

EXPLORING HEADTEACHERS' LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PUBLIC ECD
CENTRES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Abina Thapa

A Dissertation

Submitted to
School of Education

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership

Kathmandu University
Dhulikhel, Nepal

January 2025

AN ABSTRACT

of the dissertation of *Abina Thapa* for the degree of *Master of Philosophy in Educational Leadership* presented on 23 January 2025 entitled *Exploring Headteachers' Leadership Practices in Public ECD Centres: A Narrative Inquiry*.

APPROVED BY

.....

Asst. Prof. Rebat Kumar Dhakal, PhD

Dissertation Supervisor

Guided by Instructional Leadership Theory and Theory of Career. This qualitative study explored the leadership practices and perceptions in improving the ECD quality of headteachers in public Early Childhood Development centers in Kathmandu Valley using a narrative inquiry approach. The study was bound to answer two key questions: How do the headteachers of public ECD centers narrate the experiences of leadership practices? And how do headteachers in public ECD centers perceive their role in improving the quality of early childhood development in their centers? Four headteachers of public schools who also run ECD centers were the main participants, and two other ECD teachers were also there to facilitate data verification. From in-depth narrative and reflective interviews, the study revealed a list of challenges and lessons learned, most critically. Perhaps headteachers exhibit an enormous capacity for ECD development and struggle with issues of infrastructure, space constraints and daunting administrative demands. Perceived sufficiency of short-term teachers' training was the second shared finding, where the participants assumed little professional development, reflecting a massive gap between the knowledge of a specialist nature or education for early childhood development. The majority of headteachers didn't have any formal training or exposure to ECD-specialized pedagogy. The leadership focus often leads more toward upper grades, leaving ECD misunderstood. Headteachers viewed Classroom management through a surface-level lens. Prioritizing aesthetic over child-centred functionality.

The research accentuates context-based preparation for head teachers as well as context-based policy reform so as to enable headteachers to become instructional leaders more effectively. Lastly, the quality of ECD programming in public ECD Centers should be improved. It further advances our research in ECD leadership scholarship, giving practical guidelines to educators and policymakers and enabling young kids to integrate development through improving key leadership qualities. This research argued that quality improvements in ECD settings require contextually responsive leadership. Finally, as a researcher, the process was an eye-opener and humbling. What had begun as a straightforward plan of conducting interviews and analyzing narratives became complicated in practice. One of the most significant challenges was obtaining time from headteachers who were busy, which demanded perseverance and flexibility. The process opened my eyes to understanding narrative inquiry not only as a research methodology but as a relational and context-sensitive process.



.....

Abina Thapa

Degree Candidate

23 January 2025

शोध सार

शैक्षिक नेतृत्व तथा व्यवस्थापनमा दर्शनशास्त्रको स्नातकोत्तर डिग्रीको लागि अविना थापाको शोध प्रबन्धको शीर्षक " सार्वजनिक प्रारम्भिक बाल विकास (इसिडि) केन्द्रहरूमा प्रधानाध्यापकहरूको नेतृत्व अभ्यासहरूको अन्वेषण : एक संकथन" १० माघ २०८१ मा प्रस्तुत गरिएको थियो।

.....
उप. प्रा. रेवत कुमार ढकाल, पीएचडी
शोध निर्देशक

निर्देशात्मक नेतृत्व सिद्धान्त र करियरको सिद्धान्तद्वारा निर्देशित यस गुणात्मक अध्ययनले काठमाडौं उपत्यकाका सार्वजनिक प्रारम्भिक बाल विकास (इसिडि) केन्द्रहरूमा प्रधानाध्यापकहरूको इसिडि गुणस्तर सुधार गर्ने नेतृत्व अभ्यासहरू र धारणाहरूको अन्वेषण गरेको छ । कथनात्मक अनुसन्धान पद्धति प्रयोग गरिएको यो अनुसन्धान दुई मुख्य प्रश्नहरू: सार्वजनिक इसिडि केन्द्रका प्रधानाध्यापकहरूले नेतृत्व अभ्यासको अनुभवलाई कसरी वर्णन गर्दछन्? साथै, सार्वजनिक इसिडि केन्द्रका प्रधानाध्यापकहरूले आफ्नो केन्द्रमा प्रारम्भिक बाल विकासको गुणस्तर सुधार गर्न आफ्नो भूमिकालाई कसरी बुझ्दछन्? मा केन्द्रित रहेको थियो । यस अनुसन्धानको मुख्य सहभागिको रूपमा इसिडि केन्द्रहरू पनि सञ्चालन गर्दै आएका सार्वजनिक विद्यालयका चार प्रधानाध्यापकहरू थिए भने अन्य दुई इसिडि शिक्षकहरूले तथ्यांक प्रमाणीकरणमा सहजिकरण गरेका थिए । गहन कथनात्मक तथा प्रतिबिम्बात्मक अन्तर्वार्ताहरूको आधारमा अध्ययनले नेतृत्व अभ्यासको विभिन्न चुनौतीहरू र सिकाइका पाठहरू उजागर गरेको छ । विशेषगरी, प्रधानाध्यापकहरूमा इसिडि विकास गर्न ठूलो क्षमता देखिए तापनि उनीहरू भौतिक पूर्वाधार, सीमित स्थान, तथा प्रशासनिक कठिनाइहरू जस्ता समस्याहरूसँग जुझिरहेका पाइएको छ । अल्पकालीन शिक्षक प्रशिक्षणलाई पर्याप्त ठाउँ धारणा अध्ययनको अर्को प्रमुख निष्कर्ष रह्यो जसले विशेष ज्ञान वा प्रारम्भिक बाल्यावस्था शिक्षाको आवश्यकता र व्यावसायिक विकासबीचको ठूलो अन्तरलाई देखाएको छ । अध्ययनमा सहभागी अधिकांश प्रधानाध्यापकहरूले इसिडि विशेष पेडागोजीमा कुनै औपचारिक तालिम प्राप्त गरेका थिएनन्। साथै, नेतृत्वको ध्यान प्रायः उच्च कक्षाहरूमा केन्द्रित हुने भएकाले इसिडिलाई सही रूपमा नबुझिएको देखिन्छ । कक्षा व्यवस्थापनलाई प्रधानाध्यापकहरूले सतही रूपमा ग्रहण गरेको पाइयो जसले सौन्दर्यलाई प्राथमिकता दिए तापनि बाल-केन्द्रित कार्यशीलता उपेक्षित भएको पाइन्छ ।

अध्ययनले प्रधानाध्यापकहरूलाई प्रभावकारी शिक्षण नेतृत्वदायी भूमिकामा तयार पार्न सन्दर्भ-आधारित तयारीको आवश्यकतालाई जोड दिँदै सार्वजनिक ईसीडी केन्द्रहरूको कार्यक्रमको गुणस्तर सुधार गर्न नीति सुधार आवश्यक रहेको निष्कर्ष निकालेको छ । यसले ईसीडी नेतृत्व अध्ययनको ज्ञानलाई थप प्रवर्द्धन गरी शिक्षक तथा नीति निर्माताहरूलाई व्यावहारिक दिशानिर्देश उपलब्ध गराउने उद्देश्य राख्छ ।

गुणस्तर सुधारको लागि यो अध्ययनले सन्दर्भिक रूपमा उत्तरदायी नेतृत्वको आवश्यकता औल्याएको छ । अन्ततः अनुसन्धानकर्ताको हैसियतमा यो प्रक्रिया मेरो लागि ज्ञानवद्र्धक र समीक्षात्मक अनुभवको रूपमा रह्यो । सुरुमा सरल योजना जस्तो देखिए पनि अन्तर्वार्ता सञ्चालन र कथनात्मक विश्लेषणको वास्तविकता जटिल रह्यो । सबैभन्दा ठूलो चुनौती व्यस्त प्रधानाध्यापकहरूको समय मिलाउनु थियो, जसका लागि धैर्य र लचिलोपन आवश्यक रह्यो । अन्ततः कथनात्मक अनुसन्धान केवल अनुसन्धान विधि मात्र नभई सम्बन्धपरक तथा सन्दर्भ-संवेदनशील प्रक्रिया पनि रहेको बुझ्न प्रेरित गर्यो ।



.....

अविना थापा

उपाधि उम्मेदवार

१० माघ २०८१

This dissertation, entitled *Exploring Headteachers' Leadership Practices in Public ECD Centres: A Narrative Inquiry* presented by Abina Thapa on 23 January 2025.

APPROVED BY

..... 23 January 2025
Asst. Prof. Rebat Kumar Dhakal, PhD
Dissertation Supervisor

..... 23 January 2025
Chet Nath Panta, PhD
External Examiner

..... 23 January 2025
Assoc. Prof. Shesha Kanta Pangeni, PhD
Head of Department, Educational Leadership

..... 23 January 2025
Prof. Bal Chandra Luitel, PhD
Dean/Chair of Research Committee

I understand that my dissertation will become a part of the permanent collection of the library of Kathmandu University. My signature below authorizes the release of my dissertation to any reader upon request for scholarly purposes.



..... 23 January 2025
Abina Thapa
Degree Candidate

© Copyright by Abina Thapa

2025

All rights reserved.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my original work, and it has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree at any other university.



.....

Abina Thapa

Degree Candidate

23 January 2025

DEDICATION

This work is profoundly dedicated.

To the countless headteachers and educators striving to make a difference in the lives of young children. May this study serve as a step toward improving Early Childhood Education for the generation to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Rebat Kumar Dhakal, for his invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and unwavering support throughout this research journey. His expertise and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping this dissertation. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Shesh Kanta Pangeni, Head of the Department, for his encouragement and for fostering a supportive academic environment. I am also grateful to my internal examiner and external examiner for their critical insights and valuable suggestions, which strengthened this research. My sincere thanks go to Prof. Dr. Bal Chandra Luitel, Dean of Kathmandu University, for his leadership and encouragement and to Asst. Prof. Dr. Basu Prasad Subedi, thank you for imparting essential knowledge on research methodology during the course of my study. I am also deeply indebted to Prof. Dr. Mana Prasad Wagle for providing feedback on my research proposal, which was vital in refining the initial stages of my work. I would like to express my appreciation to Prof. Dr. Dhanapati Subedi, Dr. Rajkumar Dhungana and Dr. Hari Lamsal, whose expertise and guidance during our classes enriched my understanding and helped me navigate this academic endeavor. A special thanks to WCC for meticulously editing the language and ensuring APA formatting accuracy in my work, making it polished and professional. And sincere thanks to all my participants who shared their story

I am profoundly grateful to my Mom and sister-in-law, who selflessly supported me by looking after my children and giving me time and freedom to focus on this research. To my husband for shouldering the family responsibilities. To my daughter and son for giving me a purpose to push through even the most challenging times. I also wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my research participants for generously sharing their stories, which are at the heart of this study. Finally, to my dear friends Uma, Minju and Kapil, thank you; your support made the challenges feel lighter. This research is a culmination of collective efforts, for which I am eternally thankful to everyone who played a role in its completion.

Abina Thapa

Degree Candidate

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
ABBREVIATIONS	v
CHAPTER I	1
INTRODUCTION	1
Setting the Stage	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions	6
Rationale of the Study	6
Delimitations of the Study	8
Chapter Summary	8
CHAPTER II	10
LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Conceptualizing ECD and Leadership	10
Early Childhood Development	11
Effectiveness of Early Childhood Development	11
Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers	12
School-Based Public ECD Centers	13
Leadership in Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers	14
Headteachers and ECD Functioning	16
Empirical Review of the Related Literature	16
Review of Policies and Provisions to Enhance the Status of ECD Centers	20
Theoretical Referent	22
Instructional Leadership Theory	23
Theory of Care	26
Research Gap	27
Chapter Summary	28
CHAPTER III	30
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	30
Philosophical Foundations of the Study	30

Research Paradigm: Interpretive Perspective	32
Research Method: Narrative Inquiry	34
Study Sites and Selection of the Participants.....	35
Strategies for Information Generation	38
Entry into the Field of Work.....	39
Data Organization, Analysis and Meaning Making.....	40
Quality Standards.....	41
Chapter Summary	44
CHAPTER IV	46
HEADTEACHERS' LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN ECD SETTING.....	46
Journey from Teacher to Headteacher	46
Instructional Leadership Practices in ECD Supervision.....	53
Teacher-Head Teacher Relationship.....	57
Community and Parental Involvement	62
Professional Development and Capacity Building for Teachers	66
Professional Development and Capacity Building for Headteachers	70
Chapter Summary	72
CHAPTER V	73
HEADTEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPROVING ECD QUALITY	73
Quality Through Leadership: Headteachers' Guiding Role	74
Creating a Learner-centered Teaching Environment.....	76
Navigating Challenges in Public ECD Centres	81
Future Pathways for ECD	84
Chapter Summary	89
CHAPTER VI.....	90
DISCUSSIONS AND KEY INSIGHTS.....	90
Discussion	90
Perseverance Amidst Adversity: Headteachers ' Commitment to ECD Development	90
Leadership as Instructional Guidance and Emotional Anchoring	93
Embracing a Caring Ethic in Leadership Practices.....	93
Promoting Learner-Centered Pedagogy.....	94
Infrastructure Challenges and Space Utilization in ECD Centers	95

Perceived Sufficiency of Short-Term Teacher Training in Addressing ECD Needs	96
Beyond the Aesthetics: Rethinking Classroom Management and Leaders' Perspective	99
Gender Dimensions in Educational Leadership.....	100
Reframing ECD Purpose.....	101
Key Insights	102
Chapter Summary	105
CHAPTER VII.....	107
CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION AND REFLECTION.....	107
Conclusion	107
Implications.....	109
Headteachers and School Leaders	109
Educators.....	109
Educational Organizations and Trainers.....	110
Community and Families	110
Decision Makers and Policymakers.....	110
Researchers and Academics.....	110
Reflections	111
REFERENCES	113
APPENDICES	133

ABBREVIATIONS

COVID	Coronavirus Disease
CTEVTE	Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECDE	Early Childhood Development Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education Center
ECED	Early Childhood Education and Development
ELDS	Early Learning and Development Standards
EY	Early Years
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
M.Ed.	Master's in Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
NIRT	National Institutes of Research & Training Private Limited
NEP	National Education Policy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPC	National Planning Commission
NPECE	National Program on Early Childhood Education
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PGDE	Postgraduate Diploma in Education
SESP	School Sector Education Plan
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My research has focused on the area of public ECD centers' headteachers, where I have unpacked the experiences of ECD leaders to provide quality ECD education. Here, I have started with my own experiences, which have led me to carry this topic as my dissertation. Then, I talked about the problem statement, purpose, research question, rationale and delimitations of the study.

Setting the Stage

For almost a decade, I have been deeply immersed in the field of Early Childhood Development, experiencing firsthand the impact of leadership in shaping the quality of education. Having studied in a public school and later worked in private institutions, I have witnessed stark differences in leadership practices, resources, and overall educational outcomes. This contrast sparked my curiosity about how headteachers' leadership practices influence public ECD centers. The defining moment that led me to this research topic occurred when I had the opportunity to visit a public ECD center in my hometown. What I saw deeply unsettled me: young children sitting on a simple mat with no proper seating arrangements, a severely stained and unhygienic toilet that I hesitated to use myself, and a visible lack of learning resources. What struck me the most was that a single teacher was managing everything alone, juggling multiple responsibilities with little to no support and managing an early year setting by a single person, leading to challenges that compromise the quality of education (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019a). This made me question how leadership functioned in such a setting. Given that the ECD center operated within a school structure, I wondered why the school leadership had not addressed the glaring issues. Were the headteachers playing an active role in improving these centers, or were they simply an overlooked part of the system? The leadership of the headteacher is pivotal in shaping educational organizations, including early childhood development centers. Strong leadership is a vital component of any thriving organization. It clarifies and affirms values, sets goals, articulates a vision and charts a course to achieve that vision (Gurley et al., 2015). As the study discusses how a leader influences program quality, I believe ECD cannot be an exception.

I understand that Early Childhood Development is a crucial determinant of future success; the experiences of early life affect the development of the brain's architecture, which provides the foundation for learning, behavior and health. Early Childhood Development is a critical phase that lays the foundation for a child's future well-being, learning and behavior. Research indicates that the experiences during early childhood shape biological and psychological structures and functions in ways that affect health, well-being and productivity throughout the life course (Richter et al., 2019). In connection to this, I can say that early childhood education is the key gateway to life, where children get ready for lifelong achievement. Every individual needs to be focused on different learning areas at an early age so that in the future, they will master their life qualities and will help them to appreciate the value of humanity (Kapur, 2018a). Through my experiences, I assume that when they are young, they develop good habits, daily routines, literacy and numeracy skills, and emotional resilience; as a result, they develop and enjoy a prosperous future. Sattar and Taimur (2019) stress that closing the gap that disadvantaged people around the globe have in life skills needs to expand the quality of early childhood education as a strategy for achieving social, economic and professional success. Leadership plays a central role in improving the quality of early childhood settings (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012). As I work in a private ECD center, I have experienced how important the role of the headteacher is in making a difference. I wanted to have more ideas on how headteachers practice their leadership in

Public ECD centers. Educational leadership within an ECD context involves, in addition to developing transformational vision and governance facilitation, organizational strategy, education outputs, teaching and learning, and curriculum strongly related to children's education and welfare (Kivunju, 2015). Continuing, as explained by Kivunja, an efficacious education leadership develops capacity through motivating, affirming and challenging teachers.

In Nepal, ECD centers play an essential role in delivering initial care and education within public institutions. In spite of such initiatives, public ECD centers in Nepal also encounter diverse challenges. A study by Dahal (2024) states that ECD centers have poor infrastructure; few of them have experienced quality ECD services and have poor monitoring and evaluation. Such research points out an absence of adequate advocacy and investment in programs intended to increase the quality and reach of ECD programs in Nepal. Policy analysis shows that although Nepal has ECD

guidelines and institutions at every level, universal accessibility remains an issue (Khanal et al., 2017).

I feel that the importance of education is expanding in our globalizing world, where we are experiencing many developments in science and technology, and it is vital to have well-equipped ECD centers with teachers who are prepared to provide high-quality education. In my opinion, leadership is crucial to improving and sustaining quality in the context of ECEC. Leadership in recruiting, organizing, developing and designing may require additional research, so defining the leadership practices happening in the current situation was my focus point.

While exploring existing literature on leadership practices in public ECD centers in Nepal, I found that most of the research focuses on the challenges these centers have and how they function. Experiencing the vital role of headteachers and witnessing lots of challenges along with limited scholarly work that deeply examines how leadership can shape the quality of ECD, I finally decided to get to know about headteachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers. Despite the growing global emphasis on quality leadership in early childhood education, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the heterogeneous leadership practices of headteachers in Nepal's public ECD centers. Existing studies often generalize leadership, and the challenges marked by limited resources and grassroots levels have been largely overlooked in ECD discourse. This gap is not merely academic. It has practical consequences for the development and delivery of equitable and effective early childhood programs. Recognizing this, I have deliberately chosen a narrative inquiry approach to authentically capture the diverse experiences and perceptions of these in the belief that meaningful educational reform begins by listening to those at the frontline, which is essential to the future of Nepal's youngest learners.

Statement of the Problem

Early Childhood Development centers are integral to the foundational education system and should not be overlooked. Ensuring quality in these centers necessitates effective leadership, typically by principals or headteachers who show direction toward a better way. The leadership style of headteachers significantly influences the quality of early childhood education (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). As the study highlights, the headteachers' leadership has a significant impact on shaping the ECD centers. Despite the recognized importance of effective leadership in Early Childhood Development centers, there is a paucity of research focusing on the lived

experiences of headteachers in Nepal's public ECD setting. Leadership strategies foster productive learning and also help create a holistic learning environment (Mainali, 2024). In Nepal, challenges such as limited resources, inadequate training and lack of professional development opportunities for educators further exacerbate the leadership gap in ECD centers (Bhandari, 2017). I feel that addressing these issues is essential for improving the quality of ECD education, which is a good doorway if we think beyond the leadership setting in those centers. I have come up with the knowledge that public ECDs often operate under a broader school structure, where head teachers are responsible for multiple levels of education. As a researcher deeply committed to the future of early childhood in Nepal, I am compelled to confront a persistent leadership vacuum within public ECD centers. Argyropoulou (2015) mentioned the perception of ECE headteachers in Greece regarding their roles and responsibilities; he highlighted that headteachers view their leadership as a shared endeavor characterized by courage, commitment and collaboration, fosters organizational culture and enhances the quality of early childhood education. In our context, the role of headteachers in ECD centers is similarly essential. However, challenges are obvious, and the cause remains silent. If leadership is the key to improving education, what roles do head teachers truly play in shaping the learning environment of ECD centers? I sense that the lack of qualified ECD facilitators and ineffective curriculum implementation are also issues in ECD centers. Lack of clear curriculum guidelines, unqualified educators and lack of parent support in children's learning are still a challenge in implementing ECD policies. However, the government has initiated the ECD provisions, which are found in most countries around the globe (Tyilo et al., 2017). A visit to a public ECD center and witnessing firsthand the dire conditions, children sitting on mats, unhygienic toilet, lack of learning resources and single teacher struggling to manage everything raised a fundamental question: How does leadership function in public ECD centers and why are these fundamental issues not addressed despite being part of the school system?

While my primary focus was on leadership practices, I hold the view that it's essential to recognize that leadership plays some role in promoting the retention of educators for quality services. However, here in public ECD centers, the government is in charge of remuneration. I was just wondering if they are advocating for an equitable pay structure within ECD centers. A study by Garrett and Gibbs (2025) mentions leadership practices in Australian ECD centers and finds that supportive

leadership significantly influences educator retention, ensuring that educators get competitive salaries that reflect their quality, which can lead to improved job satisfaction and retention. The remuneration for facilitators is very low compared with that of Private preschools, which has led to low retention and low motivation for the facilitators. It is estimated that 250 million in low- and middle-income countries, millions of children under the age of five are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential. (Ozmert, 2021). With a higher salary, the teachers work better on their retention rate, which also might increase the effort they put into their work; when their wages are low, they may get a second job, which reduces the effort in teaching (Evans, 2019). In some cases, the children are just in school to be fed and looked after, and the parents let them work because, in community schools, many children come from very deprived families where their parents don't have an idea, which is why it might be the duty of ECD facilitators who at least have knowledge on importance of quality foundation education, where the child is not cared the academic area but also his/her well-being, emotional and intellectual property stays in dilemma (Faccini & Combes, 1998).

There might be a number of challenges hindering the quality of ECD education in Nepal, though the Ministry of Education has put forward some practices to minimize them. The number of ECD centers increased from 4,032 in 2004 to 35,991 in 2015 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015). An increased number of early childhood centers may help the child at least get something instead of getting nothing. The district of Education is accountable for leading and coordinating the different types of activities for children's overall development program (age 3-5 years) (Shrestha, 2002). Planning a holistic development program adds more value to the quality of education for preschool-aged children. To the extent that ECD services are being provided, there is minimal evidence to say that all children are receiving all the key services they should receive to ensure their all-around, holistic development. There is very little research on the topic of leadership in the ECD sector. Despite being the foundation of lifelong learning, these centers are often managed without a clear vision, strategic direction or empowered leadership. Headteachers are key figures in shaping quality education, but they remain unheard of. Their leadership practices are rarely studied, let alone understood, through their own voice. This silence is not just a gap in the literature; it is a crisis in the making. If we do not listen to their lived experiences now, we risk continuing cycles of mediocrity and missed

potential in the most formative years of children's lives. My research seeks to break that silence.

I carried out this research because leadership in ECD is often overlooked in educational discourse, yet it has a profound impact on young learners' experiences and development. My biggest concern is whether headteachers recognize and prioritize the ECD centers within their leadership scope or whether these spaces are left to function in survival mode. Are headteachers given the necessary training to lead ECD centers effectively? Do they have strategies in place to ensure quality early Education? Or is leadership in ECD merely an administrative responsibility without real engagement? A study highlights that effective leadership in schools is crucial for enhancing educational outcomes. It emphasizes the need for head teachers to engage in continuous professional development and adopt inclusive leadership practices to address the diverse needs of students and teachers (Singh & Allison, 2016). Through this research, I explored the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD settings, identifying gaps, challenges, and potential solutions. Ultimately, I bring attention to the need for strong attention to ensure quality Early Childhood Education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to explore head teachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers. More specifically, this study unpacked the experiences of the headteacher's leadership while working to improve the situation of the ECD centers.

Research Questions

This research study focused on exploring the answers to the following questions.

1. How do the headteachers of public ECD centers narrate their experiences of leadership practices?
2. How do headteachers in public ECD centers perceive their role in improving the quality of early childhood development in their centers?

