom, these days children share their problems clearly in their language—when they want to drink water or go to the bathroom— and I can help them.”

Develop local ownership for sustainability.

By training ECD Management Committees and engaging local government in mapping eligible children, communities became very aware of who was currently excluded and what was needed to ensure access. Once engaged on a regular basis they became more aware of the need for good physical conditions, teaching-learning materials replacement, and regular monitoring. The annual mapping and skills gained through ECD Management Committee trainings will be key for long-term sustainability, especially as management of ECD and schools will become the full responsibility of local government under Nepal’s new federal system.



Formation of a new ECD Management Committee

CASE STUDY



In 2014 the Sangai Sikaun Sangai Badhaun Project conducted mapping to identify the out-of-ECD children 3 and 4 years of age in Parsurampur and found 26 children not in ECD. This was mainly because of the distance to the nearest ECD Center and lack of awareness of parents. Parents were busy in the fields and paid little attention to children's education or holistic development. Sometimes older brothers or sisters had to look after their ECD-age siblings at home, which forced them to miss school. In this Tharu village few parents understood the importance of Early Child Development. Most would wait until their children were 5 years of age before taking them to enroll in school. Often they would enroll the child directly into Grade 1. As a result, many children were missing the opportunity to learn through ECD activities, which was one of the major causes of poor learning outcomes in Grade 1.

After identifying the families with children not accessing ECD, project staff conducted an interaction meeting with community leaders and parents to help them appreciate the importance and facilities of a good ECD center. They learned how they could establish a new ECD center and formed an ECD Management Committee. They then advocated with the Village Education Committee and Resource Centre and were finally able to establish a community-based ECD center in 2015. The Village Education Committee under the local government provided approval and have approached the District Education Committee for support. As a result of the mapping, the Parsurampur ECD Centre was established in 2015 with the initiation of the community and 21 children are now happily learning in this center.

An ECD facilitator was selected and trained on child friendly teaching-learning methods and the facilitator was also involved in a materials development workshop. The project provided the initial carpeting and cushions, whiteboard, toys, charts and other related learning materials. In its second year, 21 ECD-aged children enrolled and attended regularly. Parents come to drop off and collect their young children. Parents support by helping make learning materials. They also take better care of their children at home thanks to parenting education in ECD center. According to data, 75% of parents have regularly attended Parenting Education sessions. The ECD facilitator prepares a daily lesson plan and follows it. There are lots of playing and learning materials and six learning corners for language development, mathematics, science, creativity, performing arts, and recreation, which are well managed and enjoyed by the children. Children are now leaving the center better prepared for school, and parents are pleased with how well the ECD center has grown and improved.

“Now all 3-4 year old children are getting the opportunity to learn and play in a nurturing environment. They are developing the habit of learning.”

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SANGAI SIKAUIN SANGAI BADHAUN (LEARNING & GROWING TOGETHER) PROJECT TECHNICAL BRIEF SERIES

Summary Brief

1. Early Childhood Education

2. Early Grade Reading

3. Medium of Instruction

4. Community Mobilization

5. Remedial Instruction

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