Rationale of the Study

As I have found very few researches related to ECD leadership, my topic added value to those few works previously done in the area of ECD. Leadership practices of headteachers in public Early Childhood Centres in Nepal are a less explored area in educational research. While there is substantial literature on ECD policies and access, the specific role of leadership in influencing the quality of early

childhood education, particularly in public settings, has not been adequately addressed. Accessibility and quality within Nepal's ECD sector, but does not delve deeply into the leadership dynamics that impact Early Childhood Education and Development (Bhandari, 2017). The study highlights that the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD centers remain an understudied yet crucial area in Nepal's education system. While much research has focused on ECD pedagogy and access to early education, there is a gap in understanding how leadership influences the quality of ECD centers. My professional commitment as an early childhood educator and headteacher has allowed me to observe the stark differences between public and private ECD settings. These experiences, coupled with my personal visit to a public ECD center where a single teacher struggled to manage everything alone, raised a critical concern: Where does leadership stand in public ECD centers? Leadership competencies lack contextual relevance in early years settings (Klevering & McNae, 2018). This kind of gap in the literature indicates a need for refocused research on the leadership practices of headteachers in Nepal's public ECD centers.

This research is timely because Nepal is gradually expanding its early childhood education policies, but without a clear focus on leadership, the policy might risk becoming ineffective in practice. As a researcher, an educator and a parent of a 5-year-old and 20-month-old, I understand the urgency of ensuring high-quality early childhood education, not just in well-resourced private settings but also in public institutions where thousands of children receive their first learning experiences. By addressing the research gap, this study provides valuable insights for policymakers, school leaders, teacher training institutions and educators, ultimately contributing to a stronger leadership framework in public ECD centers and improving early childhood education quality in our context. Sections are now interconnected, so I have raised the problem according to my experience and the literature that I have gone through. My purpose statement is connected with the issue, and on the grounds of the purpose, I have mentioned my research questions, which definitely give the answer to the problem that I have raised. This research may help school leaders, facilitators, teachers, parents, policymakers, children, and all those who strive for quality public ECD centers. It provides an opportunity to achieve good results at the primary level compared with those who don't attend quality early childhood education (Bakken et al., 2017). As Bakken said, providing quality early education helps children achieve better than those who are out of the facility and do not receive quality education.

Delimitations of the Study

The study has been delimited to exploring leadership practices within school-based public centers in the Kathmandu Valley, with an emphasis on understanding how they work to improve the quality and functioning of these centers. The research didn't aim to evaluate the effectiveness of specific leadership but instead looked to capture the experiences of the headteacher. Additionally, the scope of this study was limited to the leadership practices of headteachers; it didn't extend to external stakeholders and didn't include the leadership of private ECE centers. This focus allowed me to concentrate on the topic that I have chosen for my research. Also, it focused on ECD centers that are integrated into the broader school structure, such as ECD centers operating within primary or secondary schools. The study excluded private ECD centers, non-school-based programs, and community-based ECD centers, as the focus was mainly on those public ECD centers that are part of the formal education system and funded by the government. It is carried out through the experiences of headteachers of school-based early childhood development centers. The study is grounded on instructional leadership theory, which binds this research in a systematic way. Only the possible implications have been focused on in this research, as I talked about the content of early childhood development, where I explored the environment rather than the child's different developmental stages. As a researcher, my study was purposefully delimited to explore the perceptions and practices of leadership among head teachers in public ECD centers. This focus was guided by my research objectives and philosophical stance, aiming to understand not only what leadership practices were enacted but also how these practices were perceived, interpreted and made meaningful by the headteachers. By framing the study within perceptions and practices, I was able to capture a more holistic view of leadership grounded in both what they do and how they think and feel about what they do. Thus, the study didn't attempt to cover all possible dimensions of leadership experiences but rather remained intentionally and meaningfully focused.

Chapter Summary

The chapter began by setting the scene for my research, explaining how I became interested in this topic. Then, the chapter moved to provide a background to the study, outlining the context of ECD in Nepal and the central role of headteachers. Following the background, the statement of the problem was presented. I highlighted the lack of clarity around the leadership roles of headteachers, questioning whether

headteachers are actively engaged in improving the quality of education or if their leadership remains neglected. The purpose of the study was clearly defined: to explore the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD centers and to unpack their experiences in striving to improve the situation of public ECD centers. To guide the research, I formulated the research question, and then the rationale of the study emphasized the significance of understanding headteacher leadership in public ECD centers; the research seemed to be a vital contribution to the field of educational leadership, particularly in early childhood development education. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the delimitation of the study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part of my research provides more information on my chosen topic through different kinds of scholars' views on the topic of my research. Reviewing plenty of literature related to my topic has helped me build a strong knowledge of the topic. Through this specific chapter, I have attempted to summarize my review related to my theme, previous studies, and policies related to my research, including the theoretical foundation with a proper argument.

Conceptualizing ECD and Leadership

Through my limited knowledge of my topic, I assume and support the idea that Early Childhood Development encompasses the comprehensive physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth of children. Leadership within ECD refers to the guidance and management provided by headteachers or any authoritative person to create and maintain a high-quality early childhood education and care environment. The connection between the ECD and leadership is where the idea of leadership seems multifaceted. People who carry the responsibility carry a lot of tasks ahead, such as planning programs, resource allocation, supporting teachers and promoting best practices in child engagement (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). I wonder if it applies in our context or not because I have heard a lot of backlashes about our public educational institution, and I don't think that ECD can be an exception; having said that, all the things I have heard might not be true so digging out the real practices would help me to get the answer of my curiosity. I strongly support the idea that the setting provided by the leaders fosters the teachers' enthusiasm, and that definitely helps in children's learning. Leadership is essential in developing cohesive ECEC systems that support consistent and equitable services across the community (Movahedazarhouli et al., 2022). This section contains a review of the literature related to early childhood education and leadership practices from national and global contexts. Basically, I have reviewed the studies under the following themes: early childhood development, public ECD centers, early childhood leaders and the effectiveness of investing in early childhood development.

Early Childhood Development

As per my understanding, the concept of early childhood development focuses on the child's holistic development, as well as physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and typical developmental milestones. Here, the term early childhood is a crucial stage for any child, where the development happens a rapidly form. The most critical developmental stage of a person's life is early childhood. Early childhood is defined as the period between conception and the age of eight years, according to the majority of specialists (Goldman, 2018). I assume that it is a multidimensional concept that incorporates both the kid and the child's environment, which is referred to as child development. Early childhood is an umbrella term for a group of specialists who collaborate to help families with very young children, and it may be prioritized with the goal of lowering crime and enhancing mental health (Stover, 2019). Generally, early years education is given to children below the age of formal schooling. According to the government, children aged 4-5 and in community-based ECD centers, children aged 3-4 are the target group for ECD centers, though private preschools provide the service to children aged 0 -3 too, which the public ECD centers do not offer (Education International, 2010). If we take this as a reference, children after the age of 5 are eligible for formal schooling, or they go to primary school.

To enable the child to acquire a better understanding of education from play group to pre-primary and pre-primary to primary, the education begins when a child reaches the age of two and remains till the age of eight (Kapur, 2018a). As per my understanding, the country has different grounds for calling a certain age under the children for ECD centers. In our country, where we count the age of three to five for kindergarten, but in daycare, it varies. According to Jatmiko and Wardiah (2021), the early childhood development period is an early period in the growth and development of human life, and it is also called the golden and emerging period of life. Saying this makes me feel that this is a critical stage for a child where they play, explore, sense, and identify the different areas of learning.

Effectiveness of Early Childhood Development

Children begin to learn from a very early age about the world around them, so it is our responsibility to reinforce their young minds to learn in a spontaneous way where they enjoy learning. Early developmental opportunities create a strong base for the child's cognitive and socio-emotional functioning, development of specific skills,

knowledge acquisition, readiness to learn and general well-being (Anderson et al., 2003). From Anderson, I came to know that early childhood development programs increase the child's readiness in every aspect of life, where they deal with different milestones in the process of learning and early intervention of the activities that facilitate developing a child into a holistic area has a good long-term benefit in their life. It provides an opportunity to achieve good results at the primary level compared with those who don't attend quality early childhood education (Bakken et al., 2017). Providing early childhood education to young children with safe, nurturing and needed stimulation where the facilitator often plays the role of the first person who identifies the developmental delays of the child and then helps in better transition for the early grades (Shaughnessy & Kleyn, 2012). I also agree with the point of Shaughnessy and Kleyn that the teachers often find developmental support for the child because not all the parents are knowledgeable and aware of early childhood growth and development; for this reason, having ECD centers can be a fortune for some parents.

Hearing about the importance of early childhood development, where the children are very enthusiastic at an early age, reinforcing them with essential developmental activities will be an outstanding achievement for life (Hardy & McLeod, 2020). Although brain development is most fleeting in the early years of a child's life, when the quality of stimulation, support, and love is lacking, overall development might be harmed. (Fleming, 2019). As an ECD practitioner, who tries to provide ample opportunities to develop the child holistically, which is the good part of sending the child to early childhood centers. We also make sure to create an environment to explore them and gain mastery over different areas of learning.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers

During my personal and professional visits to different places, I have understood that early childhood development centers are the places where children go and acquire knowledge according to their age and level; they consist of extended day care providing the educational program for the child's different learning areas. I have witnessed that there are two main types of early childhood development centers: public preschools (community and school) and private preschools. Both preschools are funded differently. The first one receives government grants, and the private ECD centers are self-sufficient. In Nepal, there are two specific types of ECED schooling. Community-based (public) ECED schools predominate in the mountain, hill, and terai

regions, while institutional (private) pre-primary classes are primarily found in valleys (Shrestha, 2023). Although there are mainly two types of early childhood development schooling centers, I have found that there are three distinct types of early childhood facilities operating across the country. According to Bhandari (2017), there are three different types of early childhood development facilities operating across the country: community-based run by non-governmental organizations with resources handled partially by the government and partly by the INGOs, or by the government and partly by the INGOs with a contribution from parents, and institution-based charges parents fees and runs the school.

In Nepal, the concept of ECD centers emerged as a part of a broader strategy to address the developmental needs of young children. It was established by the influence of global movements emphasizing the importance of early childhood education and care in Nepal; the ECD sectors have had some noteworthy successes during the past 20 years. In addition to the government's low expenditure on ECED, there are 466,187 children registered in ECED nationwide, with 37,700 community-based and school-based ECED/pre-primary classes operating (MoE, 2022). The turning point was in 1999 when Nepal's Ministry of Education set up the Early Childhood Development Section under the Department of Education. By 2005, the National Early Childhood Development Council was established to ensure collaboration among various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, and UN organizations.

School-Based Public ECD Centers

School-based public ECD centers are early childhood development facilities integrated into the structure of larger schools. These centers are not standalone units with separate buildings or spaces but operate within the same premises as schools offering classes up to grade 8, 10 or even up to plus 2. School-based ECD centers refer to the ECD as seamlessly connected with the broader school environment. This approach of integrating early childhood development into higher grades within the same school system facilitates the transition (World Bank [WB], 2019). It is realized that they function as a part of a unified system, with a single authority, usually the headteacher, overseeing the entire institution, including the ECD. In our country, I have seen, experienced, and witnessed that school-based public ECD centers primarily attract families seeking accessible and cost-effective early education for their children. The high fee structure is the main barrier for parents to send their

children to private preschools, so government-funded ECD centers are in service to provide quality education. Free, high-quality school education for all children is an international education motto, and Nepal has committed to achieving that aim by operating public schools (Koirala, 2015). Despite all the efforts that the government has implemented for quality education, the outcome doesn't seem satisfactory. When the majority of public ECD parents come from a low-income family whose children have access to ECD centers but cannot pay expensive Montessori, where the facilitator receives a government quota for the center's sustainability and similarly from the equity (Koirala, 2014); thus, leadership in public ECD centers must adopt a strategy for quality services or education at the center. By prioritizing school-based public centers through effective leadership, they can work toward an inclusive early education system where all children, regardless of financial background, can thrive.

Leadership in Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centers

When addressing a concept like leadership that has been identified in a different way, it is really crucial to think that it can be defined in a variety of ways. Newer traits of leaders include being a team builder, having innovative and strategic thinking skills, exhibiting honesty and integrity, and motivating others to action (Klingborg et al., 2006). I have experienced a lot of school leaders getting through the pressure to show how their work contributes to school improvement. To work better for the quality of ECD centers, the role of a leader takes up a vital space. A leader works in the team, identifies the changes, and allows the facilitators to work beyond their capabilities. Leaders are the people who guide, govern, manage and operate the organization in a fixed way on the basis of its vision and mission. School leaders are learners first and leaders second; their leadership emerges as a result of their learning, opening up a plethora of new opportunities for improving school performance. (Kin & Kareem, 2019). I have seen a quote on the wall somewhere during my visit, "Leaders grow leaders," which I think is true in the sense that when a leader has a mission or vision for the goal that an organization has set, they share it with the staff and the effort becomes the achievement. Headteachers who lack the vision and direction needed to bring the school ahead will never see academic advancement, so they should relinquish control to a new visionary administrator (Koirala, 2019). As Koirala mentioned, the head teacher or a leader who works for the future of thousands of students should be progressive, and the ECD sector cannot be an exception. The teachers who assume leadership in their schools may assist in making the change

occur (Lieberman & Miller, 2005). Here, I can say that a term leader is one who directly works for the children's growth and development.

A leader who works for small children and their holistic development is a person who has a mature understanding of the children, family and the community. According to Klevering and McNae (2018), a leader is focused on clear communication, rationally connected, provides care and support, leads for growth and change and acts as a critical friend. Role modeling, inspiring vision, stimulating creativity, coaching and mentoring are the significant qualities that school leaders must have (Darshan, 2011). In most cases, people think that the preschool is just a tiny area where the facilitator, leader or teachers should not be involved in all the teaching and learning aspects, but I think that is just the myth because the early childhood period is crucial where they need to have a good facilitator who knows and understands their needs. Just having a fancy job title does not mean they are a good leader; it's a commitment where a person sees the clear vision of the center, sticks to it, and gets motivated to work for the young children (Keshen, 2022). Personally, I came to understand that early childhood leaders keep on trying to provide quality service to those young souls.

Going through the different pieces of literature and recalling my experiences, I have been able to develop a sense that an ECD leader is a person of any ECD center who shares the goal of that center and puts effort into making education better for the children and who directly works with the children it can be a facilitator or principal headteacher of that early childhood development center. Early childhood educators need to identify ways to improve relationships with students as a goal for professional growth. The physical environment is not the only thing that ensures the quality of the school. It is necessary that there should be ample activities to let the children develop all their areas of learning (Choi & Dobbs-Oates, 2016). Year after year, children learn by building positive relationships with the grown-ups who know about the techniques of supporting the children. Hearing that the headteachers who work tirelessly for upper grades know how to bridge, where to focus, and what to expect, I delimited my study to researching school-based ECD centers' headteachers' leadership practices. This research indicates and delimits that the headteacher in higher-performing schools tends to be more proactive in establishing policies and practices that motivate stakeholders and promote continuous improvement. Exploring these leadership practices within the context of integrated school-based public ECD centers can shed

light on effective strategies for managing and enhancing early childhood education in Nepal (Singh & Allison, 2016).

Headteachers and ECD Functioning

When selecting research sites, I intentionally chose public school-based ECD centers that are structurally integrated within larger schools offering upper grades. This decision arose from reflective discomfort, and I found myself wondering, “What would I be missing if I focused only on stand-alone ECD centers?” I wanted to understand how ECD functions within the broader schooling system and whether these youngest learners are included or overlooked in the larger school system. In Nepal, many public ECD centers are physically and administratively embedded within schools, yet there is limited understanding of how they are prioritized or neglected by school leaders. I wanted to explore whether ECD classrooms are treated as an integral part of the school or as peripheral spaces isolated from the school’s main decision-making processes. This curiosity led me to study the headteachers’ leadership practices and perceptions in improving ECD quality. I believe that ECD cannot be fully understood without recognizing the influence of those who oversee its day-to-day functioning, the headteachers. Their perceptions, beliefs, and leadership practices shape how ECD is positioned within the school and how teachers are supported in creating child-friendly, learner-centered environments. Bajracharya & Pathak (2019) emphasize that in Nepal’s public ECD programs, headteachers’ prioritization is crucial for ensuring functionality and sustainability. Similarly, Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) argue that in a school-based setting, headteachers can promote quality through collaboration and care-oriented decision-making. Thus, my choice to explore headteachers’ roles in ECD functioning is not a forced connection. It is deliberate and contextually grounded.

Empirical Review of the Related Literature

In this chapter, I reviewed existing literature related to headteachers’ leadership practices in public ECD centers and ECDs’ existence, examining how leadership influences early childhood development education in diverse contexts. As a researcher, I recognized the significance of understanding the evolving nature of leadership, particularly within public institutions where resources, policies and socio-cultural factors shape leadership roles. This empirical review synthesized recent studies to identify patterns, challenges and gaps in knowledge, providing the foundation for my research and highlighting the need for deeper exploration into how

headteachers navigate their leadership responsibility in public ECD centers. Through my experiences, I assumed that leadership plays an integral part in the development and the widening of any institution. So, the ECD center cannot be the exception, where the headteachers look after the whole school and empower their staff through different training courses and capacity-building programs. The competent school leader has various roles as a leader for learning, a leader of entitlement, a person for capacity-building, a community builder, and a leader for resource management; these essential factors influence effective school leadership performance in increasing the quality of ECD centers (Mukhlisah, 2019). A headteacher not only has the responsibility of looking after the organization but also has multifaceted roles in the quality of the service provided in the ECD. However, the paradox that I have been experiencing is that, despite the programs and policies to upgrade the condition of public schools, the teachers, students and parents related to some of the public schools narrate the problems the public-school education in Nepal has not produced the anticipated effects the way it had to. ECD centers are battling with different kinds of challenges to run and provide quality education to children, and the concerned authorities do not pay much attention to it (Bhandari, 2017). The public school headteachers face more resource limitations, which impact their ability to provide impactful leadership (Ansaah et al., 2024). While going through the study by Anssah et al., I recognized that resource limitations often constrain leadership effectiveness.

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on the pivotal role of headteachers in shaping the quality of ECE. Fonsén et al. (2022) highlighted the universal importance of effective leadership in supporting young children's development and learning, as the study suggests that effective leadership is crucial in shaping and planning to improve early childhood settings. It's very high time to think and reflect on our future direction. Further, the research emphasizes the headteacher's declarative and informal knowledge in efforts to improve aspects of professional culture in education (D'Souza, 2023). Coming across literature and experiencing firsthand, I realized leadership plays a vital role in quality improvement in ECD by managing the culture of learning and engaging staff as well. Effective leadership includes a collaborative decision-making process (Douglas, 2019). A lot of progress has been made in the education sector compared to previous data, but there are still some challenges that are dragging the success of government-funded ECD centers down, like parental awareness, age-appropriate materials, competency of the teachers

or facilitators in the area of early childhood development (Dhakal, 2018). A good early childhood program furnishes a safe and caring atmosphere while encouraging young children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive well-being (Knauf, 2019). For this reason, the classroom where children learn should be child-friendly. Nicholson et al. (2018) critique traditional leadership models in ECD, advocating for approaches that incorporate social justice. They argue for leadership that is inclusive and responsive to diverse community needs.

With my experience in private schools and now conducting research in public ECD centers, I clearly see the vast difference between these two settings. Sometimes, I think if private ECD centers' leadership can drive innovation, foster teacher motivation, and create an engaging learning environment, why is this impact not visible in public ECD centers? Headteacher's leadership practices in building trust, fostering communication, and guiding professional development are key to creating a positive environment for both educators and children (Ballaschk et al., 2024). The high teacher-pupil ratio, untrained professionals in ECD, and lack of funds for buying adequate materials have been major handicaps in Gweru Urban (Mupondi-Masuka & Nyika, 2017). In this article, the researcher had evidence of a 1:50 student ratio, where thinking of effective education is just a saying, so this is also a big challenge for ECD leaders in managing the funds and providing enough caregivers for the children. To date, 35,000 ECD centers are in Nepal. However, students from low-income families frequently lack access to high-quality ECD centers, where social justice issues persist (Khanal et al., 2017). It is more inclined to the disparities of rural and urban ECD centers of our country, where the children from well-off backgrounds prefer the institutional ECD centers, where the service is a bit better than government-funded ECD centers, so the children from poor economic backgrounds can't afford it. Access to early childhood education has improved since the national policy in 2004. However, the availability of services for vulnerable, disadvantaged, street children and children with special needs is least likely to get access to those services in many early childhood centers. Well-managed physical infrastructure (toilets, permanent structure, learning corner), management capacity in the management committee, lack of teacher preparation sessions, poor implementation of the curriculum and lack of advocacy in the field of early childhood sector have been the significant challenges (National Institutes of Research & Training Private Limited [NIRT], 2016).

Inclusiveness should be the priority in early childhood education, which will lead every child to the path of success in achieving their holistic goal.

Early childhood educators are the leading personality who makes real learning happen in the lives of young children. A study underscores the need for headteachers to focus on continuous teacher development and creating supportive learning environments but acknowledges that systemic and financial barriers persist in many settings (Gretchen et al., 2023). Headteachers help make the foundation strong for the entire life of an individual, but this is only possible if the facilitator is well-known about the essential terms of early childhood education, which makes them professionally competitive (Phajane, 2014). While strengthening ECD services, there are several problems in designing and implementing the curriculum and teaching and learning approaches for improving the quality of early childhood education and care, ECCE staff qualifications, training and retention engagement, families in ECCE services, feedback cycles, especially for monitoring and quality assurance ECCE system planning, which includes education sector planning, resource allocation, and service delivery and tracking (Global Partnership for Education[GEP], 2019). As GPE says, the multiple models and techniques for curriculum and pedagogy are utilized in different types of service supply (public, private, non-profit), and there is a lack of control and oversight.

Good leadership plays a crucial role in leading any organization, so in ECD, too. A study in Singapore found that despite many good marks on the quality of ECD centers there, the leaders are having some challenges while accomplishing their responsibilities, which were juggling administrative work, dealing with diverse staff, raising professionalism, managing special needs children and meeting the expectation of parents (Saidon et al., 2017). Problems with meeting the responsibility of leading and managing both organizational and educational goals within the legal and pedagogical framework of the system, preparing educators for changing roles, which may result in staff turnover (Alchin et al., 2019). It wants to convey the message that if the loaded work is given to the facilitator, it may not provide a high-quality result. A review done in Ghana examines leadership in Ghana's basic education system, with a focus on the unique challenges headteachers face, including resource shortage, lack of parental involvement and administrative burden. The study highlights the adaptive strategies that headteachers employ, such as involving community members in resource-prioritizing instructional leadership despite systemic hurdles (Dare et al.,

2025). This review tells us the landscape of headteacher leadership in Ghana's basic education.

Leadership in ECD is a less-discussed and poorly researched subject in South Africa, and the majority of ECD leaders, especially in marginalized ECD communities, have assumed their positions without any professional training (Modise, 2020). From Modise's findings, I understood that leaders need to have professional training in order to provide quality service at the ECD centers. Coming up with bundles of literature, despite the growing necessity of early childhood education and distributed leadership, there still exist challenges that pull down the practical implementation. These include a lack of sufficient teaching-learning resources, socioeconomic factors, a high teacher-child ratio with low remuneration, financial constraints, and even the implementation of the policy framework, where strong advocacy is also needed.

The existing empirical literature extensively discusses the challenges faced by ECD leaders, such as resource limitation, policy constraints, and the struggles of headteachers in executing leadership. It primarily focuses on the difficulties rather than the leadership practices actively being implemented to promote ECD services. Although studies highlight the importance of leadership in improving ECD, I found a gap in understanding how leadership is being exercised in practice within public ECD centers. My research stands apart by shifting the focus from challenges to leadership practices and providing a nuanced perspective on the strategies, decision-making and instructional leadership approaches used to enhance the ECD setting.

Review of Policies and Provisions to Enhance the Status of ECD Centers

Education policy is the principal framework of laws and rules governed by the government to make the educational program practical and goal-oriented. Since 1999, community-based early childhood education programs have been developed and implemented by the Department of Education. Designing and coordinating the different kinds of activities for the child's overall growth in ECD is essential, where the District of Education is responsible for leading the children (age 3-5 years) (Shrestha, 2002). ECD centers are expected to provide a child-friendly environment for at least a year in preparation for school education. Where they need to ensure safety, play materials, and the area, including the sleeping area, there should be a Through the ELDS report card package, teachers access children's progress and plan appropriate learning activities where it includes six core developmental domains,

categorizing children's performance into four levels: beginning, improving, progressing and ready for school (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2016). One-month intensive training and refresher training will be provided to all early childhood facilitators/teachers, and more resources will be invested in where the Ministry of Education will seek further quality outcomes for early childhood education centers (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology [MoEST], 2020). The school sector development plan has mentioned that each early childhood teacher or facilitator should have a training of only one month, where they will be just learning some basic guidelines to work with the young kids. Early childhood curriculum focuses on a child's holistic development activities, including healthy habit formation activities, personal, social and emotional development, creative development, language, information and technological skill development activities to let the child develop his/her areas of learning (ECD curriculum, 2020). Because their entire being is considered during the learning process, offering children opportunities to learn values strengthens their ability to be themselves. All-around developmental activities allow them to establish internal values and confidence. The SESP aims to increase access to quality ECD programs, ensuring that all children, particularly those from marginalized communities, benefit from early learning opportunities. By the age of five, the plan targets that all the children will have gained learning readiness for grade one through their participation in quality ECD services (UNICEF, 2016)

ECDS (2021) dragged out some policies regarding early childhood education in Nepal where a child's holistic buildout is at the center of the focus; it includes the goal for the developmentally appropriate activity within the framework of the national curriculum then it also focuses on the active involvement and participation of the parents and the community too. This framework focuses on the child's quality assurance in getting the basic needs. It encourages the stakeholders and the community people to invest in the community's early childhood centers for a better quality of education. Municipal governments are now in charge of school-level education, which was earlier under the Ministry of Education's District Education Office's jurisdiction. Strategic framework aimed at enhancing the quality and inclusivity of its education system, with a strong emphasis on expansion of quality ECD services, Capacity building of ECD educators, monitoring and evaluation, and community and parental involvement (MoEST, 2020). Local government institutions,

in collaboration with local communities, have emerged as key players in the transformation of education, allowing for quick, beneficial change. The ECD facilitators should be selected carefully; there needs to be a leader who really looks after the quality of the center. Children with special needs have to get a quality education in their early years, which is why the environment also needs to be friendly for them; it also adds the strategy of introducing technology in teaching-learning, being on the level of the children (National Program on Early Childhood Education [NPECE], 2021). Special training is provided for learning tools made from locally available materials, and materials in ECD centers were purchased by district education offices and disseminated throughout the district, with many NGO partners involved and uplifting this practice (Upreti, 2013).

By the end of 2017/2018, the ratio of children who attended pre-primary was 84.1%, whereas children in class one with pre-primary education was 66.3%. There will be one early childhood development center per school with the provision of minimum qualification and training, and classes will be affected by the set standards like child-friendly classroom environment, entertaining materials, and enough play materials (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2020). The National Education Policy of Nepal serves as the cornerstone for the country's educational framework, encompassing early childhood education and development. The policy is a commitment of the government to provide free and compulsory basic education, which includes early childhood education. All children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality early learning experiences; integration of ECD into formal education for easy transitions for children entering grade one aims for more community-based ECD centers for more accessibility of education (NEP). I think the National Education Policy of Nepal provides a comprehensive framework for ECE.

Theoretical Referent

In this section, I have discussed the theoretical functioning, which has definitely provided the ground for my research topic. Theories arrange the set of concepts to define and explain the phenomena (Kawulich, 2009). So, a theory helps to know and understand the general principles of the topic of the research. I believe that the theory allows a researcher to add value to the chosen subject matter, and it is necessary to make sense of and interpret the data in the research. In my study, I took

two theories to thread my topic in an organized way. The theories were instructional leadership and the Theory of Care, which I have reviewed below.

Instructional Leadership Theory

There are lots of people who work with children of a very young age and their developmental areas. A leader is a person who initiates the achievement of the goal of an organization and works to achieve the goal for which they have been appointed. A person is a leader who has ambition, skills, personality, and other qualities to motivate and influence a group of people to reach a common goal (Strait, 2020). Here, it explains that a leader generally works within a group of people and stays self-motivated, then tries to influence others to achieve the common goal and works for it. A leader is not just a person who manages or controls the people but also inspires them and not just works to target the goal but also modifies the existing goal if needed and challenges (Malik & Azmat, 2019). I came to know that the leader and the leadership are often used simultaneously and to be a leader, one needs to have good leadership ability and the previously mentioned points. While going through some literature, I came to know that there are different leadership styles, and I adopted instructional leadership theory in my study. As a researcher examining leadership within public ECD centers, I have observed that existing literature predominantly highlights the challenges these institutions face. Even while such research is highly valuable in revealing the hindrance of good leadership, one can see a gap in its daily interpretation of instructional leadership. Sim and Waniganayake (2015) detail the role of leadership in early childhood environments, citing how key to its success is for leaders to possess sound knowledge in pedagogical practice so they can effectively instruct others. By grounding this study in instructional leadership theory, I tried to assess its application and effectiveness within the context of my research topic.

This study is informed by Instructional Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the pivotal role of school leaders, particularly headteachers, in shaping the core activities of teaching and learning. Instructional leadership theory focuses on how leaders influence teaching quality, learning environments, and curriculum implementation, which are all essential dimensions of quality Early Childhood Development. In the context of public ECD centers, where resources are limited and systematic challenges are prevalent, the leadership practices of headteachers become even more critical in ensuring effective pedagogical practices and holistic child development. Without effective management of instructional programs aimed at

enhancing teaching practices and student learning, efforts to improve education quality are likely to fail (Manaseh, 2016). through which to interpret the narratives of headteachers, not merely as administrators but as active agents in shaping learning environments and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Quality in ECD is closely linked with effective instructional practices; this theory offers the most. Given also that research in this area attests to instructional leadership's importance, instructional theory is equally well-suited for this research purpose because it allows for in-depth scrutiny of headteachers' management strategy, developing staff, and developing and applying good ECD from their practice. Further, Instructional Leadership Theory provides a structured lens through which to interpret the narratives of headteachers, not merely as administrators, but as active agents in shaping learning environments and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Instructional leadership is a leadership approach that emphasizes the enhancement of teaching and learning processes within an educational setting. Connecting it to my topic, like public ECD centers' headteachers, this practice involves leaders actively engaging in curriculum development, teacher mentoring and the establishment of effective instructional practices to foster optimal learning outcomes for young children. Hallinger & Heck (2010) emphasized that instructional leadership is a pivotal part of learning. The primary agenda of instructional leadership efforts is the improvement of quality, which includes setting clear educational goals, managing curriculum implementation, and monitoring lesson plans. As a result of globalization, many countries are competing in the international knowledge economy, and their competitiveness is increasingly dependent on their capacity to meet the fast-growing demand for employees with sophisticated skills and knowledge.

According to instructional leadership, administrators have a lot of authority over the school's direction and vision. All instructional processes, programs and activities at the school are specifically planned to support the school's vision, educational goals, and initiatives (Ng, 2019a). I think it is obvious that the headteachers cannot be the only people in charge of the school's educational program. However, this approach believes that the headteacher's leadership job is to create the school's academic core. Instructional leadership requires the ability of the headteacher to make the institutional status needed to expand pedagogical dimensions, develop opportunities for new creation, supply and allocate resources, and empower teachers to assume individual and group responsibility for instructional movement by

providing guidance and support (Ng, 2019b) as the writer focuses here how the successful school leaders have. Interactive impact on the outcomes or the service and quality of the school based on the expertise, strategy and techniques that encourage learning cultures, engagement and more outstanding student achievement.

Instructional leadership determines the primary source of information for the school's development (Bush, 2015). As everyone works for the same goal of providing quality service at public ECD centers where they may involve a broader range of stakeholders, when decision-making is decentralized, shared responsibility, power and authority definitely will be helpful in fulfilling the child's early year's needs. So, in a nutshell I would like to say a leadership with the vision, mission and the strategy for the ECD development would be influential for everyone.

This study uses Instructional Leadership Theory as its primary framework by combining global leadership ideas with a context-specific framework that aims to offer practical insights into how headteachers in our context can improve the quality of education in their settings despite the unique challenges they face. Instructional Leadership Theory is highly applicable to this study as it allows for an exploration of how headteachers perceive and enact their leadership practices specific to the content of Kathmandu's public ECD centers. It includes providing instructional support, fostering teacher development, making sure that teaching practices align with curriculum standards, establishing a clear vision and creating a collaborative environment. Instructional leadership practice by headteachers in high-achieving schools is at the center of academic success (Lamsal, 2022). In line with research in this qualitative study, Instructional Leadership prioritizes instruction and learning improvement, which directly relates to ECD targets, in which learning experiences in early childhood shape the future academic success of children. Headteachers embracing instructional leadership foster learning-focused student and teacher growth (Shrestha, 2021).

Applying instructional leadership theory to research in this qualitative study is an evident and rational choice in light of its explicit relevance to current public ECD center leadership practice. Yet, there is little evidence on whether instructional leadership is practiced effectively. Instructional leadership encourages leaders to be actively involved in teaching and learning processes rather than merely handling administrative tasks; this perspective is critical in ECD centers where leadership must foster teacher development, improve classroom practice, and advocate child-centered

learning (Robinson et al., 2009). Since my research is attempting to expose practice in leadership rather than challenges, this theory serves as an operational analytic frame in which to view public ECD leaders influencing the quality of learning. Although locally available competing theory exists within our context, my research is mainly concerned with instructional leadership and its direct impact on the quality of learning. All locally available competing theories are capable of engaging culture or social areas of leadership, which, while essential, do not necessarily have to address key aspects of learning and instruction leadership featured in this research. Such theory additions will not be of further meaningful benefit to enhance my understanding of headteachers' instructional leadership practices, which is why I decided to focus solely on Instructional Leadership Theory as I have mentioned some reasons that the Instructional Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of school leaders particularly principals and headteachers in fostering an environment that prioritizes teaching and learning. Hallinger and Murphy (1985) argue that the core dimensions of instructional leadership are defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a favorable learning climate, which directly influences teaching quality and student learning outcomes.

Theory of Care

As a researcher deeply engaged in narrative inquiry, I intended to incorporate Nel Noddings' Theory of Care as my theoretical standpoint, and this theory resonated with my commitment to honoring the lived experiences of headteachers who lead Early Childhood Development Centers. In ECD settings, the need for care is significantly greater than in later stages of education, as young children rely heavily on emotional security, consistent support and nurturing relationships to thrive. Neil Noddings' Theory of Care emphasizes the ethical responsibility of educators and leaders to fully present and respond to the needs of others, particularly young ones who need extra support. Henderson et al. (2024) discuss the implementation of a rule of care in early childhood education leadership, advocating for practices that prioritize responsiveness and attentiveness to participants' needs. This framework can guide leaders in creating supportive environments conducive to children's well-being. Noddings (2006) posits that educational leaders should embody the role of caring teachers, emphasizing relational ethics and attentiveness to the needs of students. This approach is particularly pertinent in ECD centers where children often require care and support.

As I explored headteachers' leadership experiences and practices in public ECD centers through narrative inquiry, I drew on Neil Noddings' theory of care not just as a theoretical lens but also as a guiding philosophy that informs how I engage with my participants. Since my research is situated in the Early childhood context where the role of care is amplified due to the developmental needs of young children, Noddings' work offers a meaningful way to understand how headteachers lead with empathy, responsiveness and attentiveness. It allowed me to interpret their leadership experiences and practices not only in terms of administrative functions but also through the lens of how they nurture, support and protect both children and staff. The theory of care thus strengthened my understanding by anchoring it in an ethical stance, ensuring that the research process itself is grounded in care. The importance of building authentic caring relationships with children, which serve as the foundation for their learning and overall well-being. Unlike older students, young children are in a critical period of emotional and social development, requiring an environment where they feel safe, seen and valued. Applying the ethics of care in these settings encourages educators to move beyond routines and management and instead focus on nurturing each child's sense of belonging. Early years are a pivotal period for emotional and social development where consistent, responsive caregiving lays the foundation for a child's future well-being and learning capacity (Center for Early Childhood, 2023).

I have mentioned that this theory has not only been my theoretical referent but also stood as an ethical compass guiding me through my research journey. This theory has prompted me to reflect critically on my positionality (Moralli, 2023). By embracing the ethic of care, I have strived to foster reciprocal relationships with the perspective that qualitative research necessitates reflexivity and an ethic of care to navigate the complexity of researcher-participant interactions. Furthermore, adopting a caring stance has enabled me to be more attuned to the emotional and social contexts of the participants' experiences, facilitating a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of their leadership experiences and practices in the ECD setting.

Research Gap

I reviewed the literature related to leadership in early childhood education, policy related to early childhood education, theories related to my topic and a leadership theory. Going through related literature, I found that the research associated with ECD areas is very limited, and the literature focused more on

challenges only, without discussing the leadership practice part. Despite extensive research on early childhood development leadership, there remain gaps in understanding how instructional leadership is enacted in public ECD centers. My thematic review revealed that much of the literature focuses on the challenges faced by ECD leaders rather than on how leadership is actively practiced to enhance quality. From a theoretical perspective, instructional leadership has been widely applied in primary and secondary education but is less explored in the EY setting. Policy review emphasizes quality standards and leadership development but does not provide clear implementation strategies for ECD leaders. Works of literature lack insights into how headteachers in ECD centers adopt instructional leadership strategies despite their essential role in shaping early learning experiences. Addressing these research gaps is crucial for strengthening leadership practices in public ECD centers. I carried out the research after finding some gaps that contribute to leadership development in public ECD settings, ensuring that head teachers and facilitators are equipped with strategies to enhance teaching and learning.

Through an extensive review of the literature, I discovered that much of the research on leadership practices in our context has centered on secondary and higher education, with little focus on the early childhood development sector. This gap is significant because early childhood education is foundational to children's academic development, and leadership in ECD centers plays an essential role in shaping the quality of education delivered to learners. Several studies, particularly in our context, highlight the challenges faced by school leaders, such as limited resources, high teacher turnover and lack of professional development opportunities (Poudel, 2021; Shrestha, 2021). However, studies rarely delve into how instructional leadership is applied explicitly in public ECD settings. I found a gap in detailed studies on how headteachers enact their leadership practices to improve the ECD outcomes. Furthermore, I found that most existing research is either focused on different challenges or managerial aspects of leadership rather than instructional practices directly related to improving teaching and learning.

Chapter Summary

Chapter II presented an in-depth discussion of research-related themes. I reviewed related literature and critiqued policy frameworks. The thematic review highlighted key elements of school-based public centers, in particular integrating them into larger school systems and teachers to ensure good leadership and

management strategies. The empirical review introduced insight into current practice, barriers, and potential of leadership in ECD centers, as well as loopholes in practice despite progressive principles. Additionally, recent literature depicted growing recognition of early childhood education's importance in holistic development. Finally, this chapter wraps up by understanding further research into how the headteacher's practice of leadership can make a significant contribution to ECD centers' betterment. As an ECE practitioner, I have personally seen so many difficulties in operationalizing early childhood education. Reviewing different literature on the subject of early childhood education from various parts of the country. Here, this research is carried out through the instructional theory of leadership. Studying educational leadership at Kathmandu University prompted me to gain insight into the theory of leadership, which I could look for in my research, even the perspective of the ECD center's leader. Here, instructional leadership theory discusses the belief that a leader functions to achieve the expected outcome. Then, I reviewed the Nepal Government's policy for early childhood education.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I have discussed the philosophical assumptions of the research, research approaches, research design and the procedures that took place while conducting the research in the field. The methods are explained along with the sampling, data collection and data analysis procedures. It also explains how the data collection was done using the interpretive paradigm of the research, while trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed thoroughly.

Philosophical Foundations of the Study

I believe every individual may have different experiences regarding leadership practices. Their family, society, education, experiences, age, gender, and regularity in implementing leadership may be different. As my topic is leadership practices and their perceptions, every single experience of the participants, their stories, and their opinions are subjective in nature. I completely agree with the statement given by Aliyu et al. (2015) that reality exists within the experience of participants. This means that reality may vary from one person to another. The headteachers in public school-based ECD centers come from diverse backgrounds, live in different societal contexts, and have had unique experiences that shaped their journey into leadership. The realities were influenced by personal, institutional and socio-cultural factors, making each of their experiences distinct. Therefore, reality was constructed differently by each headteacher, emphasizing the multiplicity of experiences rather than a single objective truth. Ontology refers to the nature of the reality of the study; the ontological belief or the nature of my study becomes multiple realities, so the reality is subjective (Crotty, 1998). What I believe is that it is impossible to find a single truth among multiple diversified participants. Each headteacher's story represented a unique reality rather than a single objective truth. Hence, subjective beliefs or multiple realities were my ontological beliefs. According to Snape & Spencer (2003), ontology examines the nature of reality, like whether a single reality or multiple realities exist. Here in this research, the ontological assumption was that reality is multiple and cannot be fixed.

Being a researcher, I met with the participants and tried to unpack their stories and narrate them. For this, I went to the participants' natural settings and had some

phone conversations before going to their settings. I really had a good time meeting them, having informal talks, and enjoying tea with Jeong (2003), who mentions that knowledge is constructed and co-constructed in the cognitive mind based on experiences and extracted through interaction. Knowledge in this study was not seen as objective; rather, it was co-constructed through interactions with the headteachers. Their understanding of leadership in public ECD centers was shaped by their personal and professional experiences, social contexts and institutional structures. The closeness and the kind of relationship that I established with them helped me to construct the knowledge that was my epistemological belief. After a few meetings, I interacted with the participants to capture their experiences in the story. So, the knowledge I collected from my participants was my epistemological assumption as I visited different ECD centers and tried to gain the knowledge that was needed for my study. Epistemology is the knowledge about what can be counted, where the knowledge is located, and the different ways to gain knowledge (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996). Epistemology is the way of looking at the world and making sense of it, particularly where the nature of knowledge is entailed. It is also called a theory of knowledge. It is the understanding of an individual of the knowledge we know and acquire.

Epistemology is concerned with how we know things. ‘The word epitome is derived from the Greek terms epitome and logos, which mean “knowledge” and “study” (Wenning, 2009, p. 3). As discussed here, the epistemological assumption of this study also had its epistemological concern, where I went, with each individual creating knowledge by interacting with and interviewing the participants. When I first told my participants about the aim of my study, they thought of proper interview sessions, so later, I started saying just a sharing session of your leadership journey. I personally felt that when the word interview appeared, the participants seemed a little bit conscious. Then, as a researcher, I wanted to make them feel at ease, so I decided to call it a sharing. The data and the information gathered here from different ECD centers and the sharing with the different practitioners on their leadership journey were the main sources of knowledge for my topic. The perspective I have mentioned here posits that the knowledge I gained in my research was collaboratively constructed through the stories of my participants. Narratives shape the understanding of reality, whereas storytelling constructs the knowledge (Bruner, 1991). Similarly, other secondary sources, such as teachers of ECD centers from the same school as my

headteachers' participants, where I found my research-related information, were also my source of knowledge.

Every human being carries a certain value, and that value directs them to move forward in life. Hence, the participants of my research, too, possess the value, and they make meaning based on their value. McDonald (2004) states that axiological values can be evaluated and observed since they are timely, not timeless, and present in reality. In this research, I interpreted the experiences, opinions, feelings, emotions, and even gestures. In the meantime, as a researcher, I was also a part of this research. When I interacted with the people at that time, I definitely reflected my own ideology on certain topics that were discussed in the research field, so I believe my own experiences on the problem have added more ideas to my research. Likewise, the ideology of my participants also played an equal role in creating the knowledge. Hence, there was a big role of value in my research, and value-laden axiology worked in my study. While doing research, there were many things to be considered, so the values, beliefs and biases of the researcher made sense for interpreting the data. Being a social science researcher, I, too, possess my moral values, and the research that I was ready to do was not value-free. Instead, my values assisted me while interpreting the data during the meaning-making process. Therefore, the axiology of my study was value-laden.

Research Paradigm: Interpretive Perspective

As a researcher exploring the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD centers, I have chosen the interpretive paradigm because it aligns with the objective of my study. Guba (1990) quoted paradigm as a set of beliefs that guide action. So, the research paradigm is our shared perspective toward the truth that determines our assumptions about our surroundings. The interpretive paradigm is rooted in the belief that reality is socially constructed, meaning that individuals experience (Berger & Luckman, 1967). Since my research seeks to understand how headteachers share their leadership practices and influence early childhood education within their specific contexts, an interpretive approach is the most appropriate. The nature of leadership in early childhood education is deeply contextual, shaped by social, cultural and institutional factors. Therefore, the experiences and perspectives of headteachers cannot be objectively measured; instead, they must be understood through their own narratives, reflections, and interactions. The interpretive paradigm allowed me to engage with participants in a way that captures the complexity of their

experiences, acknowledging that multiple realities exist depending on each other's unique circumstances (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By adopting an interpretive perspective, I acknowledge that my research is not about finding universal truths but is eager to understand the subjective experiences of headteachers as they work to improve public ECD centers. Interpretivism is a popular philosophical approach that aids our comprehension of the social world by providing meaningful interpretations of the world inhabited by people, which they have already interpreted through the meanings they create and reproduce as a necessary part of their lives (Chowdhury, 2014).

Interpretivism was my research paradigm based on my ontological, epistemological, and axiological beliefs. According to Goldkuhl (2012), interpretivists are concerned with social life, where people have their own internal logic, and as sociologists, researchers need to understand subjective constructs. My research paradigm was subjective in nature. As interpretivism is a research paradigm that deals with subjective knowledge of human experiences, these experiences are collected and constructed as a block of knowledge with the help of a suitable approach. Regarding the nature of my paradigm, qualitative research design was the study's design. As suggested by Saldana (2011), a qualitative research design explores the phenomena; it is only possible when we try to collect the lived experiences of the participants. Relating my research topic and the research question, I chose a narrative inquiry approach that could justify them appropriately. I agree that what matters in research is people's beliefs, and narratives allow the researcher to understand experiences (Bell, 2002). Though there are a number of approaches in practice, and each has its own importance, it is not fair to underestimate the others. Additionally, this paradigm is particularly well suited for qualitative research methodologies, such as in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, all of which I employed in my study. These methods enable me to explore the meaning headteachers assign to their leadership roles rather than quantifying their practices. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) emphasize, qualitative research within the interpretive paradigm values human subjectivity and emphasizes understanding over prediction. By grounding my research in the interpretive paradigm, I tried to make sure that my study captures the lived experiences of headteachers, allowing for a deeper understanding of their leadership practices in public ECD centers. This approach was not only methodologically

appropriate but also ethically aligned with the goal of amplifying the voices of educators working in early childhood education.

Research Method: Narrative Inquiry

As a qualitative researcher working within the interpretive paradigm, my study aimed to explore and understand the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD centers by focusing on their lived experiences, perspectives and meaning-making processes. Given the nature of my research, a narrative inquiry was the most suitable methodological approach because it allowed me to collect, analyze and interpret the personal stories of the headteachers, emphasizing their subjective realities and broader social contexts that shape their leadership practices. Narrative inquiry aligns with this paradigm by acknowledging that people's experiences are best understood through the stories they tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). From the ontological perspective, narrative inquiry is well-suited for exploring multiple realities because it assumes that there is no single objective truth in leadership. Instead, leadership is experienced differently by different people based on different factors (Riessman, 2008). Another reason for choosing narrative inquiry was that it allows for a relational and ethical engagement with participants. Unlike more rigid data collection methods, narrative inquiry involves building trust and co-constructing knowledge with participants (Clandinin, 2016). By following this approach, I engaged with my participants as partners in meaning-making, allowing them to reflect in their own words rather than fitting their stories into a predefined research framework. Another strength of narrative inquiry was that it allowed for longitudinal and context-sensitive insights. Leadership is not static; it evolves over time as headteachers encounter new challenges, gain experience and adapt to change. Through in-depth storytelling and reflective conversation, I could trace how leadership practices develop over time, providing a more holistic picture of leadership in ECD centers (Polkinghorne, 1995). So, through narrative inquiry, I was not just collecting data but also honoring the stories of headteachers, contributing to a richer and more authentic understanding of leadership in early childhood development centers.

As a researcher using narrative inquiry, I acknowledge that interviews and storytelling are the heart of this methodology, as they allow participants to construct and share their lived experiences in their own words. However, I chose to incorporate field observation into my data collection process not as a replacement but as a complementary method that enriches and deepens the narratives being constructed.

Observing how a headteacher interacts with teachers or manages instructional activities added texture and authenticity to the stories shared during interviews. Highlighting that critical events observed in practice can support or challenge the stories told by participants, adding depth and credibility to the narrative analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007). By observing participants in their natural setting, I was able to gain insights into their day-to-day leadership practices.

Study Sites and Selection of the Participants

In my research on head teachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers, the selection of participants was a critical component in ensuring the quality and relevance of the study. To align with my research objectives and question, I employed purposive sampling; I assumed it was a strategy widely used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants, and it is widely used in qualitative research (Plinks et al., 2015). For my study, purposive sampling was deemed appropriate as it allowed me to identify head teachers who could provide a rich, detailed narrative about their leadership experiences in public ECD centers. It is an appropriate qualitative research method in studies where the researcher requires participants to have good knowledge regarding the research topic (Elo et al., 2014, as cited in Bayers, 2018). Purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is the conscious selection of an informant based on their characteristic (Tongco, 2007). This deliberate selection process ensured that the data collected was both relevant and comprehensive, thereby enhancing the study's overall quality and depth of understanding.

My research site was the public ECD centers of the valley run by the schools, where I took four headteachers and just to validate some of the points shared by headteachers, I got a feeling of having few teachers of ECD, so I selected two teachers from the same school as my two headteachers participants. As I live here in the valley, I have had adequate time to work on extended participants, which has definitely added more credibility to my research. I have selected the participants purposively, who I thought had a better understanding of the specific topic of my research. I believe that the leadership in ECD centers is context-dependent, and small, carefully selected participants would allow me to examine the specific realities of my participants. It also gave me space to understand experiences deeply. Instead of the broad sample with surface-level data, I aimed for fewer participants with rich contextualized narratives that highlighted leadership context (Case, 2011). As I

mentioned here, I used purposive sampling. I did not want to be rigid with the criteria, but yes, I chose those participants according to their willingness to share their leadership experiences through narratives and who I thought had a better understanding of my study area. Since building trust is crucial in narrative inquiry, I selected participants who were willing and comfortable sharing their leadership experiences. From a researcher's perspective, this was a deliberate and thoughtful decision grounded in the nature and scope of narrative inquiry.

Narrative research values depth over breadth, and it focuses on rich, detailed and meaningful stories rather than generalization across large data. I chose four ECD headteachers because I aimed to engage deeply with each individual's story. Each narrative was treated as a case itself, requiring time, emotional presence, and detailed analysis. Including more participants might have diluted the quality and depth of engagement that narrative inquiry demands, so I decided to stop at four, not because the research lacked momentum but because I found recurring themes in leadership practices began to emerge and the third round of meetings provided confirmation rather than new information; a similar theme occurs when no new themes, patterns or insight emerge from the participants' narratives (Guest et al., 2006). So, I thought the thematic depth reached was sufficient for the purpose of my study, and further data collection would likely not provide additional new insights beyond what my data collection process reached the endpoint. Here are the brief profiles of my participants:

Medhavi

Madhavi, a 45-year-old headteacher with a master's degree in education, embodies warmth, energy and dedication. Her radiant smile and welcoming demeanor create an atmosphere of trust and respect. With over 34 years of experience in the teaching field, she is a cornerstone of her community's educational landscape. With a grown-up son and a supportive husband, Medhavi's journey into education took a personal turn as she guided her son through his studies and school projects. It was during those moments of nurturing and teaching that she realized the profound role parents play in shaping a child's learning experience. Belonging to the Newari community, she has dedicated her professional career to the same school her grandfather established, which has infused it with a deep sense of family history and community pride. Madhavi began her teaching career in 2045, driven by a passion for nurturing young minds. By 2064, her commitment and skills led her to the role of vice principal, where she honed her leadership abilities. Finally, in 2071, Madhavi

assumed the position of headteacher at the same school where her teaching career began. This chapter delves into Madhavi's rich narrative, tracing her transformation from a passionate teacher to a seasoned leader. Her experience reflects the evolving roles of headteachers in Nepal's public ECD centers, offering insights into the challenges, milestones, and profound changes that define her remarkable journey.

Meenakshi

Meenakshi is a tall and physically strong woman with a radiant, fair complexion who carries an aura of confidence and determination. At 45 to 48 years old, her 26 years of tenure at the same school is a testament to her unwavering commitment to education. Known for her expertise in English, she has dedicated her career to shaping the lives of countless students with both strength and grace. Her journey began in 2056 when she entered the school as a lower secondary teacher. Over the years, her persistence propelled her to greater heights. In 2071, she appeared in the lower secondary teacher commission and successfully passed the exam. Her hard work and passion for teaching were further recognized in 2075 when she cleared the Teacher Service Commission. Paving the path for her appointment as a headteacher in 2075, before stepping into the role of headteacher, she also served as the vice principal, earning respect and admiration from colleagues and students. As a headteacher with grown-up children, she has taken on the demanding role of leadership with grace despite facing unique challenges at home. In her sharing, Meenakshi revealed the difficulties of balancing her professional responsibilities with a family dynamic where her husband's support is limited. Belonging to the Brahmin culture, her strength reflects the grit and dedication of a woman who overcomes personal and societal challenges to make a lasting impact in her community and inspire others around her.

Mohan

Mohan was a gentleman who looked around 40 to 45 years old. He embodies positivity and vibrancy. A gentleman who has dedicated 14 years of his life to shaping young minds at the same school. Originally from the serene hills of Okhaldhunga, he moved to Kathmandu after completing his SLC in search of greater opportunities. His academic journey led him to achieve an MEd in 2066, followed by a major in curriculum and evaluation, a testament to his unwavering commitment to education. Growing up in a large family of nine siblings, three sisters and six brothers, he learned the values of perseverance and collaboration early in his life. While many of his

siblings pursued careers in medicine, banking, telecom and government services, he and one of his sisters chose the noble path of education. A man of medium height but towering in his dedication and vibrancy, he brings warmth and positivity around him. His journey from the tranquil countryside to the bustling city is a story of resilience and purpose. As a father of two beautiful children, he proudly shared how his journey has been shaped by the unwavering support of his partner. He expressed heartfelt appreciation for his wife. Belonging to the Chhetri community, in Mohan's reflections, he humbly acknowledges that he has faced fewer hindrances, which allows him to approach his responsibility with a sense of joy and gratitude. His perspective speaks to the power of partnership and mutual support in navigating life's complexities.

Malini

Malini is an inspiring educator whose dedication to teaching spans over two decades. Nearly 50 years old, she has been a cornerstone of her school since 2056, when she began her journey as a primary teacher. Her commitment and expertise quickly earned her the position of head teacher in 2060. A role she has upheld with distinction for more than 20 years. Born in a picturesque hill of Ilam, she later moved to Siraha after her marriage, but her passion for education remained constant, so she moved to Kathmandu for her studies and job. She holds a master's degree in education with a specialization in Nepali, making her an expert in language. Over the years, she has become the guiding force, teaching Nepali to students across all grade levels, from the youngest mind to the oldest. Her journey is a testament to her tireless dedication and leadership in shaping not just her language skills but also her character and inspiration. Malini got married at a young age; she defied societal expectations by continuing her education and carving a path for herself in the field of education. Malini attributes much of her success to her incredibly supportive partner, whose encouragement has made her leadership journey smooth and fulfilling. Proudly representing the Newar community, she boldly shared that no matter what, you should continue your studies.

Strategies for Information Generation

As I have understood during my study, a research instrument is a tool to examine the gathered data from the field of research topic. As I have already mentioned, the data collection method is an in-depth interview/sharing where I have conducted a naturalistic interview setting, just recording the participant's spontaneous

behavior relating to my research problem, where challenges may occur even in delivering the content. Where open-ended and unstructured interviews have a less formal set of questions, I have prepared some leading questions to address my research topic. When selected participants were questioned about their opinions or impressions on a particular topic, the sequencing and wording of questions may appear. Open-ended questions allow participants to provide a variety of responses; some of the responses will be expected, and person-to-person interviews are advised with follow-up questions (Hyman & Sierra, 2016). During the in-depth interview, I collected the experiences of the headteachers regarding their leadership practices in their ECD centers. The unstructured interview method, in which open-ended questions were the primary source, was recorded, and subsequently, the recorded interview was transcribed. I have also collected the artifacts of the centers to add the information for my research questions.

Entry into the Field of Work

As I planned my information gathering, I went for a field visit to gather real and authentic data for my research. When I was planning for the fieldwork, I made sure that I had the consent of the responsible bodies to enter the research field. Responsible personnel were the gatekeepers for my study, where gatekeepers improved understanding and the facilitation of the process (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). While visiting the field, the gatekeeper helped me facilitate the needed process that had to be followed while collecting data from my participants. Gatekeeping has a range of effects on the research process, including limiting requirements, identifying the study's problem area, restricting access to data and participants, and limiting the breadth of analysis (Broadhead & Rist, 2014). As Broadhead and Rist mentioned, if I am aware of gatekeeping, an individual or a group of individuals will help in many ways regarding what to do and what not to do. After learning about the field and obtaining consent, I just went to meet and had coffee to build a rapport with my participants and make the environment cozy and comfortable where they could share their experiences comfortably. Rapport is the mutual confidence, trust and acceptance between the participants and the researcher (Kapur, 2018b). When I felt like my research participants were ready to proceed with my purpose, I planned for a sharing session and observed them relating to their attempts to improve the service at public ECD centers and their leadership practices.

Data Organization, Analysis and Meaning Making

The process of organizing, analyzing and making meaning from the data in this research followed some process, ensuring that the voices of my participants were authentically reprinted while being analyzed in relation to existing literature and my own understanding. Analysis of the data is the process of reducing large amounts of information and extracting useful data to give it a sense for decision-making (Kawulich, 2004). Following what Kawulich said, the first step in data organization began with recording the participants' narratives during the sharing. Then, once recordings were gathered, I went through the process of transcription, faithfully translating word for word into the written word. This process of transcription was highly important and positioned me near raw data and at the beginning of observing patterns, key phrases and emotions in their testimonies.

I became acquainted with the data by reading and re-reading each of the four respondents' accounts. Iterative reading allowed me to mark keywords, sentences and even paragraphs that were manifestly insightful, salient and relevant to research questions. I went ahead and coded a process in which dominant data sections were leveled to determine key concepts, experiences and practices of leadership articulated by participants. Coding is an easy process in which labels or tags are given for segmenting data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Coding is the short-hand notation that is needed to create a theme from the gathered data and to identify and organize the themes (Cope, 2010). In the coding process, I categorized the similar and differing ideas that emerged across all participants' narratives. These categorized segments allowed me to develop themes that provided a structured way to interpret and present the data. Through this theme analysis, I sought to amplify the voices of participants, integrating their life experiences with relevant literature and my personal reflections. The meaning-making process was not just about categorizing data but understanding the deeper insights within the narratives. Creating meaning and making sense of the collected data is the main goal of qualitative data analysis; it is guided by the theoretical framework, research questions, evaluations and many more to give meaning to the research (Ngulube, 2015). By intertwining participants' experiences with theoretical perspectives and my own interpretations, this study tried to ensure a rich, contextual, grounded understanding of headteachers' leadership practices in public ECD settings.

Quality Standards

In my qualitative research, maintaining high-quality standards was essential to make certain that the findings were credible, trustworthy and meaningful. Korstjens & Moser (2017) highlight that the quality standard is important to ensure the transparency and quality of research. By adhering to the following quality standard areas, I have made sure that this study is meaningful.

Credibility

I made sure to maintain the standard quality of my research throughout the whole process to make my study credible in any way. I tried to provide detailed information for the reader to make my research question valid. To ensure credibility, I ensured my engagement in the process of the research from the beginning up to the end, where prolonged engagement has added more value to it; I collected the thick description data for a deeper knowledge of the related area, and then peer debriefing also took place. Conformability is where different peer debriefing sessions take place (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). I collected the experiences of my participants regarding their challenges when I conducted the narrative inquiry. Writing notes, having a daily journal and adding my own experience. Triangulation and member checking while analyzing the data is what I did to ensure credibility in my research. Through prolonged engagement in the field, persistent involvement as well as exposure of the research report to peer reviewers, where credibility is built up (Seale, 2002),

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of my research, prolonged engagement in the field of my research site and collecting data through various methods for a better understanding of the topic added more value to it. Purposively selected participants dealt with my research questions more deeply; building rapport with them and obtaining consent from them also came under the process of trustworthiness. Writing field notes, having a daily journal and adding my own experience while analyzing the data was what I did to ensure trustworthiness in my research. Additionally, I have collected the data in a natural setting for socialites and temporalities. Moreover, I was equally aware of the grounded insights and conclusions of the study.

Temporality

In my research, temporality refers to the consideration of time and its influence on the research process, including data collection, analysis and interpretation. Maintaining temporality ensures that the research accurately reflects

the experiences and perspectives of participants within their temporal contexts (Bryan et al., 2021). During the process, I remained cognizant of the time frame during which data was collected, acknowledging the participants' experience and perspective. The timing of the data collection and analysis influences the research process and outcomes (Ramanujam et al., 2020). I engaged with participants over extended periods to capture the evolution of their experiences and practices. Keeping in mind the concept of temporality as a researcher, I focused on exploring both the temporal and contextual dimensions of my participants' experiences. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of their journey and the sequence of events that occurred in their journey. Without maintaining the temporality of the study, the important aspect of their stories might have been overlooked, leaving several questions unanswered. As a researcher, it was my role to guide the participants through their narratives, making sure their voices and experiences were accurately portrayed in the unfolding of the story.

Sociality

To maintain the sociality in my research, I tried implementing some strategies that emphasized the importance of establishing a strong, respectful relationship between the researcher and the participants. The rapport was very important for eliciting authentic and in-depth insights as it encouraged my participants to share their experiences and perspectives openly. Building a good rapport with consumers is crucial for obtaining quality insights. In qualitative research, building rapport provides the foundation for open and honest discussion, allowing moderators to delve deeper into complex topics (Aspers & Corte, 2019). By prioritizing sociality, I tried to make my participants from diverse backgrounds feel respected and understood. And this strategy fostered trust and commitment to valuing their individual identity. I also got engaged in attentive listening, allowing participants to express their thoughts and feelings without interruption.

Place

From my limited knowledge, I believe understanding the place of the participants is helpful because it provides valuable content for interpreting their experiences, behaviors and perspectives. Visiting the participants' environment allowed me to collect data in a more natural setting. Observing the surroundings and the physical context of the participants' lives revealed nuances that were not immediately apparent throughout the interview. This approach, where the data are

collected in participants' natural settings, helps to observe and understand behaviors and interactions in their authentic context, leading to more accurate findings (Penny et al., 2022). Also, being aware of the physical and social dimensions of a place added meaning to the data I collected. By considering the place of my participants, I made sure that my findings were grounded in the real-world context of my study.

Reflexivity

As a researcher, reflexivity is the most important aspect of my research process. It helped me be aware of my own critical biases, perspective, and role in shaping my research. Given that my study explored headteachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers, my background as an early childhood educator played a role in influencing how I interpreted my data. I acknowledge that my personal experiences, values and emotions could have shaped my interactions with participants and the meaning I derived from their narratives. To maintain the quality standard of my research, I engaged in critical self-reflection throughout the process. Reflexivity involves researchers critically appraising how their subjectivity and context influence the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). This included keeping a research journal to document my thoughts, feelings and potential biases. By acknowledging my positionality, I ensured that my study remained ethical and transparent.

Throughout the entire research journey, I consciously upheld Neil Noddings' theory of care not only as a conceptual anchor but as a lived guiding principle that shaped every interaction with my participant's headteachers working in public ECD centers. I prioritized building respectful, trusting relationships rooted in empathy and active listening. I approached interviews not just as a data collection moment but as meaningful conversations where participants felt heard, valued and emotionally safe to share their lived experiences. I remember one of my participants could show her emotions without any hesitation, and she even cried in front of me. In the analysis and writing stages, I maintained care by preserving the authenticity of their voices, carefully contextualizing their stories, and avoiding interpretations that might misrepresent or diminish their realities. Reflexively, I remained attuned to my own emotional responses, biases, and positionality, continuously asking myself whether my actions, interpretations and representations were aligned with the ethic of care. In doing so, the research process itself became a caring relationship and an ethical commitment to honoring both the participants' humanity and the integrity of the research.

Ethical Considerations

For the ethical consideration of my research, I let my participants know the objective of the study, its purpose, and the problem statement. The process of obtaining consent, preserving participants, and maintaining confidentiality while collecting the data falls under the ethical part of the research, which helps the researcher feel more confident in the research area (Arifin, 2018). I asked for a feasible time to answer the research questions. I tried my best to ensure that my continuity of going to the field wouldn't affect their care for their job in the ECD centers. Their anonymity or confidentiality was vital during the study so their identity wouldn't be revealed while collecting and analyzing the data, even while writing the findings. Privacy was maintained during the interview sessions of the ECD leaders. As a narrative inquirer who uses the interpretive paradigm of the research and grounds the constructivist theory of learning, I tried my best to present the lived experiences of the field using documented forms of data. Furthermore, the study does not hold the potential to cause participants harm of any kind. I maintained the correctness of data originality and trustworthy results using appropriate research design, participant selection, data collection, analysis and meaning generation. The choice of the methodology should be determined by the purpose of the research and the nature of the research questions (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). So, my research questions and the nature of my study demanded narrative inquiry within qualitative research. This way, I tried to consider my ethical standards. Since a study, in my opinion, is a compilation of concepts from various fields and individuals, I appreciated their opinions and ideas when I was writing in order to make my research more meaningful. Furthermore, I was constantly reminded of the requirements that I had to adhere to by KUSOED's ethical guidelines, which I submitted with my proposal. The rule prevented me from acting unethically, much like an oath. I adhered rigorously to the standards and guidelines that a researcher ought to follow.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the research methodology, grounded in the philosophical foundation of the study. The narrative inquiry approach shaped the design and execution of the research, providing the framework for exploring the participants' lived experiences. The information gathered during fieldwork, along with the regular formal and informal conversations with the participants, played a vital role in constructing the meaning that unfolds in the subsequent chapter. The trust and rapport

established with the participants enhanced the depth and authenticity of the research. Their willingness to share their experiences openly added richness and depth, revealing their practices in teaching, learning, and leadership.

CHAPTER IV

HEADTEACHERS' LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN ECD SETTING

In this chapter, I have presented the narratives of four participants based on their experiences and the contexts of their locations. The participants are four headteachers from public ECD centers in Kathmandu, each bringing diverse experiences to the table. Through a series of discussions, I explored their experiences of leadership, tracing their journey, the stages they navigated, and the challenges they overcame to assume their roles as leaders and the practices they have been doing. Based on the narratives of my four participants, I have identified and developed a set of themes that encapsulate their stories and experiences, both before and during their roles as headteachers in public ECD centers. These themes reflect the various stages they have navigated, highlighting their journeys, challenges, and growth as leaders. Additionally, the themes address the research question by exploring how public ECD center headteachers narrate their experiences and how they apply their leadership. This chapter focuses on synthesizing and presenting the changes they have undergone throughout their leadership journey. In this chapter, I explain their experiences in detail and drag out the story for my research questions. I have come up with some different themes to explain to participants.

Journey from Teacher to Headteacher

In exploring the journey from teacher to headteacher through the lens of temporality, it is essential to consider how time and experience shape leadership development. I believe that the progression to headship is not merely a series of promotions but a complex evolution influenced by accumulated experiences, reflective practices and the gradual process of leadership skills. The journey of the participants makes sense in how they came to that position, so this theme allows me to learn more about my participants. I found it interesting that their journey informed their leadership practices as well. Narrative inquiry explores the experiences of constructing stories that link their past, present and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). One of the characteristics of narrative inquiry is to connect the past to the present and get an idea of their future plans.

From the experience that I have collected through a journey of being in education for almost 10 years, I believe the journey from a teacher to headteacher is a

transformative experience marked by growth, responsibility and a deeper connection to education. As a teacher, the focus is on the classroom, shaping young minds and celebrating small daily victories. But stepping into the role of headteacher expands that perspective; it means guiding an entire team, making decisions that impact the school community and balancing the needs of the staff, students and parents. I also came to understand that it's about evolving from a nurturer of children's dreams to a leader who cultivates a shared vision and fosters an environment where everyone can thrive. Here in this theme, I have tried to put all my participants' experiences of their journey to becoming a headteacher, where they have come up with very emotional phases, too. My first participant, Medhavi, shares her road to becoming a headteacher this way:

I started teaching right after my SLC, and at that time, I joined as a volunteer...During that time, we used to have 6 months of free time after SLC, and my grandfather used to be the chairperson of the school management committee. This school was established by my grandfather, and one of the teachers decided to leave. I was appointed as a temporary teacher; then, I fought for the Teachers' Service Commission, and in 2048 BS, I became a permanent teacher. It's been 34 years that I have been working here in the same school, and I have started teaching at this school. I started in 2045, Chaitra, and as I kept working as a vice principal from 2064 and from 2071, I worked as a headteacher here. I have seen the growth of this school, from a little hut with no furniture to a big building equipped with almost all the important resources. The whole journey has been a roller coaster, and I remember the days of balancing my personal life and carrying all the responsibilities at school.

When Medhavi shared her journey of becoming a headteacher, I could feel how much she had come through. As she shared, she started her career at the same school, worked for 34 years, and is now working as a headteacher. Honestly, her growth and dedication to the school seem very impressive. I could portray her journey beginning with a young teacher stepping into the classroom, filled with dreams of shaping young children's future and over time, she formed strong bonds with colleagues, students and parents. As her years passed, she took a leadership role, mentoring and coordinating, where I felt she initiated a lot to improve the school, as Leithwood et al. (2004) emphasize that effective leaders set direction and build

organizations conducive to learning. Headteachers' term commitment can enhance these leadership practices, leading to improved outcomes. Medhavi's journey represents more than a career; it's a life of service. The teacher-turned-headteacher leaves a legacy of values, hard work, and a deep love of education. I have seen many turnovers of teaching and non-teaching staff in private schools, but I was quite impressed to see how teachers are invested heavily in government schools, though we keep hearing about the quality of public ECD centers.

Meenakshi, my second participant, shared her journey a little differently. While sharing, she became a little emotional because of her journey towards education and how she became a teacher despite her dream of becoming a nurse. She shared her story this way:

I was born in Chitwan, and both my parents were farmers. They were not that aware, but they kept saying we should study. Actually, only my mom did everything because my dad left us when we were young. That's how my mother got all the responsibility of raising us as she raised us. She sent us to school, so I didn't get any guidance from my parents. During those times, most people used to go for Nepali as a major subject, but my English teacher told me once, 'You have good English, so go with English in intermediate even if you don't get a job, you will survive by doing some tuition.' And I took it personally. Then, after SLC, I was desperate to go do nursing because it was on hype, but because of my financial condition, I couldn't afford to come to Kathmandu, and my mom didn't allow me to go to Birgunj because we only had two options either Kathmandu or Birgunj. I was very sensible because I was a strong-headed person. I wanted to go and fight with my dad because he used to be very physical (attack). He used to punish me (her eyes were full of tears). I couldn't insist my mom study nursing. So, that's when I decided to be a teacher and joined the education faculty in the Sapta Gandaki campus. I did my intermediate there, and while I was doing my intermediate, I started teaching in a boarding school; as I already had the plan to be a teacher, I asked one of my uncles to hire me as a teacher then later he asked me to appear in the exam to be selected, they asked to write an essay. Then I got selected, but they put me in junior level because I only had SLC, so they kept me in nursery for one whole year, but that was my biggest learning. I learned about caring for and helping small children. I learned a lot of things; as I was

a student of psychology, I at least knew that we shouldn't hit and shout at children. I was not sad about getting nursery; I took it as a learning experience. I used to think about how they were going to learn, but I came to know that they can learn very easily. I believe people say children learn 90% of their words by the time they are 5 years of age. I joined this school in 2056, and since then, I have been working as an English teacher. Before becoming a head teacher, I served as a vice-principal for a few years; only then was I appointed as a head teacher in 2080. It was a whole story when I became headteacher here; so many friends were disappointed because I am a female. My whole life has been a struggle, from childhood to having an abusive husband to my professional journey to become a headteacher, so I didn't take it as a big problem. I want to inspire other teachers as well, not to give up.

When Meenakshi shared her journey, I could read how powerful and resilient it was. Headteachers sharing stories about overcoming struggles in childhood, marriage and professional life highlight the extraordinary strength required to rise above personal and societal challenges to lead and inspire others. Her difficult childhood and marriage reflect a life marked by a challenge that could break her spirit. Yet, instead of succumbing, she used those experiences to build her inner strength to become a leader. While listening to her, I saw the quality of a strong leader who overcomes everything to work for an organization. While doing that, she is showing examples to other teachers not to give up. While Meenakshi rolled her tears down during her sharing, I somehow felt it was a little difficult for the female because she shared that her mother also faced some violence, and she, being a headteacher, was going through a similar situation, which made me think from a different perspective. A study by Coleman (2005) found that female educators often face multifaceted challenges in their roles, encompassing personal, social and systemic challenges that affect their progression into senior leadership positions. To leave a legacy for generations to come is also a big power as a leader. Meenakshi knew before her strong career base how important it is to know about child psychology and ECD education. I believe that when a headteacher emphasizes the importance of early childhood education, this might create a school culture that values every stage of learning.

Observation #

Although I had intended this to be a casual conversation before the formal interview, it seemed that she perceives it as part of the formal research process and appeared somewhat prepared. However, as our discussion unfolded, she became more candid and shared her personal aspects of her life that provided valuable insights into her character. I observed the dynamics of the head teacher's personality which revealed layers of her professional and personal resilience. She recounted experiences from her childhood challenges and post-marriage life, including challenges such as her husband's drinking and smoking habits. When she was sharing her eyes were full of tears and she tried holding them inside very hard. She also mentioned that when her husband is drunk, he would belittle her efforts, making remarks like, "you are not doing anything". Despite this, she conveyed a remarkable resilience and ability to rise above negativity. In the course of our interaction, I noticed her strong-willed personality in action. While we were talking, an accountant approached her to discuss a school related issue. She responded promptly and firmly, clearly addressing the concern with directness. Her words reflected a logical and decisive approach: "if this happens, then this happens; if not doesn't happen". She demonstrated an ability to resolve matters quickly, which underscored her capability as a leader.

30th June, 2024 (2pm-3pm)

During this short observation, I found it compelling to see how her personal experience seemed to shape her professional traits. Her ability to maintain composure and strength in the face of challenges at home paralleled her assertiveness and clarity in managing school affairs.

Diving into the story of my third participant, where he has shared so many things about his childhood, how he came into the education field and all. Here is the narration of his leadership journey:

Once I came to this school as a science and social teacher 14 years back, I served as a teacher for 12 years, and then I was appointed as a headteacher. Even before becoming a headteacher, I used to work for our school's admin work besides my 4-5 periods of teaching in school. I still remember the day when I said to my big brother that I wanted to be a teacher. He didn't say anything, though most of my siblings are in other fields. I chose to be in the

education sector. I don't know how I got the thought, but randomly I said it. I started my career teaching at one of the private schools here in Kathmandu; at that time, I also worked in a tuition center. After finishing my master's, taking the population as my major, I joined this school, and since then, I have been here. After working as a teacher for a long period, our previous headteacher left the school, and I was voted headteacher. My journey to become a headteacher was not that hard. I must say I was lucky because I was appointed without any other troubles. Because I had helped our headteacher a lot in admin and management work, my colleagues and the school management committee decided to appoint me even if I was not ready. The story behind starting ECD here is that I have made a great contribution because, before that, none of the staff were aware of the importance of early childhood education. Once I joined, I went with the proposal of starting ECD in our school, too, so all the concerned parties agreed. That's how we started ECD here in our school. However, it took a little while to convince them.

Here, the participant looked very confident and proud of his contributions to starting ECD in school. He shared that his journey of becoming a headteacher was easy, as everyone trusted him. Mohan, being a male teacher in a school and leading an organization, might have helped him a little. When he shared his journey, he described how his teaching career was not exceptionally challenging. Unlike many stories of struggle, this headteacher's journey into teaching or leadership seems to have been straightforward. The decision to start an early childhood development program reveals his forward-thinking mindset. Recognizing the importance of foundational education, He likely understood that early years are crucial for a child's overall development. Understanding the significance of early childhood development is crucial for headteachers as they help to plan short- and long-term well-being to help their foundational needs (Teacher Development Trust, 2024). This initiative might have been a bold step. Here, his transition to become a headteacher suggests that the school valued his vision and ability to create a lasting impact, making him a strong candidate for leadership.

Malini, whose experiences were a little smoother in other areas, is here, presenting her narration on how she became a teacher and how she made a roadmap to becoming a headteacher. She shared her story in the following way:

My roadmap to becoming a teacher was quite clear because I wanted to have a government job. I attended school in Ilam, and when I was doing my intermediate, I wanted to do some work, not to earn a lot, but at least to have some pocket money. I started my journey as an educator without telling my parents because they wanted me to study well at an early age rather than diverting from the work. But I filled out the form and appeared in the Teachers' Service Commission's exam, and I passed. When I passed my exam, I told my parents that I was going to be a teacher. After a few months, I got a job where I had to stay in a hostel, and then after a few years, I got married and transferred my job to Kathmandu. If I reflect on my journey from a teacher to the headteacher, it was not as hard as expected, but yes, being a female and leading an organization was not less challenging. People didn't trust my ability, but later, once I started making progress, everyone appreciated me, including my colleagues, parents, and the people from the community around me. I am a headteacher, but I still teach Nepali subjects in upper classes because my expertise is in Nepali, so I teach it. If you ask me about ECD, I visit the ECD classes frequently; though I don't take any classes personally, I ensure all lessons are aligned with our collective goals for early years. But most of the time, they are consumed by small paperwork (she giggled.)

Malini's story is a testament to the power of vision and hard work. By combining her leadership role with her passion for teaching, I think she creates a harmonious balance that benefits the school community. Her frequent visits to the ECD classes show her belief in the value of holistic education, ensuring every student gets the best start and continues to grow under her guidance. Despite her focus on upper grades, she visits ECD classes to ensure alignment in lessons and teaching practices. Her journey from a determined young woman appearing for the Teachers' Service Commission in secret to becoming a trusted headteacher in Kathmandu showcases her resilience. Even as a headteacher, she remained deeply connected to teaching, leveraging her expertise in Nepali. However, she spends so much of her time on small paperwork. Headteachers get occupied by the time-consuming nature of paperwork which might limit their instructional leadership capacity (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2006). Even the headteacher here tries so hard to show more instructional

leadership quality, but sometimes small paperwork might hinder a lot in such a position, as Boris-Schacter & Langer also mentions it.

Instructional Leadership Practices in ECD Supervision

With my limited knowledge and experience, I think Early Childhood Development centers play a pivotal role in shaping the foundational years of a child's life in the scenario of Kathmandu, where public ECD centers cater to a diverse population. Teachers' ineffective performance really counts in the quality of the learning of young children. I also believe that the ineffective performance of teachers significantly impacts the development of children, especially during their formative years in Early Childhood Development centers. When teachers are unable to implement effective teaching strategies, it creates a learning environment that lacks stimulation, engagement and support.

Here, I am attaching how my four participants have unfolded their experiences. Medhavi shares:

As a headteacher leading a strong and united team, I am fortunate that issues related to ineffective performance are not a significant challenge in our school. Our team operates with a spirit of collaboration and mutual support, which has helped prevent many potential problems. I understand that working with people can sometimes lead to conflict or complaints. When the situation arises, I take a positive approach. I ensure that I address the concerns promptly by speaking with all parties involved. The last time I saw one of the teachers from ECD not doing her best, I started having complaints from the parents. I called her to my office and talked to her nicely. The teacher was a bit nervous, but I suggested to her privately so she started being aware of her actions during the lesson. However, it may be because of her age or because she seems uncomfortable with the changes and adapting to new things. The teacher I had first was my own student from this school; she is very energetic and loves taking risks. That ma'am, who is around 50, is a little tricky, but once I talk to her, she also understands, so I believe counseling has an important role in improving the performance of teachers. By fostering open communication and addressing concerns directly, we can resolve issues, so I don't have any bad experience of taking some out for their underperformance. I believe that because of their performance, our ECD is recognized as one of

the models ECD centers in our area, where we have quite a lot of children compared to other government schools around us.

Medhavi confidently shares how she manages underperformance or ineffective practices among teachers. Instead of resorting to complaints about their performance, when the leader ensures open communication by directly engaging with the teacher, it helps in better achievement at the professional level (Muteori, 2020). I personally found this approach particularly interesting as it highlights a contrasting yet essential quality for a headteacher in any ECD center or school. A study by Kilag and Susan (2023) highlights that effective instructional leadership involves constructive feedback, collaboration and learning opportunities. Here, the headteacher confidently and constructively manages underperformance by setting up expectations and providing positive reinforcement.

Meenakshi, my second participant, had a facial expression that changed when I asked her to share her experience with the practices she has been doing to deal with teachers' ineffectiveness in teaching. I have put her narration this way:

As I have shared with you, I was working as a vice principal before becoming a headteacher here in this school; at that time, I also used to tell the past headteacher to talk with the ECD teacher about her behaviors towards the students because I didn't have that authority to address certain issues directly. However, when I became the headteacher, I received numerous complaints about the same teacher pinching students. I decided to address it directly, but she denied the accusations, claiming she hadn't done anything. One day, I personally witnessed her behavior, which left me no choice but to have a serious conversation with her about it. So, still, sometimes I go and do some observation and counseling on how to deal with and make a class child-friendly. Sometimes, the same teacher who has been having issues is not that open, so I feel like she has something in her head. Though I try to send her for the opportunities of learning and developing herself, I don't deny it. However, because of financial constraints, I am obliged not to send her to every training yet; one of my key practices is regular classroom observations and reflective feedback.

When I went there for my school observation and asked the headteacher if I could meet and observe the ECD class, she allowed me to do so and also shared that I could meet the ECD facilitator if I had anything to know because they had one more

hour to finish the school day. Once we came downstairs, the teacher was already gone without letting the headteacher know about it. The headteacher said, “*You see, ma'am, she is different. I didn't tell you for any reason I am going to talk to her tomorrow*”. When she was saying it, she sounded a little stunned, as if she would have shouted at the teacher if she had been there. But, everything aside, the headteacher showed her positive counseling by counseling at some point and helping the teacher to grow herself by sending her for some professional training, showing her dedication and positive side as an instructional leader. Identifying where a teacher needs help and persisting in their effort to uplift the teacher is crucial in instructional leadership (Bridges, 1967). While I was observing all these, I found that quality ECD education is a collaborative task rather than one for headteachers alone. Collaboration in education plays a crucial role in enhancing educational performance and achieving organizational objectives; effective leadership requires a clear vision and mission to inspire staff, along with a strong sense of responsibility to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the management process (Robiah et al., 2024). According to Robiah et al., being responsible as a teacher is essential, but true success in education requires collaboration. While teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and nurturing young children, they can't give all the responsibility to the headteacher. Moreover, I think collaboration fosters teamwork and innovation, too.

Another participant, Mohan, also shared valuable insights and experiences about the various strategies he employs to address the challenge of underperforming teachers:

I had some truly bitter experiences in this regard. Before becoming a headteacher, I was assisting the previous headteacher with administrative tasks. During that time, we had an ECD teacher who was not up to date in her methods and struggled to connect with the children, possibly due to her lack of life experiences. She would even hit the children, which led to frequent complaints from parents. I made several attempts to address the issue after I became headteacher by talking with her and offering support, but nothing seemed to work. At the time I was appointed as a headteacher, there were only six students enrolled in the ECD program. I made significant efforts to improve the situation, implementing numerous changes to enhance the ECD environment. As a result, we began to see an increase in enrolment. However, a recurring issue emerged: many children would stop attending after just a few days. This pattern persisted for quite some time, primarily because the teacher

was not connecting well with the children and lacked professionalism in her approach. Ultimately, I had to call her into a meeting and make the difficult decision to let her go. The main thing is that I trust teachers and give them the responsibility to come up with ideas, so it's not that hard to work with my team here.

From the headteacher's interview, it is evident that leadership in Early Childhood Development requires balancing empathy with accountability. The headteacher highlighted his efforts to improve the ECD environment, demonstrating dedication and commitment to creating a positive space for children. However, the teacher's unprofessional behavior and inability to treat children, evidenced by harmful actions like hitting, presented a challenge that could not be overlooked. Underperformance should be addressed in a way that helps the teacher understand the issue, take corrective action, and ensure that students do not suffer due to serious teacher-related problems in the classroom; school leaders must engage in courageous yet compassionate conversations (Zepeda, 2016). As Zepeda mentions, headteachers should champion high-quality teaching and create accountability. Tolerating or sugarcoating underperformance in the classroom can no longer be helpful in school and children's growth; I experienced it firsthand when I was working as a facilitator in one of the preschools. So, I could feel and read his face while he was sharing it. In this instance, the headteachers' approach reflects instructional leadership to a large extent. He demonstrated patience and commitment by offering multiple opportunities for the teacher to improve. However, the decision to terminate employment can be seen as an obligation to the broader educational context. Instructional Leadership sometimes involves making hard decisions to ensure the collective goals of the institution are met (Murphy et al. 2007). Here, this situation reflects a leadership style that prioritizes the well-being of students, and it is even necessary to make tough decisions.

Malini, a confident-looking personality, shared very confidently the story of her long years of experience in leadership. She shares it this way:

Perhaps it's my good fortune or something else, but having worked in this field for over two decades as a headteacher, I have been fortunate not to face major issues; while I do work with many people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, which can sometimes lead to conflict or challenges, I have always been able to resolve them within the team. Thankfully, I have not encountered

a situation where teacher ineffectiveness became a significant issue or where I had to let anyone go. When I find some complaints from parents or notice issues during my observations, I simply call the teachers in for a discussion. Additionally, I encourage them to attend training sessions or workshops where they can enhance their skills. This approach has been quite helpful in addressing the situation.

During our sharing time with Malini, a few students who couldn't pass SEE came to visit her, and she really inspired them by counseling them in such a way that they got ready for their second attempt and promised to come to the class provided by the school. When she was talking with students, I could sense how beautifully she could impact people just by using her words, which pushed me to realize why she had not encountered such a situation to pull the teacher out of the school. When a teacher's performance is recognized, and they wish to introduce specific innovation in their teaching, having the moral support of the headteacher fosters an environment that encourages teachers' efforts (Podgornik & Vogrinc, 2017). From the narration of Malini and the findings of Podgornik and Vornic, I believe this kind of leadership, where a headteacher allows the teacher to be innovative, plays a key role in enhancing the quality of education within the school.

Teacher-Head Teacher Relationship

Reflecting on my journey as an early childhood educator, I have seen how this dynamic can make or break the atmosphere of a school. I recall working under a headteacher who truly listened to the challenges we faced in the classroom. Instead of dismissing concerns at my school, the relationship between the teacher and headteacher plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of education. This partnership is especially important in early childhood education, where young learners depend on a nurturing and well-structured environment. A strong teacher-headteacher relationship has a positive effect on students' learning experiences, too. Here, under this theme, I am representing how my four different headteachers have shared their experiences regarding their relationship with the staff. Medhavi shared her journey this way:

You might be aware of government teachers who love coming late. Though normal school time is 10 am here, they come at 9:30, and one of my staff who looks after the account comes at 8:30. She also stays after four if there is something to be finished. I know where to be an autocrat and where to be a

Democrat. As a leader, if you become too liberal, you can't work; I mean, I am strict with the school's rules/timing. I tell them if you don't do this I accept but at the same time I look after them when they are in need for example if they ask for some time I ask them to teach half-day finish your duty and go you don't have to write early leave as we have more female teachers sometime they have something at home and say I will be late for two periods but I will catch that up after lunch then I say ok if they are doing their everyday duty and finishing the lesson why not. I make sure we provide some incentives to the class teacher and incentives for those who take extra classes. We take teachers on the refreshments tour for at least one or 2 nights. We have even been to Delhi for 12 days, and we plan some refreshments for every Chaitra. After I became a headteacher, I took a refreshment tour every year, which also motivated them. I celebrate all the staff's birthday at school, they become sentimental and say no one wished me but are thought of celebrating my birthday they start crying sometimes these are some practices I am doing here and some of my colleagues are older than me, but they keep saying they feel like I am their mother That happened just because of my behavior, as I said am too strict and get angry too if things are not done properly, but they don't take it personally they know my habit (with a little laugh).

When Medhavi was sharing her experience, I could see how proud she was while sharing her relationship with the teachers and how that helped achieve the school's goals. From the sharing, I understood one thing: a good relationship between teacher and headteacher gives positive results because, over time reached there, one gentleman was talking to her about a trip where he requested her to let his team from Nuwakot to visit her school because they took that school a model school. From these scenarios as well, I got to speculate that she is well, good, including her whole team. I also support this kind of environment; for young children, the quality of education goes beyond lesson plans. It is deeply influenced by the harmony within the school team. When a headteacher and teachers work together as partners, it sets a foundation for a positive and consistent learning environment. Strengthening the relationship between leaders and teachers, along with understanding how leaders' instructional leadership influences teachers' behavior, can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness and students' achievement (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). As the writers

here emphasize, the good relationship between leaders and teachers directly impacts students' achievement, fostering better learning outcomes and deeper understanding.

During my interview session with my second participant, Meenakshi, she also shared her experience as follows:

I have been working in the same school for 26 years, and because almost all the staff were my good friends, we used to have a good time together. Even after becoming a headteacher, I haven't felt that much of a difference in our relationship. Yes, sometimes we get some intellectual clashes, but we try to resolve them as soon as possible. Around the time I got appointed, there were a few friends who tried to nag me down, but later, they were ok. We work in a team, so having a few challenges is normal. I try to make sure my teachers are happy to work for the school and manage if anything urgent comes up, so they are okay with it, I think. This year, we got very good results in SEE compared to previous years, so that was possible only because of our teamwork. Basically, I have a good relationship with. I believe in open communication when anything arises between us, but I ensure that I call them personally and give them the feedback they need, and the next day, we are okay with it. There are male teachers who have been working here in the same school as I have. They try to be tricky. Maybe they have a kind of attitude that I am a woman's head, but that doesn't bother me; I do what I need to do. Every year, we go for a staff retreat program, and sometimes, we plan teachers' tours as well.

From Meenakshi's sharing, I reflected on my days when I used to work as a team leader a few years back. From my experiences, I think working in a team full of humans who have different experiences and backgrounds makes a leader think many times. But by being approachable, supportive and genuinely invested in the growth of the school, we can foster a meaningful and professional relationship with your teachers, enhancing both their experiences and learning environment. I can imagine Meenakshi because being a female and leading a whole school could be a little trickier than we thought. But I felt very happy that she has a good relationship with her teachers, which helps her achieve good results in school. The important factor in developing headteachers and teachers is to impact student achievement (Van Beck, 2011). When the main goal of the whole structure of the school is to impact little minds and hearts, having a good relationship is also important. What I really liked

about Meenakshi's practice at her school is that if we get stuck in small conflicts, it's very hard to achieve the common goal.

Mohan, my third participant, was looking very positive when I asked him about his relationship with his teachers. He gave me a smile and shared:

Honestly speaking, I am quite lucky in this regard. As I shared, I had no plan of becoming a headteacher because I knew that once I became a headteacher, it was going to need extra time, effort and commitment. However, my colleagues really pushed me to be in this position. When our previous headteacher was leaving, we all had a meeting where the headteacher asked everyone about their eligibility to become the new headteacher. Everyone voted for me and trusted me because of my dedication and hard work, maybe. So, we all get along, have meetings, and have conversations about the things that need to be done. We talk like a family, so I don't think somebody in my team is that negative about me. I have completed my master's degree, and as an education student, I know so many things about teacher motivation; maybe because of that, I also appreciate their dedication and encouragement for the next step. Sometimes, we sit for meetings, and in most cases, we agree on each other's ideas, so I can say we share a strong team quality.

I clearly saw how happy he was when he was sharing about his team spirit because I felt like his eyes were sparkling to let me know how strong his team was. Mohan also mentioned that he is the only male teacher in his school, and he has been doing great by blending in with all the female teachers. From here, I came to understand we need someone to push us and take risks in life, just like teacher friends did for Mohan. Teamwork not only fosters skill development and improvement within schools but also emphasizes children's educational quality (Silvia & Beatriz, 2012). As the writers say, it's not only about the school but also about building positive relationships with teachers. I think it's more like working as a team requires intentional action and a supportive attitude that helps children's learning as well.

Malini, my fourth participant, also came up with the story of the relationship between her and their teachers and then added how that is helping her to grow in the field of education. She shared it this way:

Working as a headteacher in the same school for so long was not an easy job, though our school seems very organized and nice and has progressed a lot. I had lots of struggles to make it here; people were very different at that time,

and being a female teacher added more challenges to me, so I think it's a little different, though. It's a long story. Rather than going all the way back, I would love to share about my current situation. Teachers or other non-teaching staff have come along a long journey with me to change this school to another level; they have helped me a lot; honestly speaking, it's teamwork. We ran up to +2, and I couldn't go everywhere until and unless teachers or other staff members took responsibility. It would have been very difficult for me, but they have always been my backup support. I also support them in their need. Some of our teachers have their own personal issues, and I let them sort that out and only ask them to go to school. Obviously, that doesn't work every time, but I make sure my teacher is well cared for. I have a habit of greeting them every day and checking if they are doing well.

She added,

School is like a garden; the teachers are caretakers, and for the garden to bloom, they must feel supported.' Especially in ECD, I can't give much time because of my own classes and looking after everything. These days, we are adding a new building for +2, which has added more responsibility, so I tell teachers that they are the planners. I only go sometimes and check how it's going.

She was very proud to share how, over the years, her school has become a model of excellence. Not just because her school got good results but also because of its harmonious environment. From Malini's narration, I could say that her philosophy was simple: that having a good relationship is the heart of a school. The way she trusted the teachers was very impressive. The way she trusted ECD teachers, where they were free to make their own decisions, also added enthusiasm to the teachers and made them feel that they also held some responsibility. It's very important to fix the educational issues in school until and unless we fix the collective responsibility issues because education in kindergarten needs the cooperative effort of teachers, parents and headteachers (Behn, 2003). As Behn explains, education is more of a collective responsibility rather than just a single party making it accountable. He also adds that if we only think of accountability in terms of superiority and sub-ordinateness, it's very hard to differentiate the issues.

Community and Parental Involvement

I also work in an Early Childhood setting, and I completely agree that parental involvement is really important for a child's growth. It involves the collaboration, interaction, and integration between the school and parents in partnership for the development of the kids. When I asked how they ensure their involvement in schools, my four participants came up with different stories, which I have mentioned below separately:

After being a mother and looking after my son, staying late nights and helping with my son's projects, I realize that we should support our kids for their better study, but here in this school, that part is lacking, even though parents still rely on 10-4's teaching in school. I used to think about how we can impact a child's learning. I used to think even when I was vice principal, but at that time, I didn't have the authority to make decisions. Once I became a headteacher, we did parent-teacher meetings quite a lot. Before, there were no' parent-teacher meetings, but these days, we call parents at least once in three months. We call them and talk about their children's progress and feedback. Then, after a slight change has been noticed, they have at least started checking on their homework. Even if they can't read, we request them to sit next to their kids and support them in doing their work. Even if they do wrong, you observe that their pages should be filled with something. We tell them that the duty of checking right and wrong is ours, so let us help them, but you have to check on them at home for their homework; this way, we are trying to involve the parents. When we call parents, we make sure we call only one class's parents to ensure less hustle. Basically, in ECD and grade one, it's really good because, in ECD, 100% of parents come to pick up and drop off the children... they don't come by themselves, so I meet parents every day and can talk because of that parents could see what we do in everyday basis and they might have an idea how their kids are learning, and sometimes they also come with the complaints and we too suggest some important things.

Medhavi's initiative to hold regular parent-teacher meetings and encourage parents to actively support their children's education highlights a commendable effort toward strengthening the home-school connection, an essential factor in early childhood education. Conducting parent-teacher meetings every three months, meeting ECD's parent every day, and sharing if there is anything to be shared made

me feel like Medhavi, as a headteacher, is trying to focus on the practice of fostering trust and collaboration, which is very important in a child's holistic development. Daily engagement with parents allows for real-time sharing of children's progress, challenges and needs. Medhavi also shared that she encourages her parents to stay with their children, even if they feel unsure about how to assist them academically, reflecting an important understanding of the emotional support that young learners need. She added that they don't wait three months if something important arises. While appreciating all of these practices, I noted during her sharing that she was not able to hold any essential workshops where parents are aware of supporting their children. In order to promote their children's self-regulation and social-emotional growth, parents must be empowered; this will increase the likelihood that their children will develop reading skills and have long-term access to education (Ngwaru, 2012). Here, Ngwaru argues that a promising step toward integrating parents into the educational process in a systematic way could further amplify the impact. I believe the presence of an adult or parents provides reassurance and encouragement, helping children stay focused and engaged.

My second participant, Meenakshi, who was appointed as a headteacher 6 months back, was taking leadership roles for a few years, where she was working with the previous headteacher for decision-making parts as well. Meenakshi shared her experience of involving parents in the following way:

In our setting, we typically interact with parents during pick-up and drop-off times rather than waiting for a normal resolution meeting. Parents usually bring their children to ECD centers daily, which provides an opportunity for us to share updates or address any immediate concerns in a timely manner. If any issue is particularly important, parents often choose to speak directly with the teacher. If it can't be resolved during these interactions, they approach me. We arranged a time to sit down and discuss the matter further. At the same time, there is no designated time for parent meetings other than on result days. These regular touchpoints during drop-off or pick-up serve as our main avenue for communication and collaboration with parents. I have noticed that these days, parents are more comfortable sharing their feedback or complaints, and I think we are creating a comfortable environment for them.

Meenakshi shared that they lack the formally designated times for parent-teacher meetings, aside from result days, which sheds light on the flexible yet

effective communication strategies employed in the ECD center of her school. These routine interactions create valuable opportunities for educators to share updates, address immediate concerns, and build collaborative relationships with families. However, it also raises questions about whether all parents have limited availability during drop-off or pick-up times. However, I read an article that emphasizes the value of teacher-parent collaborations in fostering long-term learning results and kids' well-being, according to early childhood development centers. Additionally, it was discovered that these collaborations foster congruence between the school culture and community needs, improve communication and decision-making, and serve as a foundation for altering parents' attitudes toward early childhood development education (Lunga, 2024). The study came to the conclusion that at this educational level, parents and instructors ought to collaborate. The practice of teacher-parent meetings reflects a strength in adaptability, where the needs of parents and the demands of the learning environment are balanced, Meenakshi mentioned how her informal but consistent communication fostered trust and reinforced the connection between home and school.

Mohan, who has been working in the same school for 14 years, playing different roles in the school, has shared his experience of how he is trying to involve the parents and how it is impacting children's learning, somehow, in this way:

When we invite parents to participate, only a few of them actually show up, so parental involvement isn't as effective as we would like. We have a calendar in place that includes events like parent-teacher meetings and conferences scheduled to happen four times a year. During these sessions, we call parents to the school to present the reports and discuss their child's progress. However, despite our efforts to reach out, the turnout is often low, and things don't go as we hope. Many of them leave for work early in the morning, which makes it difficult for us to have more sessions involving parents. In many cases, parents in the morning drop their children off before school time with our DD, who comes early, and they head straight to work. This is the reality for most families who have demanding jobs like construction, household or simply office work, and as a result, parental involvement in school activities remains very low.

The headteacher, Mohan, highlighted a significant challenge regarding parental involvement in their school despite having a structured calendar with

scheduled parent-teacher meetings and conferences. During his sharing, I could sense his dissatisfaction, as it was evident from his expression. He didn't seem happy with the level of parental involvement. He also didn't mention any potential solutions or strategies to address the issue. I felt that without sufficient parental engagement, it becomes challenging for teachers to effectively communicate with parents about their children's progress or areas needing attention. Preschoolers' parents require a more defined framework for parental involvement and how to create a positive learning environment in the home (Bayat & Madyibi, 2022). Bayat & Madyibi emphasize the need for a well-defined framework to guide parental involvement, particularly for parents of ECD centers. This resonates with my reflections, as I feel that many parents might not fully realize the significant impact they can have on their children's learning when they actively get involved. Reflecting on Mohan's case, where parental involvement is notably limited, this insight feels particularly relevant.

My fourth participant, Shalini, shared her perspective on parental involvement, explaining that it is not very effective:

We don't have much effective parental involvement in our school. For instance, when parents have two or more children in the school, one in ECD and the other in a higher grade, they often request that we send their ECD child with the older one. In such cases, we have asked them to sign a form acknowledging that we are not responsible for any incidents that may happen after school hours. Another challenge is that many parents work away from home, and some children come from split families, being raised solely by either their mother or father; they definitely work more. I mean to say that if only one parent is looking after them and working obviously, it's hard for them to manage everything single-handedly. Because of these circumstances, it's simply not feasible for parents to be actively involved or to attend school events frequently. As a matter of fact, we are not able to enroll the children from the local community because they go to private and boarding schools. I accept that we lack a lot of parental involvement.

As a researcher, I can relate to those challenges. In my experience, when families face such a struggle, the burden on a single parent can lead to exhaustion and a lack of time or energy to engage with the school. Parental involvement, while crucial, requires support not only from the school but also from the community and external resources. The issues raised by Malini reflect broader societal challenges that

impact how parents can contribute to their children's learning experience. The performance of ECDE children is influenced by the parents' collaboration, occupation, income, and educational attainment (Abincha, 2014). Abincha argues that the performance of ECD children is significantly influenced by factors such as parental collaboration, occupation, income and educational attainment. As a reader and researcher, I fully support this statement. It matches my own observation because I have seen firsthand a parent's level of engagement. I have experienced that when parents are actively involved and have the resources or knowledge to support their child, it creates a more positive environment for the child's growth, both academically and personally.

Professional Development and Capacity Building for Teachers

From what I have observed, professional development and capacity building are the keys to fostering continuous improvement in schools. It is essential for creating a thriving learning environment. Based on my experience, when a headteacher focuses on their own growth, they lead by example, and if a headteacher emphasizes the professional development of teachers, it empowers them with new skills and improves the teaching quality.

Medhavi shared:

I have been working in the education field for a long but haven't taken any specific training regarding ECD or any other developmental course, but yes, Kathmandu University had organized a principal workshop on ECD last time I was there, so I got lots of ideas. But within my two teachers, one of them has 3 months of Montessori training, and she also has experience working in a private preschool before she came to our school. I have seen a difference between a trained teacher and a non-trained one. Sometimes, our colleagues help us in many different ways. For example, one of our friends helped us use a laptop for online classes and ICT. Occasionally, government or metropolitan city training programs, like the one-week ECD training they recently organized. We encourage our teachers to attend those, but such opportunities don't come around often enough. Capacity building in this context feels like a slow journey. We are always looking for partnerships or affordable opportunities to grow, but because of limited resources, we can't do it as we wish.

I am including a short sharing from an ECD teacher at the same school, provided below, to cross-verify the details of what the headteacher has said:

Before I joined the school, I had already completed three months of Montessori training and three months of CTEVTE teachers' training. As a teacher, I must admit that the school itself can't afford personal training; however, I feel fortunate that sometimes the government does organize refreshment training and materials-making workshops from time to time. Our headteacher is very flexible and supportive when it comes to these government-organized programs.

As I summarize Medhavi's narration, I strongly believe professional development capacity building is a vital component for maintaining and improving the quality of education. However, in resource-constrained settings, these efforts face significant challenges that hinder their progress and impact. She also highlighted that professional development is a priority, but limited resources make it difficult to provide regular training opportunities for teachers. When she was sharing about the training, I could see on her face the budget management for sending the teachers for extra training and capacity-building programs. Perry and Bevins (2019) state that teachers enhance their teaching knowledge and skills through various capacity-building programs, which also support their growth as facilitators of professional development. From here as well, I personally agree that professional development and capacity building are essential for enhancing educators' knowledge, skills and confidence.

Here, another participant, Meenakshi, shared her experience of being in the same school for over 26 years:

It hasn't been so long since I started working in this school as a headteacher, but once I became headteacher, I sent a few staff members for training and capacity building. However, for ECD, I could only send in one of the programs that was organized by the metropolitan city this year. The teacher I have in ECD has been working in this school for a few years and was appointed as a teacher in this school before my headship. At that time, I heard she had done Montessori training, but once I became the headteacher and tried finding the document, I couldn't. As the school can't afford self-paid training, sometimes, I ask teachers if they want to pay half so that the school can pay half for them this way. I also try to manage to send them to professional development

courses. Personally, I haven't taken any training regarding ECD, but being a student with an educational background, I know how important it is.

Here, Meenakshi shared that she is unsure whether her teacher has received any training, as the school does not have the resources to offer paid training opportunities. However, she emphasizes that whenever training programs are offered by a metropolitan city or the government, she makes sure that the teachers have the opportunity to attend. Despite her efforts to send the staff for training, she mentioned that she has not yet been able to send the teacher of ECD, except that 1 week of the program was held by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City. While I was listening to my participant, I thought that the success of the sustained expansion of quality ECD programming depends critically on the knowledge capacity among all relevant practitioners. With my own experience of working in a renowned private school and how it thinks and plans about the teacher's capacity building, I was a bit nervous about how the schools depend on a few programs given for free. Leadership, capacity building and professional programs improve or provide a fresh, original perspective on the most important issues confronting today's practitioners (Dimmock, 2011). When Dimmock says clearly how leadership plays a role in providing opportunities to the concerned parties, it improves the fresh and original perspective on students' learning or any kind of learning. Meenakshi also mentioned that financial issues have been a barrier to sending or making more training available. Ignoring school-level capacity building reduces the likelihood that the target will be achieved (Smith, 2005). When I was meeting with my participant for the first time, she informally mentioned that because of fewer opportunities for ECD teachers to explore and learn, the quality we are trying to give is beyond the level. Even if she is trying hard to manage and give more chances, some unavoidable conditions are hindering her. Furthermore, my participant number 3, Mohan, stated the following when we had a talk about how he is practicing teachers' professional development and capacity building for ECD:

I truly believe in sending teachers for training because, as an education student with a master's degree, I know how important it is. However, it's very difficult for our government school to afford to send teachers for training. Thankfully, I am lucky to have a teacher who has Montessori training and experience from working in a private school. She is doing a great job teaching the students.

Teachers' sharing is included here from the same school as Mohan: Mohan narrated his experiences and how difficult it is to manage things like training for teachers if the school is running on a low budget. He was very proud that one of the teachers in ECD had already been Montessori-trained before coming to the school. With my experience of doing one year in ECD and working in the field for almost 10 years, I personally believe there are tons of things to be known and learned from such programs, where we can learn about working with children and be professionally confident in the field we are working in. Documenting the process of implementing a nurturing care, health, or education program is critical for a number of reasons (Aboud & Prado, 2018). When so many articles have been done on the importance of education programs, they are sometimes lacking in our context. Malini, a participant, also shared her experience of helping her ECD teachers with their professional development and capacity building.

We have two classes, which we call ECD Nursery and KG, where we have two teachers who have been working here for a long time. They are both Montessori-trained teachers, and they have experience working in a private school in Kathmandu. Talking about professional development, I try to send them to any programs that are provided by the government and any other NGOs and INGOs. Sometimes, I ask teachers to share their own personal knowledge with each other if they have any. Last time, I sent one of my teachers to the capacity-building workshop, which was paid for by the school. I asked stakeholders to add some amount to the school's small budget, and they agreed that I could send one of my teachers for a three-week training. Last time, we had guest trainers from Kathmandu University as well who shared lots of ideas with me, and I shared them with my team. As we don't have enough resources, I try my best to give them some extra knowledge that might help them in their teaching and learning.

It's very inspiring to see schools achieving so much with minimal resources. It is resilience and dedication from the educators' side. I have seen schools that operate under such constraints, and I think that emphasizes the value of resourcefulness. The scenario of public and private schools is a little different because of my experience of working in a completely private school and observing that government ECD centers have different practices on teachers' professional development. A headteacher who leads the teacher's development program in order to provide the correct teaching and

learning environment gives a proper broadening of education (Mugure, 2018). Mugure emphasizes that leadership plays a crucial role in creating an environment where teachers can expand their knowledge and effectively support children's learning. Similarly, Malini is making commendable efforts to provide more capacity-building workshops for her teachers, showcasing good leadership.

#Observation Notes: Participant 3#

During a brief meeting with headteacher in her office, I observed a notable example of her lives experience regarding professional development. While discussing the topic, she shared that her engagement in professional development activities is limited. And also shared She mentioned that she sometimes attends seminars organized by government bodies, but these opportunities are rare. Her tone and gesture suggested a desire for more frequent and consistent professional development opportunities. Although the mention was brief it reflected an awareness of importance of capacity building and the challenges of accessing such opportunities within the system. Additionally, she highlighted her involvement in groups such as local committee.

2nd July,2024 (2:45pm)

Professional Development and Capacity Building for Headteachers

Capacity building and professional development are essential for headteachers to effectively lead and manage schools. Professional development and capacity-building processes involve enhancing leadership skills, instructional strategy, and administrative capabilities. Effective capacity includes collaboration with peers, leadership coaching, and embedded learning activities through onsite support (Meyer-Looze & Vandermolen., 2021). The study presents that different elements help a headteacher foster a culture of continuous improvement, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes for children. Here, I have presented some observation notes of my four different participants, where they showed the traits of headteachers'

professionalism and capacity building topic:

#Observation Note: Participant 1#

Ms. Medhavi, the headteacher was my first participant. When I met her, she was dressed in her government school's pink dress, looked elegant, professional, and approachable. Upon my arrival she greeted me warmly and ensured her staff served tea as a gesture of hospitality. During our informal chat, one of the staff members entered the room, and she offered them a bottle coke. This small gesture reflected her kind and considerate nature showcasing her respectful and caring approach toward her colleagues.

In our conversations, Ms. Medhavi candidly shared her experiences with capacity building programs. When asked if she had participated in any training specific to headteachers, she admitted "way long back", she explained that although occasional meetings or sessions were held, they were infrequent and mostly organized by Metropolitan city.

21st June, 2024 (3:15pm)

I wrote some of my own understanding from my observation during the informal talk because I didn't have these in my plan, so it came out just naturally. This observation highlights the need to explore strategies to increase access to meaningful and regular professional development opportunities. Their tone and gestures suggested a willingness to grow further in her role despite the limited formal opportunities available. Research by Timperley et al. (2007) suggested how reflective engagement and personalized learning frameworks enable educators to grow within the observed headteachers and align with this evidence, demonstrating a reflective approach and readiness for growth, even when opportunities are scarce. Similarly, according to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), ongoing professional learning opportunities significantly enhance educators' instructional quality and leadership skills, fostering better outcomes for learners. While an article supporting professional development, programs says that they provide a great opportunity for instructional leadership skills, adding to it, I believe this kind of embedded program supports a positive impact.

My focused research method was narrative inquiry, where the primary focus was on collecting and analyzing individuals' stories to understand their experiences. While interviews are a common method for gathering these narratives, I incorporated

a few observations as well, which helped me to enrich my research for contextual understanding.

The study emphasizes that combining observational data with interview narratives enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of research insights (Bleakley, 2005). Combining observational data with interview narratives allowed me to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of my research insights.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the participants' narratives regarding their leadership practices in early childhood development centers. Drawing from their stories, I have identified and categorized key themes that offer insight into their experiences and answer my research question. The participants' journey reveals a shared narrative of resilience as they navigated numerous personal and professional challenges yet emerged stronger and more determined. Through their reflections, I explored how each individual transitioned from being a teacher to taking on the responsibility of a headteacher. The reasons for strengthening ECD centers are also discussed. In addition to the participants' accounts, this chapter incorporates observations that provide a deeper understanding of their leadership journey and practices.

CHAPTER V

HEADTEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPROVING ECD QUALITY

As a researcher, I found that alongside sharing their leadership practices, the headteachers also expressed strong and often heartfelt perceptions about what it means to improve the quality of early childhood development centers in public schools. Their narratives revealed not only how they lead but also why they lead the way they do, rooted in their vision for better learning environments, stronger systems and improved outcomes for children. This chapter presents the perceptions of headteachers on improving ECD quality as understood and narrated by the participants. It highlights their voices, values and changes they believe are necessary for sustainable quality enhancement in public ECD settings.

From my perspective as a researcher working closely with headteachers in public ECD centers, quality in early childhood development goes beyond infrastructure or policy. As I listened to the stories of the headteachers, it became clear to me that quality is not a static checklist; it is dynamic, evolving, and dependent on the leadership capacity and perception of those guiding the centers. For instance, one participant emphasized creating a joyful learning space, and another focused on parents' engagement, showing how diverse and deeply personal the idea of quality can be. The quality in early childhood development is multi-dimensional and context-dependent, encompassing structural, process and outcome-related elements. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2016) framework, quality in ECD refers to the extent to which programs promote children's holistic development cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically within safe environments. OECD (2012) emphasizes that the quality of ECD is not only determined by resources and policies but also by the interaction between educators and children, the learning environment, and the involvement of families. High-quality early learning is strongly associated with better long-term educational and social outcomes, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Headteachers play a crucial leadership role in shaping the culture, priorities, and daily practices of ECD centers. Their perceptions of what they believe and understand about quality directly influence decision-making, resource allocation, teacher support, and interactions with parents. As Fullan (2001) argues, meaningful

educational change begins with the beliefs and perceptions of leaders. This focus on headteachers' perceptions of improving ECD quality aligns closely with the overall aim of my study to explore the leadership practices and perceptions of headteachers in public ECD centers. Since leadership is both an action and mindset, understanding how headteachers perceive quality improvement provides insight into their leadership identity and the choices they make daily.

Quality Through Leadership: Headteachers' Guiding Role

In the real world of early childhood development, leadership is pivotal in shaping the quality of education and care provided. Headteachers, in particular, serve as the linchpins of this quality, not merely through administrative oversight but by embodying a guiding role that influences pedagogical practices, staff development, and the overall learning environment. Leadership that supports collaboration, reflective practice, and continuous professional development creates a culture of ongoing improvement (OECD, 2019a). Effective headteachers act as facilitators of a collaborative culture, fostering an environment where continuous improvement is the norm. Here, one of my participants was sharing his thoughts on how he believes that his leadership can help to grow ECD at his center. At the same time, some of the other participants claimed that other sources also make a difference, other than only leadership.

Mohan shared his opinion this way:

I truly believe that the quality of an ECD center depends a lot on the kind of leadership it has. Before I became a headteacher myself, I worked under different leaders. Some of them just followed the rules, and others really tried to uplift their team. I saw a clear difference: one head teacher can either break or build the whole environment of the center. I am still learning. I make mistakes. But I am trying my best because I know I have seen with my own eyes that one leader can truly make a difference. I also try to get new things done in class or outside if possible. I believe if teachers are motivated and feel supported, that energy automatically passes to the children. So, I sometimes try to call the teachers and ask what they are struggling with. I try to create a culture where my team feels they belong, and I have noticed that effort comes inside the classroom, too. One of my teachers painted the wall as we lacked enough resources. She loves being engaged with the children and looks happy when she is with the kids. For me, quality in ECD is in small, often unnoticed

moments where a child feels valued and happy. It's also about whether a teacher smiles with genuine care. As a headteacher, I believe my leadership should create this kind of environment, and if a leader wants to do it, he or she can do it, too.

Mohan's reflections underscore the profound impact of empathetic and participatory leadership in the ECD setting. His approach to prioritizing listening, collaboration, and engagement exemplifies the principles of the Theory of Care, which focuses on relationships, empathy, and responsiveness in educational leadership. Empathetic leadership involves creating secure, supportive environments where people feel heard and valued, which impacts the quality they give to the children in the class (Henderson et al., 2024). By understanding the importance of a leader, he demonstrated how leadership is inclined to the quality of an ECD center. Leadership provides significant support in improving quality in ECD settings by strengthening the areas of preparation and professional development (Douglass, 2019).

Another participant, Meenakshi, came up with a little contradictory thought on how an ECD is not an easy job as a leader.

Working in a public ECD center is not always easy. The community we serve is diverse, and not all parents are actively involved in their children's education. Some are busy with daily labor; others are hesitant to come to school. As a headteacher, I sometimes have to be a motivator, a counselor, and even a listener to the staff and the parents' worries. I believe in quality, but I also know that achieving quality is not a straight road. When you don't have enough resources or get support from the team or the parents. But still, I try. I have learned that leadership is about staying grounded and hopeful. To me, quality in ECD is about giving them a space to be themselves, where an educator provides them with enough opportunities to let them explore. I don't think that only a leader who knows or does everything is possible to improve the current state of our ECD center. We need the help of parents, communities, and many other things to improve the quality of ECD settings.

In examining Meenakshi's perceptions as a headteacher in a public ECD center, it became evident that she perceives quality in ECD as not a solitary endeavor but as a collective responsibility. She emphasizes that while leadership is crucial, the active involvement of parents and the community significantly enhances the quality of early childhood education. Meenakshi believes that providing ample opportunities to

explore and learn is a cornerstone of quality, which cannot be achieved by a headteacher alone. Effective leadership involves engaging staff, families, and communities in a shared vision for quality education (Douglass & Carter, 2016). This perspective aligns with the principles of instructional leadership theory, which advocates for leaders to focus on the core activities of teaching and learning while also fostering a collaborative environment. Headteachers who actively engage in instructional leadership practices foster environments where teachers collaborate more effectively, leading to improved teaching quality and student outcomes (Brauckman et al., 2021).



Creating a Learner-centered Teaching Environment

Being in education for almost a decade, I understand and can say that the educational environment is dynamic, inclusive, and sensitive to the development of every child when leadership is in line with child-centered pedagogy. Leaders who support child-centered teaching develop procedures and policies that facilitate tailored instruction, advance equity, and allow educators to modify their approaches to meet the diverse needs of their pupils. In the end, this kind of leadership creates an environment where students and teachers are always learning and developing. Here, I am going to present what my 4 participants perceive as a child-centered pedagogy. Medhavi shares her opinion this way:

As a headteacher, I think of child-centered pedagogy, and I also work to ensure that the heart of our school's teaching and learning happens this way, especially in ECD. As I told you in ECD, one of my teachers has done Montessori training and knows how to act and help children in an early year setting. Sometimes, we plan for an activity where a child can do whatever he or she wants. Now, it's much easier once the metropolitan city has decided to make a book-free Friday, which has given us a freedom plan in our own circumstances, where children do lots of extra activities such as drawing, painting, dancing, project work, etc. Once we have practiced child-centered activity, I could see the changes, and I am proud that sometimes we get responses from the parents that our school is competing with the private schools. I also check how the teachers plan the activities for the children, and I find that they are integrated into the curriculum. In our school, we encourage parents' involvement because of how much their children have gained confidence and love coming to school, which has cultivated the

partnership between parents and teachers. We, as a school, and I, as a headteacher, try to ensure the learning takes place according to a child's need, and also, we try the play way method because we don't have enough space, which creates a problem. But, Ma'am, if you go and check our ECD, we have decorated the class, and we have most of the things on the wall that they study throughout the year. A few years back, I added some resources like blankets, pillows, and so on so that the children who were younger could get a good night's sleep. We don't have a school bus, so it's very difficult to take them for field trips, though sometimes we take them to the zoo. In the beginning, we had only six students, and by the time we reached here, we had 35 students in ECD, so I think it also had a big impact on how much we think of student-centered teaching.

During the interview and after compiling Medhavi's experience here, I personally felt that her school is trying to make the school a model for how child-centered pedagogy can positively impact student learning while contributing to the school's overall success. As the school gains recognition for competing with the private schools around it, it has attracted higher enrollment and greater community trust. The use of child-centered approaches improved the way arithmetic was taught and learned in preschools. However, the average use of child-centered approaches suggests that a number of factors may be influencing teachers' adoption of the aforementioned strategy. According to the study, the government should make sure that ECDE curricula are offered in schools, ECDE institutions should give teachers in-service training, and ECDE centers should receive sufficient funding to acquire the necessary and contemporary instructional materials that support the application of the child-centered approach (Andiema & Kitainge, 2016). As the writers suggest, activities in the classroom should give students a chance to practice discussing and elaborating on their ideas, which helps them improve their numeracy abilities. Even though they have focused and carried out a study on math, it helps to understand the way how a child learns everything. Here, they also mentioned that even if learner-centered teaching has shown a positive impact, there should be some provision for this pedagogy to continue. I came to know from Medhavi's sharing that she is doing most of the things possible, though it's also important that the teachers have this knowledge and accessible resources.

<p>Observation Note #</p> <p><i>Right after our sharing session headteacher encouraged me to visit ECD class during the children's nap time, I observed that all the children were resting. The classroom environment immediately stood out due to its overwhelming décor. Every wall and ceiling were covered with colorful papers and various items, leaving no bare space in the room. Additionally, the physical space was noticed limited. A small present, but there was a little room for the activities or movement. The available resources were poorly managed.</i></p> <p>23 June 2024 (1pm)</p>	<div data-bbox="1091 197 1236 248">Classroom management</div>  <div data-bbox="1091 568 1236 607">ECD class</div> 
---	--

From my perspective, I found the setup visually overwhelming. The extremely bright and colorful environment felt overwhelming, raising concerns about its impact on both neurodivergent and neurotypical children. For children who are sensitive to sensory input, this level of visual clutter might create discomfort or hinder focus. Even for a typical observer like myself, the space felt suffocating, lacking the calming effect that more neutral, natural colors could provide. The children in highly decorated classrooms were more distracted, spent more time on task, and demonstrated smaller learning gains compared to when the decoration was neutral (Fisher et al., 2014). With all my understanding from long years of experience in ECD set-up, I think this classroom setup reflects a misunderstanding of child-centered approaches. The principle behind child-centered learning is not merely to decorate classrooms extensively but to create an environment that supports children's development. A more minimalist and thoughtfully arranged space would likely offer greater benefits. While the intention is commendable, this observation and the headteachers' perceptions of a child-centered teaching environment prompted me to reflect on Noddings' theory of care, which emphasizes foundational elements in education. A truly learner-centered environment, when seen through the lens of care ethics, is not just about visuals. It's about how the space feels emotionally and relationally for the child. Care is rooted in a reciprocal relationship between the carer and the cared for, applied to ECD, creating a learner-centered classroom that prioritizes warmth, simplicity and emotional resonance over sheer visual stimulation (Noddings, 2013). In

this case, designing a classroom that supports children's holistic development means understanding that less can sometimes be more.

Mohan is a male headteacher who shared his smooth landing while working as a headteacher. When I requested him to share a little bit about how he is perceived and trying to incorporate learner-centered teaching in his ECD, he said these:

I have always believed in the power of learner-centered teaching because of my studies in education and working in the field for quite a long time. I support how a child learns when you give them a proper environment. I was the first person in the school who raised a voice that children learn by playing or exploring themselves rather than memorizing teachers' knowledge. When I first said it, some of my friends hesitated. They were very comfortable delivering their knowledge in a traditional way. Some struggled to adapt, finding it difficult to step back and let students lead the learning process. This kind of change created a little bit of resistance, and I had to make the bold decision of saying goodbye to my old teacher. When I welcomed a new teacher through some examination processes, she came from teaching in a private school, had Montessori training, and also showed some changes, and we are continuing her. Now, our classrooms are vibrant spaces for collaboration and inquiry. Students actively participate, and we try to teach young learners through play. Before, children used to leave after a few weeks of joining. Once we started thinking about not putting pressure on learning, we have a good number of students now. For me, as a headteacher, this experience has been a lesson in the importance of aligning a team with a shared vision. I learned that without the support of the learner, centered teaching is not just possible.

When Mohan shared his perspective, I recalled my days working as a team leader in one of the private schools. I had one teacher who denied helping students with their theme celebration because she loved writing and helping them hold their hands. We had quite a big discussion as she was ready to change her way of teaching and didn't dare to come out of her comfort zone. After a few sessions of sitting with the other leadership team, we only sorted it out, so completely relating him to practicing learner-centered teaching is a collaborative effort, whereas all the teaching staff take equal responsibility along with the headteachers. Through my limited knowledge, I could say that the teacher's role in learner-centered pedagogy is less that of an expert and more that of a coach. Both the teacher and the students are the main

focus. Interaction between the teacher and students, as well as between students themselves, is how learning happens. Meenakshi also shared how she is trying to include child-centered teaching in her school. She shared her part of the story on how she tried to make a child accountable for their learning; her sharing goes this way:

It hasn't been that long since I was appointed as a headteacher, but I have been working in leadership for a few years, so I know what kinds of planning have been made, and some of them haven't worked. I believe in children's hands-on learning; they are very active learners, and they learn if the environment is given appropriately for their growth. I have been advocating for this kind of learning approach since I came into leadership, but maybe people take female leaders in a different way. I want to ensure a child's learning holistically because they also need physical development, but we don't have enough space here. Sometimes, we ask other club members to provide a space for our children to play in the football. I am fighting this issue as well; I have submitted my proposal to the metropolitan head office to provide us with the space that is available near our school; if we get it, I am going to build a play station for children. I even ask the teacher to plan some fun activities that a child enjoys, though they feel like a burden to plan and keep doing traditional teaching. I have sent them for ECD training, too, and I am following up on what kind of activities they are planning. So, honestly speaking, child-centered teaching has been a little of an issue in our context. My teachers are flexible, though they still go with traditional teaching and don't have any ideas of child psychology.

The experiences shared by Meenakshi shed light on the multidimensional challenges of implementing a child-centered approach in school. I think that contextual factors such as gender, resource limitation and teacher resistance come into play. These challenges underscore the complexity of implementing a new strategy. The headteacher's struggle with being perceived differently as a female leader highlights the pervasive issue of gender bias in educational leadership. Studies show that woman in leadership positions often face stereotypes that question their authority, competence or decisiveness (Shakeshaft, 1989). This bias may undermine her efforts to inspire and mobilize her team, affecting the pace and efficacy of the pedagogical changes she advocates for. I also felt that when she shared that the teachers were not meeting her expectations, I thought of insufficient understanding or skill to effectively

implement learner-centered teaching. The headteacher's narrative reflects the layered challenges faced by leaders implementing a centered approach.

Malini, with her two decades of experience, also mentioned that her stories related to applying a centered approach have been a struggle. She narrated her story this way:

Being in the same school and serving as a headteacher for two decades of experiences, I have witnessed significant shifts in education, particularly in the early childhood development context; however, implementing a truly learner-centered teaching approach has been a journey fraught with challenges, despite parents' lack of education in our context of public ECD centers, resource constraints and limited space. Here, many parents view education as a formal, rigid process, believing success comes from memorization and discipline rather than play and exploration. Learner-centered teaching requires materials that encourage play, exploration and creativity. Many things our school could not readily afford. Even securing basics such as art supplies, blocks, books, and space. We are managing merry-go-rounds and small slides inside the class, and children are obliged to stay inside almost the whole day, so implementing this approach is a tough challenge for us. Over the years, I have prioritized continuous assessment, where we don't focus on term-wise exams, which is a big jump for me. Even with limited resources, we have learned to maximize what we have. Children love coming to school; we provide food and try not to be pressured to read and write.

Here, the headteacher's description of limited space and resources aligns with global research findings on barriers to effective pedagogy. However, resource shortage in under-resourced schools often restricts these opportunities. I have learned from experience, meeting people or visiting various schools, that I believe the headteacher's role is critical in sustaining any kind of new approaches at school.

Navigating Challenges in Public ECD Centres

Headteachers play a great role in shaping educational environments, yet they encounter many challenges that can impede their effectiveness. Here, I am presenting different challenges that my headteacher participants have faced during their leadership journey and the way they thought to navigate them:

Medhavi shared her journey of leadership here, having started her career in the same school; she recounts its modest beginning, teaching children while sitting on a mat with minimal resources.

I have been working in this school for so long that it feels like a part of who I am. I started my career here and have witnessed its transformation over the early days when we didn't have much furniture or proper furniture. We used to sit on a mat and teach children. Compared to those times, we have come a long way, but the journey wasn't easy at all. In government schools like ours, resource management is always a big challenge. Even when we know the children need something or the school needs a new tool, arranging those resources is incredibly difficult. The government provides some support, but it's just a small fraction of what we require. Another significant challenge is the inability to provide training for teachers. Schools simply can't afford it. What I have come to realize is that in public ECD centers, even when there is a clear understanding of what quality should look like, the ability to reach that standard is often blocked by the lack of timely funding support. To me, the challenge is not only about materials. It's also about the system not fully recognizing what early childhood education truly needs. Having said that, we have learned to be flexible. Sometimes, we create our own learning materials using locally available goods. s

As Medhavi shares her story, her challenges resonate with the systematic difficulties. She mentioned that resource management is the primary constraint. According to an article in The Guardian (Adams, 2024), many schools, especially in resource-limited contexts, face funding shortages and rising costs that strain their ability to provide quality education. In the context of my participant's understanding of the systematic challenges and the need for collaborative action, it reflects the essence of instructional leadership.

Meenakshi shared her understanding and the way she is dealing with this:

It hasn't been very long, ma'am, since I was appointed as a head teacher, and sometimes I feel like the people I used to work with as colleagues still take me for granted. Maybe they haven't fully adjusted to seeing me in this role, and that makes things a little harder for me. Relating to ECD classes, we don't have enough space to accommodate the children properly. On top of that, we are currently dealing with a case with the Metropolitan City for the

government's land, which has added to the stress and challenges. And, of course, resources are another big issue; even if we want to do something more for the children, the lack of resources stops us. Whatever is happening right now is just the most basic level we can manage. I have been working in this ECD center for a few years now, and one thing I have come to understand is that challenges are a daily part of the work, especially in a setting like ours. But over time, I have realized that challenges won't just disappear. What I understand now is that how we face those challenges matters the most, and also about finding a way to adapt.

From the resource management perspective, Meenakshi highlighted the multifaceted challenges she faces as a headteacher. Beyond the pressing issues of limited financial and physical resources, space management has become a significant obstacle. When she added that children are confined to a small room, I felt that she really wanted some change. Despite the struggles, Meenakshi's ability to address these challenges with determination showcases her resilience. Space and infrastructure limitations impact the learning environment (Matthew & Lippman, 2018).

Malini also shared similar kinds of challenges; she added that one different thing was that in her school, she is struggling a lot with parental involvement. Here, I am putting her words as it is:

In government schools like ours, ma'am, you can imagine the challenges we face daily. Resource management and the unavailability of basic resources are constant struggles. It's difficult to ensure the students have everything they need. Especially when we lack the funds to do so. On top of that, we don't have extra teachers in the classroom to provide support, and it's impossible to offer the kind of training teachers deserve to improve and grow professionally. But honestly, what I find even more challenging is getting parents involved.

Some parents may not recognize the value of their involvement in their child's education, and this lack of involvement can be exacerbated (Ho Chi, 2024). Here, the headteacher didn't share her different strategy for trying to get parents involved, but from her facial expression, I could say she was a bit frustrated.

My fourth participant, Mohan, the only male headteacher, mentioned some challenges throughout his leadership journey as a headteacher. Here, I have mentioned his sharing:

Here in our school, I am struggling with managing the classroom. My vision is to create different learning centers within the class, but in this small room, we can't even think of it. So, I am really looking forward to getting some help from Metropolitan City to extend the classroom by using our own land in front of the school. The main challenge, however, lies in resource management. Every year, we only receive a small amount of funding from the government, and with such a small budget, it's very hard to do much. Sometimes, we rely on external help from people who offer their support, and that's how we manage to run our ECD classes. But if I want to split the ECD classes and put children according to their age, we need extra teachers, and unfortunately, the school can't offer that kind of support.

From my perspective, it is evident that the principal manages the school with a limited budget and resources and often accepts external help to bridge these gaps. This approach reflects his ability to navigate significant challenges with resourcefulness.

Instructional leaders can still focus on student outcomes despite limited resources (Carey, 2011). While listening and making meaning of it, I thought this kind of leadership exemplifies instructional leadership, which is characterized by prioritizing the quality of education.

Future Pathways for ECD

As an educator and researcher, I recognize the critical role of future pathways for early childhood development as a roadmap to nurturing the growth of young learners. From my long years of investment in early years settings, I strongly believe that the early years are a critical foundation for a child's cognitive, physical, socio-emotional and language development. So, thoughtful planning is essential to ensure each child reaches their full potential. During my visit and different interview sessions, all the participants mentioned their plans for developing ECD centers that they have to run in an effective way. Here, I have presented Medhavi's future pathways for her ECD:

I see an urgent need to create one more room and a nurturing environment for children. Currently, we face significant challenges, such as the fact that there is only one classroom accommodating mixed-age groups and no designated play stations or outdoor play areas. I know this situation hinders children's age-appropriate learning and development as their diverse needs can't be met

in such a limited space. I believe a solution lies in breaking down the existing classroom into two separate spaces, enabling us to organize age-specific activities and learning experiences. I am planning to sit with the authorities and advocate for additional resources and support to restructure our classrooms if possible. We have 3.5-year-olds and 5-year-olds in the same class. More importantly, we don't have space to keep the play area and toys for the children, so I want to work on them. I also have a plan to send the teachers for more training, but the school can't afford it, and we will have to see how we can manage it.

Here, I am attaching what an ECD teacher from the same school said:

I think if we want to run the ECD effectively, we need to seriously consider the importance of placing children according to their age group. In our ECD class, we usually admit children starting from three and a half years old. However, there have been times when we have had children as old as 11 to 12 years in the same class. This happens particularly when those children haven't been to school before and lack basic knowledge of letters or foundational skills. Fortunately, this year, the situation is somewhat better. While we still have mixed age groups, the children are generally within the six-to-seven-year age range. For example, if you look at the child in the blue outfit sitting in the corner, she is seven years old (pointing at the child). Managing such a mixed-age group is challenging. However, there is another challenge: if we don't accept older children, younger ones often don't come either because parents prefer to send them together. This creates a balancing act for us as educators, but it's something we have to tackle thoughtfully to make ECD more impactful.

During the time I visited the school, the headteacher showed me the class where ECD children were studying; some of them were sleeping, some of them were writing, and the class looked very busy and overcrowded. So, from Medhavi's sharing, I could see the urge for all the responsible authorities to consider the proposal to keep children in separate groups according to their age and needs. I felt that once the rooms were separated, the teachers could also plan for more opportunities for the children. The study carried out by Obaki (2017) emphasizes that engaging children in diverse learning areas within the classroom enhances their learning skills. While going through the study and getting back to reality, there is a big gap. The school where Medhavi works as a headteacher is very congested, and they can't even think

of a single area to build inside the class. We can imagine what it looks like and how it feels to have 35 young children in one single room.

As a researcher delving into the practices and challenges in the ECD context, I encountered an intriguing inconsistency in the age groups reported by the head teacher and ECD from the same school. Adding to the complexity, the ECD teacher shared that accommodating children as old as 11 to 12 years. Such a broad age range within the same educational setting raises questions about the curriculum's adaptability and differentiated teaching practices required to address the diverse developmental needs of these age groups. Studies in Nepal have also noted that variations in enrolment and retention rates can often lead to irregular age grouping in classrooms, particularly in rural or resource-constrained schools (UNICEF, 2016). Meenakshi shared her future plans this way:

My plans were limited to thoughts; since I came into the leadership role, we have been asking for a space where children can play, and I think about their physical development as well. We have land 200m away from the school that's the government's land, and I have asked for a school, and I kept in budget for that same land, even the previous headteachers fought for it for quite a long, and we won the case, but the people living on that land haven't moved yet. I requested 5.5 crores of budget to build a new building on that land, but Metropolitan City has a law that from now onwards, there are no buildings on the government's land, so we got rejected. Ma'am, as you have seen here, kids don't have any space; sometimes, we ask for the club's ground, and they are giving it to another school these days, so it's hard to get the ground as well. As we can't pay, they might pay for the ground, so other schools get that ground. So, for now, my dream is to have more space for children to play and explore.

During my engagement with a participant in my study, she shared her desire for additional space in her school to address the current challenges. She emphasized how important a well-structured physical environment is for students' overall development. I deeply value her perspective as it underscores a fundamental issue many early childhoods development centers face. However, reflecting further as a researcher, I believe this opens a broader discussion. While physical space and infrastructure are critical, ECD development encompasses much more. Addressing infrastructure is necessary, but it must go hand in hand with thoughtful planning for age-appropriate resources, teacher training, and inclusive policy. Focusing solely on

physical infrastructure may overlook critical aspects of ECD, like a comprehensive support system, including quality teacher-child integrations, play-based learning methodology, and an emotional support environment, which is essential for effective early childhood education (Gallagher & Clifford, 2000). While going through all of the processes of listening, understanding and researching, I understood how the early childhood development program is multifaceted, where an educator needs to think beyond the boundaries of general thinking.

Mohan, a male headteacher, also shared his future pathways for developing ECD in the following way:

In ECD, we have very mixed abilities, and the age group may be from 3 years to 6 years, all in the same room. I feel very bad about it, but there is nothing I can do because we don't have extra room to split the class. The main problem is a teacher, as I have already mentioned, and once we add a class, we need physical infrastructure along with an extra teacher, which I have submitted the proposal in a metropolitan city. We already have one big room, and I have the plan to extend ECD in that room and set up corners like science, math and play corners. So, I have a plan, but we don't have a source to do all of those. I have two plans for now: 1st is to separate the students according to their age group because I have already asked for one teacher in ECD. I am sure we can manage the space. If you notice, we have a little space in the front area, which was for rent before the time the metropolitan city didn't allow it for business purposes, so it's not in use. We have that hut, and 2nd is to run grade one in the ECD model. We have been struggling to run grade one because when they come from ECD, they are not used to desks and benches, and they are little as well, so it's hard for them to sit in the same place for a long time.

The headteacher participant shared an insightful and strategic plan to address the issue in their early childhood development center. He said challenges were posed by mixed-age group classrooms comprising children aged three to six years. This participant recognizes that such a broad range creates a significant gap in developmental needs and learning abilities, making it difficult to provide appropriate activities. Moreover, Mohan has an innovative idea to align grade one within an ECD model. This approach is rooted in the understanding that ECD children cannot cope easily and that formal schooling can be less overwhelming. He has already initiated steps to split the class by requesting an additional teacher to support him. I think

mixed-age classrooms offer opportunities for social development. However, these settings present challenges, particularly in curriculum design. Managing a diverse classroom requires a heightened awareness of individual student capabilities to ensure effective learning outcomes (Tomlinson, 2001). From my experience and reading some articles, I found out that the classroom with mixed-age students requires educators to be highly aware of individual student capabilities and to implement differentiated instruction strategies.

Observation Note:

As I arrived at the school, it was nearly lunchtime for the children. While the students were engaged in their classroom activities, I had an informal conversation with the headteacher. During our chat, a sudden incident caught my attention: a child came running down the corridor, slipped, and bumped his head on the hard floor. The child cried intensely as I hurried to assist him. After helping him up, I inquired about the availability of first aid. To my surprise, the school head teacher informed me that the school didn't have any first-aid facilities in place. He explained that in cases of a serious injury, they contact the nearby health post: for minor incidents, they assume the situation to be managed without intervention.

Another notable observation was the lack of physical space and resources for the children. The school operated within a limited structure, beginning right from the main entrance door, leaving no designated area for outdoor play or activity. Additionally, when I visited the ECD class the students were of mixed age groups, which posed its own challenges in terms of curriculum differentiation and classroom management.

1st July 2024 (3:15pm)

In my view, the lack of preparation for injury was a significant concern. Even small injuries to a child's head can lead to serious issues and require immediate treatment. However, the school seemed to have a gap in its basic health and safety framework as its approach to safety seemed reactive, not proactive. The headteacher spoke about the larger vision for the Early Childhood Development Center, but there were no viable plans to bridge any gaps, such as first-aid resources. The research illustrates how important it is for ECD center educators to receive first-aid training to improve the overall safety of children and to ensure any injuries or health issues that arise during school can receive an immediate and appropriate response (Ilha et al., 2021).

Malini was quite a chill kind of headteacher compared to another headteacher I met. She was outspoken, and the way she welcomed me was very appreciable. Malini carries the personality of a dreamer who thinks about the next possible step.

She also had some plans to make her ECD better in the future, where she shared the following things:

I have a plan to send ECD teachers for Montessori training, so let's see how it goes. I see their level of anxiety working with small kids for the whole day; I really encourage them to stay positive. Teachers were not habitual in the things that the metropolitan city had asked all the schools to do. They send a resource person for the follow-ups, and all teachers feel very frustrated, so they are thinking of sending them for some training so they will know the value of working a little more for the kids. Another plan is to raise their salary scale either from the school or by talking with metropolitan cities; these two are on my to-do list for now. We have such a nice ground, and sometimes we can't use it; I have submitted the proposal if the community comes to the point where we can use it for good purposes.

Malini has demonstrated a commendable commitment to enhancing educational quality by proposing several strategic initiatives. Firstly, she plans to enroll her teaching staff in Montessori training programs, recognizing the value of change in approach where a child fosters their ability. Providing teachers with specialized training equips them with the necessary skills to implement the methodology effectively (Ahmed et al., 2021). When the headteacher shared that she wanted to raise the salary, that dragged my mind because pay skill raises might help teachers to be more motivated. After the increase in teachers' salaries, they became significantly more satisfied with their teaching profession (Abd-El-Fattah, 2010). I have a feeling that these combined efforts, investing in teacher training, improving compensation and optimizing physical spaces, are likely to contribute to ECD growth and better performance.

Chapter Summary

This chapter represented the headteachers' perceptions regarding their roles in improving the quality of Early Childhood Development. Drawing from narrative data, several sub-themes emerged that reflect their understanding and lived experiences of leadership in quality enhancement. Together, these themes that I have mentioned here reveal that headteachers perceive quality as a multilayered process anchored in leadership, care context awareness, and a deep belief in the potential of early education.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSIONS AND KEY INSIGHTS

In this chapter, I have included the key insights and discussion. My perception based on the inputs I have obtained through this research work has been mentioned in key insights, and the information I received to answer my research questions has been discussed further with the help of theory in the discussion phase. The combination of new constructive knowledge and its alignment with the theory can be observed in this chapter.

Discussion

As a researcher deeply immersed in this study, writing Chapter VI feels like bringing a piece of a complex puzzle together. This chapter is a space to critically reflect on the findings, considering how they resonate with my initial motivations, theoretical framework, and the questions that guided this inquiry. Through this discussion, I provide clarity and perspective by interpreting the data within the text of real-world applications and scholarly debates. My role as a researcher has not only been to analyze but also to question and explore what these findings mean for ECD educators. This chapter is where I connect the dots and share insights and conversations in this field, grounded in my experience and understanding of the research journey. Based on the narration of all my participants, I have tried to proceed with this topic with a fine discussion. Managing ECD centers effectively seemed to be a challenge for all the participants. They have managed not only challenges but also with the available resources, which was commendable. My research question is, *“How do the headteachers of public ECD centers narrate the experiences of their leadership practices?”* I have tried to connect their personal experience to the professional as well.

Perseverance Amidst Adversity: Headteachers ' Commitment to ECD

Development

As a researcher, I was deeply inspired by the resilience and unwavering dedication of the head teachers and participants in my study. Despite facing significant challenges such as limited resources, insufficient training, and infrastructural shortcomings, they demonstrated remarkable willpower and tried from their level to understand the importance of early childhood education, which was

acknowledged. Each of the participants had taken innovative steps to address the gaps in their centers, whether by initiating small-scale solutions, repurposing limited resources, or adapting practices to suit their context. Though most of the factors were beyond their control, like insufficient funding and lack of support, they still pushed forward with a strong belief in the value of ECD. My research stands on instructional leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of school leaders in guiding educational practices, supporting teacher development, and creating an environment conducive to student learning. When a headteacher embodies instructional leadership, they not only navigate challenges effectively but also inspire their staff to maintain commitment amidst adversity. A leader is not just a person who manages or controls the people but also inspires them and not just works to target the goal but also modifies the existing goal if needed and challenges (Malik & Azmat, 2019). Studies have even been conducted on how instructional leaders help grow an organization. Connecting this to my participants' experiences, one participant shared an exceptional example of personal sacrifice: using her own money to buy snacks for the children at her ECD center when resources were not available. This act not only reflects a profound sense of responsibility but also exemplifies a key characteristic of resilience and perseverance expected of instructional leaders.

As a researcher, one of the most inspiring stories I encountered was from a head teacher who has dedicated over 20 years to the same school, witnessing and shaping the entire growth process of her Early Childhood Development center. Headteachers' instructional leadership and sustained commitment to a single institution enable them to identify areas for improvement, thereby enhancing overall school outcomes (Samoei, 2014). Her journey reflects the profound impact of instructional leadership. Leaders encourage, inspire, and motivate employees to innovate and create change that will help grow and shape the future success of the organization (Khan et al., 2020). So, her story is a testament to the power of leadership. During the sharing, Medhavi vividly described the humble beginnings of her childhood development center, where children were taught in a small hut, a tent-like structure with no adequate resources, no proper space, no materials and no provision for snacks. Through her relentless commitment and vision, she has overseen a transformation. Today, the same center stands as a model of good practice, even though there might be some improvement plans and loopholes competing with private ECD centers.

During the sharing and meeting of my participants, one of the inspiring narratives I came across was from a participant who exemplified resilience despite the significant challenges in her personal life. She shared how she has been shouldering most of the responsibilities at home due to family issues, with little support from her husband. Even in such difficult circumstances, she demonstrated commitment to her role, striving to bring meaningful changes to her ECD center. The headteachers' demonstrating resilience enhances their instructional leadership and positively influences quality (Wallace & Hall, 1994). Instructional leadership and resilience are deeply interconnected, forming a dynamic relationship that drives school improvement and organizational success. One might argue that instructional leadership is primarily about strategic planning, curriculum implementation and teacher development, which are largely technical. However, another perspective emphasizes that leading an educational institution involves navigating complex challenges such as financial constraints, staff conflict, and personal challenges, so, in this context, resilience becomes an important skill to maintain instructional goals. In a study by Day and Gu (2010), School leaders maintain a sense of moral purpose and personal commitment despite adversity, ensuring stability and progress within the institutions. Without resilience, even the most strategically sound instructional leadership efforts may falter under pressure. Coming to the common ground, it becomes clear that resilience is not just an additional trait of instructional leaders. It is the core of what they do.

Headteachers shared how they have to manage most of the things at home and still have to carry their workload, and they do have a dream of expanding the space in their ECD centers; this kind of idea reflects forward thinking and a drive for improvement. While there might be gaps in understanding another critical aspect of ECD development, the willingness to plan and advocate for growth signals an underlying perseverance. From the lens of instructional leadership, these participants' efforts to envision growth underscore a fundamental quality of effective leadership (McBrayer et al., 2020). Being a researcher, I found this level of perseverance in the face of personal and institutional challenges profoundly inspiring. It highlighted that even in difficult situations, leaders with dedication can push for meaningful change. So, in conclusion, the headteachers' perseverance amid adversity enables instructional leaders to sustain the vision.

Leadership as Instructional Guidance and Emotional Anchoring

The narratives of ECD headteachers in public ECD centers revealed a dual understanding of leadership as both instructional guidance and emotional anchoring. Participants described their roles not only as administrative but as deeply intertwined with teaching and learning processes. This aligns with Instructional Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the leader's role in shaping the educational environment to enhance student learning outcomes (Brauckmann et al., 2021). One headteacher reflected, "I have been working in this school for a long time. It feels like a part of me. I started my career here and have witnessed its transformation". This sentiment underscores a commitment that transcends managerial duties, highlighting a dedication to fostering a learning environment responsive to children's needs. Such commitment is indicative of instructional leaders who prioritize curriculum quality and teacher development to improve educational outcomes (Eggen & Kauchak, 2021).

The intersection of instructional leadership and care ethics in participants' narratives suggests a comprehensive leadership model that addresses both the structural and emotional dimensions of ECD. Headteachers not only focus on curriculum and resource management but also on building trusting relationships with children, parents, and staff. This integrated approach reflects a nuanced understanding of leadership, where headteachers serve as instructional guides and emotional anchors. Such a model is instrumental in navigating the complexities of public ECD settings, where challenges are multifaceted, and solutions require both strategic planning and compassionate engagement.

Embracing a Caring Ethic in Leadership Practices

Beyond instructional responsibilities, headteachers perceive their roles through the lens of care, emphasizing emotional support and relational engagement with children. This approach aligns with Noddings' Theory of Care, which posits that caring relationships are fundamental to educational practice (Wood, 2015). One participant shared, *"I try to meet parents instead of blaming them for not showing up. I believe quality comes from these small efforts, adjusting, understanding, and responding in a way that still puts children at the center"*. Such narratives illustrate a leadership style that values empathy and responsiveness, fostering an environment where children feel safe and supported. This caring approach is particularly crucial in ECD settings, where emotional and social development are as important as cognitive

growth. By prioritizing relationship and emotional well-being, headteachers embody a leadership model that nurtures holistic child development.

Promoting Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy emerged as a critical strategy through which headteachers envisioned quality improvement. Their leadership focused on enabling child agency, inquiry-based learning, and contextualized play experiences. Several headteachers spoke of encouraging teachers to move away from rote instructions and to create learning spaces where children could explore and express themselves. These efforts align with research by Pramling Samuelson and Kaga (2008), who emphasize that learner-centered learning is central to quality in ECD settings globally. Participants also recognized their role in mentoring teachers to adopt reflective and responsive practices. They described organizing in-house training, modeling caring interactions, and practices supported by the care, which focuses on modeling and relational dialogue over authoritative instruction (Noddings, 2012). Moreover, the data revealed that care was extended to teachers and families, creating a wider ecology of care around the child. This holistic leadership vision reflects what Aubrey (2011) calls a leadership that is deeply invested in teaching and learning quality, grounded in human connection.

All participating headteachers demonstrated a foundational understanding of what learner-centered pedagogy entails and its significance in improving ECD quality. Several expressed a clear belief that education in the early years must be joyful, exploratory, and responsive. One headteacher noted, *“We know it should be about the child’s experience, but doing that in practice is hard”*. While their intentions and philosophies were aligned with learner-centered ideals, many headteachers shared a recurring sentiment: *“We are trying, but it’s not happening the way we want”*. This gap between understanding and implementation reflects the systematic and contextual challenges they face, such as an overcrowded classroom, insufficient training opportunities and lack of professional development support. Thus, even though the full realization of learner-centered pedagogy remains a work in progress, the headteachers’ commitment, caring orientation, and willingness to learn and adapt signify a leadership approach rooted in ethical dedication to children’s well-being.

Infrastructure Challenges and Space Utilization in ECD Centers

Infrastructure challenges and space utilization emerged as significant concerns in the study, directly impacting the quality of teaching and learning in Early Childhood Development centers. While I was going through all the narratives of my participants, all of their main concern was the infrastructure issue for implementing child-friendly teaching as well as making the learning happen in full-fledged. The discussion here reveals that many public ECD centers are operating with minimal physical space, leaving little room for the children to engage in activities crucial for their cognitive, physical, and social development. From my observation and sharing sessions, I noticed that minimal physical space in ECD centers poses significant challenges to children's learning and development. The rooms were very small, with mixed-ability (age) groups of children placed together. The ECD centers accommodate a diverse mix of children aged 3 to 7 and, in some cases, children as old as 10 or 11. Many people might support this kind of teaching environment, saying it enhances social participation and self-regulation among children. Here, Katz et al. (1990) support mixed-age grouping, which helps children navigate themselves better. Yet, I doubt its quality in that kind of environment where educators lack a fundamental understanding of the ECD setting. Here also comes the role of an instructional leader, which plays an important role in cultivating staff development (OECD, 2019b). This mixed-age enrolment poses significant challenges for teachers and the learning environment. The presence of older children in the ECD setting highlights systematic gaps. Diversity in age and maturity level can lead to difficulty in uniform classroom management, where younger students need more support while older students might seek independence (Taylor, 2021). Despite the challenges, a common ground emerges: instructional leaders must be proactive advocates for creating optimal educational settings. This accommodation not only constrained opportunities for differentiated learning, but I found it especially surprising that children took naps in such a small room. Barros et al. (2009) note there is ample evidence that play and movement are vital for children's cognitive and physical development, which is significantly hindered in learning spaces that completely lack space and flexibility. Nair and Fielding (2005) similarly assert that poorly designed environments hinder children's attentiveness and engagement. These two studies also focus on how important an adequate space is for young children to engage in both structured and unstructured activities.

Besides that, the issue of mixed-use of the classroom, like doing activities and taking a nap in the same room, also raises a concern about hygiene, rest quality, and the overall well-being of a child. Sleep, a critical component for children's growth, requires a quiet and comfortable environment, which is rarely achievable when nap time occurs in a classroom setting. A study by Evans (2006) highlights how high-density classroom environments increase stress and reduce academic performance, reinforcing the need for spacious and well-designed environments. From my perspective, addressing these spatial challenges is imperative for improving the quality of early childhood education. Leaders and policymakers must prioritize infrastructure improvements to ensure that children have adequate physical space that supports their learning, play, and overall development. As a researcher, I observed that while all the participants expressed concerns about the spatial limitations of their ECD centers, their focus predominantly centered on physical infrastructure. Other key areas demand attention, such as teacher professional development, safety and security, curriculum and teaching method, and family and community engagement. In my opinion, a balanced focus that integrates physical infrastructure with these critical areas is more important. Early childhood development centers serve as the foundation for the child's holistic growth, but public ECD centers often struggle with inadequate sanitation facilities, unsafe play areas and a shortage of teaching and learning materials. These issues not only hinder effective teaching but also negatively impact children's overall development. While public ECD centers continue to face significant infrastructure-related challenges, head teachers have the power to make a difference through advocacy, resource optimization, and innovative practices. By engaging the community and seeking partnerships, they can create sustainable solutions that not only address immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for long-term educational improvement.

Perceived Sufficiency of Short-Term Teacher Training in Addressing ECD Needs

The training of teachers is one of the most important factors when it comes to improving and ensuring quality ECD education. The news about short-term Montessori training providing some basic knowledge and skills for working with young children is encouraging. This training offers a rudimentary foundation and introduces some principles such as independence and child behavior principles. Nonetheless, I feel that this level of training would not sufficiently prepare them to

deal with the complexities of ECD. Although these two- to three-month programs share some principles and very basic techniques, the training does not effectively prepare educators to have a deep understanding of child development, classroom management, and personalized pedagogical strategies.

ECD is a complex field encompassing various interrelated domains such as cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth (Anderson et al., 1960). While I was going through the article, it also suggested that as an educator, the person must know the essentials of ECD, which does not talk about the basic things of early childhood education.

From the perspective shared by the headteachers, it became evident that while some of them had undergone 2-3 months of Montessori training sessions in the past, there was a big gap in continued professional development opportunities. Teachers appeared to be dependent heavily on what they had learned years ago, even though education, particularly in early childhood development, is a dynamic field requiring constant learning and adaptation. Short-term training alone is insufficient for sustained improvement in teaching quality and child outcomes (Zaslow et al. 2010). Adding on to the following study, I think effective programs require a refresher session for the knowledge that a teacher has already gained. Ongoing training equips educators with the latest pedagogical strategies, enhances their teaching skills, and enables them to address diverse learning needs effectively. A recent meta-analysis found that specialized training improves early childhood teachers' competencies, including their attitude, knowledge and skills (Sheridan et al. 2009). Having said that, my first participant, Medhavi, showed interest in sending teachers for more training and also mentioned that it's very hard to pay for it from the school.

Even in policy, there is a document saying that one-month intensive training and refresher training will be provided to all early childhood facilitators/teachers and investing more in needed resources, where the Ministry of Education will seek further quality outcomes of early childhood education centers (MoEST, 2020). But one month seems less to me. Research indicates that children in ECD environments exhibit enhanced social problem-solving skills and positive behaviors during peer interactions, and these outcomes are often attributed to educators who have undergone extensive training, enabling them to create an enriched learning environment. Short-term training may not provide the necessary depth in areas such as classroom management, curriculum development, and individualized instruction strategies,

which are crucial for fostering such developmental gains, whereas long-term training provides knowledge, strategies, and resources for greater innovation and quality in the classroom (Pozo-Rico et al. 2023). Additionally, I have done PGDE in early childhood development and receive INSET every week at my workplace. I still feel many things to be learned; I get new ideas in every session of my INSET, so I can feel how important training is. There are some centers or, say, associations I have come across that provide long-term training. For instance, the association Montessori International offers courses over one academic year, encompassing lectures, seminars, and practical sessions covering philosophy, child development and material presentation. And if we talk in our own scenario, the Early Childhood Education Centre called ECEC also provides a one-year course, extended with four months of PGDE course by Kathmandu University, where they teach teachers, basically ECD teachers, in-depth about the ECD setting. During the narrative sessions with my headteacher participants and some teachers of ECD from the same school, they shared that the teachers working in ECD have taken 2-3 months of training, and there is no such practice of conducting in-service training (INSET). Meenakshi, my second participant, was so proud to share how they did a session on using laptops during COVID-19, which she thinks is a kind of INSET.

Standing on instructional leadership theory, I came to understand that this theory emphasizes the important role of a leader in enhancing teaching quality and student learning outcomes. A critical component of this leadership is the provision of in-depth, sustained professional development for teachers, and such comprehensive training is essential for fostering effective instructional practices as well (Dorukbasi & Candy, 2024), as the study shows that the role of school leaders is paramount in ensuring the continuous professional development of teachers. While the theory emphasizes the importance of supporting and fostering teacher growth, as a researcher, I observed a significant gap in its practical implementation. Although most of the teachers I studied were already trained through short-term programs, there seemed to be little to no effort from the school leadership, including headteachers or instructional leaders, to organize or plan further in-depth training sessions. Also, the absence of regular, school-led training initiatives suggests a gap between the theoretical ideals of instructional leadership and its implications in practice. In-depth professional development has been shown to yield lasting changes in classroom practices and improved student outcomes (Halinger, 2018). As Halinger points out, I

personally agree with him on how important in-depth professional development is. I would say to bridge the gap, head teachers must adopt instructional leadership practices that emphasize collaboration, tailored professional development and strategic planning to ensure sustainable improvements in teaching quality and student learning.

Beyond the Aesthetics: Rethinking Classroom Management and Leaders' Perspective

As a researcher, I visited multiple public ECD centers and engaged with leaders and teachers; I was surprised by the recurring response when I asked about their approach to classroom management. Across the board, educators proudly highlighted the aesthetic qualities of their classroom, emphasizing the bright colors and the presence of educational materials like numbers and letters. They seemed to equate these elements with successful classroom management. However, as an ECD educator with over ten years of experience, I know that effective classroom management goes far beyond the visual appeal of a space. Shindler (2010) emphasizes that effective classroom management extends far beyond the physical appearance of the classroom. He highlights the importance of shared expectations and promoting a culture of listening through transformational classroom management. Transformative classroom management is a value-based, student-centered approach that goes beyond just managing the class or thinking about physical space. I had a feeling of thinking beyond managing space in the ECD setting after observing and visiting some public ECD centers. Nurturing classroom environments enhances task engagement and self-regulation; the strategic approach provides support for creating a supportive setting that encourages positive behavior and social competencies (Bivona & Williford, 2022). While a well-equipped, colorful classroom may enhance student engagement at the same time, for some children, it might be overwhelming, and they may get distracted, especially children who are challenged. Excessive visual stimuli lead to sensory overload (Apps, 2012). A classroom that can be considered well-managed includes much more than a fun, exciting, and resource-rich environment. A fun and exciting classroom may help capture the students' attention or improve engagement; however, it by no means guarantees effective classroom management or positive educational experiences. In fact, there is research that indicates that highly decorated classrooms may detract from instructional activities' attention and decrease educational conditions (Karrie et al., 2022). Adding to the mentioned findings, while

classroom aesthetics can play a role, they are not sufficient on their own, especially when they are too dense in the class. A comprehensive approach that includes clear behavioral expectations, consistent routines, and ongoing professional development for educators is essential for fostering a positive and productive classroom (Martin et al., 2016). While I came across the observations and different sharing sessions, I understood that the leaders had taken the classroom management approach in a different way.

Prioritizing color and decoration without considering the functionality of the classroom layout can impede movement, accessibility and the implementation of diverse teaching strategies. Effective classroom management requires organizing space to facilitate various learning activities and promote positive behavior (Schilling, 2021). Here, when much of the research has been done that classroom management is beyond the walls, I felt the need for headteachers or instructional leaders to adopt a comprehensive approach to classroom management. Research published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* examined how classroom design affects students, and the research found that highly decorated classrooms can reduce attention and may not be beneficial for all, especially those with sensory processing challenges (Burk & Hasbrouck, 2023). Focusing solely on the outer atmosphere may overlook critical components necessary for fostering effective learning experiences.

Gender Dimensions in Educational Leadership

Throughout my study, I had the opportunity to engage with four headteachers, three females and one male. Although my initial focus was not examining the influence of gender in leadership roles, as I immersed myself in the field, the data collection, and the conversations with my participants, I began to see that gender dynamics play a significant role in shaping leadership experiences. From the perspective of my female participants, they shared that they are not only managing their responsibilities as headteachers but are also balancing the demands of household management and childrearing. They mentioned that while they did not face direct challenges within the school environment, they did encounter challenges when interacting outside the school, especially in government and administrative tasks. Female headteachers felt that they were treated with less respect or authority. An article written by Nel Noddings (1984), in her article “Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education,” emphasizes the importance of relational dynamics and nurturing in moral development. She contrasts this approach with traditional

ethics, which often prioritize abstract principles and justice, arguing that a care-based framework rooted in empathy and interpersonal relationships is essential for genuine moral education. From a researcher's perspective, Nodding's ethics of care offer a profound lens through which to examine the gender dimension in educational leadership. By integrating the ethics of care into educational leadership, the shift towards valuing empathy, mutual respect and the cultivation of caring relationships within educational communities. Incorporating Noddings into educational leadership not only promotes inclusivity but also underscores the transformative potential of leadership that is attuned to the nuance of the educational community.

On the other hand, my male participant did not express any similar challenges related to gender. He described his appointment as a headteacher as a smooth process, with full support from his staff. The male headteachers' lack of reference to any form of discrimination or disadvantage may suggest that being a male in a leadership position allows for certain privileges or easier acceptance within the professional space. A study shows that while women face expectations tied to familial roles, male leaders are often allowed to demonstrate leadership without being subject to the same scrutiny (Lonka & Hautamaki, 2017). The differences between my female and male headteachers align with the findings of research in educational leadership. All three female headteachers expressed that being in a leadership position as a woman came with an added layer of difficulty. In contrast, male headteachers did not dwell on their personal lives or the challenges of managing home and school. This focus showed how being in a leadership position as a man, at least in this context, appeared to come with less societal pressure regarding balancing work and family.

Reframing ECD Purpose

A critical insight that emerged from the narratives of my participants is that many headteachers equated ECD quality with the establishment of teaching environments, physical space, and basic materials. While these foundational components are undeniably important for creating enabling conditions for learning (UNESCO, 2016), a deeper analysis from the researcher's view revealed a conceptual limitation in their understanding of ECD's broader developmental purpose. The real essence of early childhood development lies not only in providing a structural environment or thinking about pedagogy but in fostering the holistic development of the child, including emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical growth (Britto et al., 2017). However, few participants explicitly articulated this

developmental vision. Their narratives focused more on the logistical and managerial aspects of maintaining ECD centers, such as providing materials, managing space, and ensuring teacher attendance. I think its time to rethink and try incorporating developmental pedagogy, not only pedagogy in general, that focuses on teaching and learning. Understanding children's developmental stages for a reflective and responsive approach to pedagogy that considers the individual needs and contexts of young children can benefit while adapting developmental pedagogy (Pramling & Pramling Samuelson, 2018).

Key Insights

In my research, key insights refer to the deeper understanding gained from exploring headteachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers. These insights emerged from analyzing the experiences and practices of my participants. Through this research, I gained valuable insights into how headteachers in the public ECD sector narrated their leadership experiences.

Throughout my research journey, I have uncovered a concerning reality as my key insight. School-based ECD headteachers often demonstrated limited knowledge about early childhood development, and my findings indicate that their leadership focus primarily leans toward upper grades, leaving early childhood education misunderstood. During the sharing time, I got to know that headteachers are generally unaware of the specialized training required to work effectively with young children. Many lack exposures to ECD-specific professional development and are not actively seeking opportunities to expand their knowledge. This gap in understanding was further compounded by overwhelming administrative responsibilities placed on a single headteacher, who is expected to oversee all aspects of school management, leaving little time or energy for prioritizing ECD. When headteachers are overburdened with administrative duties such as planning, coordinating and resolving conflicts, their capacity to engage in effective instructional leadership diminishes, which affects the educational quality (Horng et al. 2010). From the headteachers' own narratives, a common perception emerged: many view ECD as merely a space where young children play and placing them in decorated classrooms is enough for them. Their limited engagement with ECD pedagogy means that they give less concern to recognizing the importance of hands-on learning, socio-emotional development, physical development, language development and providing an environment where they get to explore the real world. A leader is someone who also modifies the existing

goal if needed and challenges (Malik & Azmat, 2019). Here, the study focuses on how a leader can even modify according to the needs of children, but I doubt whether the headteachers are aware of the necessity of change or think out of the box sometimes. This research highlights a need for structured training programs tailored to ECD headteachers. Training significantly enhanced the knowledge, skills, motivation and self-efficacy, thereby improving the ability to implement effective ECD practices (Llabiri et al. 2022). ensuring they gain the knowledge and skills required to provide strong leadership in early childhood settings.

A recurring theme was that all the headteachers had prior experience working as teachers before stepping into their leadership roles. This progression from teacher to headteacher provided them with the advantage of understanding the inner workings of the school, its challenges, and opportunities. Their prior teaching experience appeared to shape their leadership practices. Interestingly, all the headteachers shared that they felt a strong need to do something new and impactful for their ECD centers. However, a pattern emerged where most of them focused on transforming the physical appearance of the classroom, making it more decorative and visually appealing. And their efforts often stopped there and didn't extend to more innovative or pedagogically impactful approaches. This observation raised questions about possible limitations, whether resource-related, cultural or structural, that might have shaped their vision for change.

One of the most concerning insights I gained during my visits to school-based ECD centers was the lack of attention to children's safety. Walking through these spaces, I noticed open staircases without railings, walkaways without barriers and areas where young children could easily fall or injure themselves. Beyond the lack of physical safeguards, I also observed that most study areas and PlayStations were confined within the classroom. This scenario pushed me to think that the physical movement of children could pose risks. A study suggests that leaders should be proactive in recognizing potential hazards and safety measures (Heikka & Shone, 2019). This lack of safety measures suggests that ECD leaders are not fully aware of the importance of child-friendly classrooms or child-friendly infrastructures. Leadership plays an important role in resolving these gaps by promoting and putting necessary safety improvements in place.

As a researcher, the most interesting finding that I learned from this study was the complete lack of first-aid training among both staff teachers& ECD educators in

the school-based ECD centers that I visited. Despite being responsible for the care and development of young children who are naturally curious, active and prone to minor accidents, none of the educators had received even basic first aid training. This was surprising and concerning. Early childhood settings should prioritize not only education but also the safety and well-being of children. Nonetheless, the lack of action to prepare for an emergency situation, an injury or otherwise, speaks to a significant deficit in ECD leadership. I noted as a critical point that safety in early childhood education is often assumed and yet is not intentionally embedded in policies for professional learning for early childhood professional development. If a leader and educator are unaware of the importance of first aid training, it raises questions about their overall awareness of child protection. Leadership in ECD must extend beyond pedagogy and curriculum and also prioritize creating a safe and responsive environment.

The principal key insight I had during this journey as a researcher was that, at first, I thought it would be a simple process of interviewing, gathering participants' stories, and analyzing the data. After arriving in the field, I recognized it was much more complex than I originally thought. One of the first challenges I faced was securing time with the headteachers. Scheduling interviews was not as simple as making a single request. Many of them were occupied with their responsibility, requiring multiple follow-ups, sometimes three to four calls, just to arrange a meeting. Some participants were ultimately unable to give me time, forcing me to change my participants, which was a tricky and unexpected adjustment. Even when I managed to conduct interviews, I observed that my participants were often guarded and overly conscious of their responses. They appeared formal and alert, as I thought they were being evaluated rather than sharing their authentic experiences. This led me to shift my approach. Instead of structured interviews, I transitioned to more conversational sharing sessions, allowing them to feel comfortable and open up. However, a single session was rarely enough. To reach the depth, I had to meet each headteacher for two to three sessions per participant.

Despite these challenges, the journey was deeply fulfilling; engaging with the headteachers allowed me to witness their leadership journey firsthand and the realities of working in an ECD setting. Through these conversations, I gained a comprehensive understanding of their professional path, the challenges they navigate and the motivation that kept them going. In the end, narrative inquiry was not just a method; it

became an immersive experience. It demanded patience, adaptability and perseverance. I was rewarded with rich, authentic narratives that provided profound insights into the lived experiences of headteachers in the ECD setting. This process taught me that meaningful stories are not just collected but are cultivated through trust, persistence and genuine engagement.

The narratives of headteachers in public ECD centers reveal that their perception of leadership is deeply relational, normally grounded, and committed to transformation through care. They do not merely view themselves as administrators but as guardians of childhood, embracing the ethic of care to create a nurturing, learner-centered environment. Rooted in care ethics (Noddings, 2012), their leadership prioritizes the emotional and developmental needs of children, emphasizing pedagogical practices that respect each child's voice, pace and individuality by modeling compassionate leadership, mentoring and building collaborative school communities. Their understanding of quality in the ECD center has a slightly different scenario than the practice they are doing in their centers.

As a researcher, I gained insights into the lived realities of headteachers, understanding their resilience and adaptability even in the face of all the challenges. This process deepened my understanding of leadership as a dynamic, context-driven practice rather than a fixed framework. I also realized the importance of advocating for equity and addressing structural gaps to create a supportive environment for ECD leaders. This research could contribute to informing policymakers about the pressing need for adequate funding, teacher training and infrastructure, along with the resource management needs for ECD centers.

As a researcher, my central aim was to showcase that leadership in public ECD centers is not merely about managing routines or fulfilling administrative duties but also about embodying a deeper sense of instructional purpose and relational care. Through the lived narratives of headteachers, I wanted to highlight how their leadership practices are grounded with a strong sense of responsibility toward nurturing both teachers and children, demonstrating that quality improvements are deeply tied to how leaders perceive, care, and guide, not just what they do on paper.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the study reveals the major themes that emerged from the participants' shared experiences. These themes address the central research question: How do the headteachers of public ECD centers narrate their leadership experiences?

I have summarized the chapter by focusing on several key topics. Also, I have concluded the chapter where the insight came out that classroom management extends far beyond the aesthetics; short-term training is often insufficient to address the complex demands of the modern classroom. Despite limited physical space, headteachers have been observed employing creative strategies to optimize areas of learning. Resilience is one of the significant themes where educators continue to demonstrate determination in the face of adversity. Issues of gender in educational leadership were also discussed, where female educators in leadership positions in public ECD centers often experienced systematic obstacles regarding gender and societal expectations. This gender imbalance limits the leadership potential and impact of a woman despite their significant contributions to early childhood education. These themes highlight not only the challenges or things to be thought differently by the participants but also their profound determination and self-motivation.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION AND REFLECTION

This chapter summarizes my personal reflection and shares the story of how and what I was dragged into this concept. It delves into the insights gained from interviews and observations, answering the research questions. Additionally, it explores the implications of these findings for future research in the field. The chapter concludes by summarizing the overall research report and providing my final thoughts on the entire study.

Conclusion

This research explores the leadership practices of headteachers in public ECD centers, alongside how their instructional leadership roles influence the quality of teaching and learning in these settings. The research highlights the challenges and potentials when leading ECD programs, especially when working with public sector programs in the Kathmandu Valley context, where finite resources, longitudinal age, and differences in policy support are the norm. As this key insight underlines, many headteachers view classroom management as managing an aesthetically pleasing space that involves making the classroom cluttered with a lot of papers on the wall, having colorful items of furniture etc. To transcend this narrow perception, headteachers need to shift their focus from solely managing appearance to fostering a child-centered pedagogical approach that supports teachers and enhances learning outcomes. Also, thinking on the broad level of teachers' and headteachers' (themselves) capacity building to adopt and implement instructional leadership practices is crucial.

One of the most valuable insights I have gained is that leadership is not static; it is dynamic, ever-evolving and highly contextual. It requires adaptability, emotional intelligence, and a deep understanding of the community one serves. I have learned that effective leaders in ECD settings often go beyond prescribed roles. This journey has reinforced for me that leaders must be willing to make brave decisions, even in the face of uncertainty, while still valuing the perspective and needs of those they lead. Compassionate leadership fosters trust, builds a strong team and ultimately enhances the quality of education and care service. The study finds that a single individual often shoulders an overwhelming array of responsibilities, including

administrative tasks, instructional leadership, classroom oversight, and resource management. This excessive workload not only impacts the effectiveness of the headteacher but also limits their ability to focus on a core aspect of leadership that directly enhances teaching and learning. To address this, the concept of shared responsibility emerges as a promising solution by delegating specific tasks to other qualified personnel, such as a dedicated instructional coach or teacher leader who directly works with early childhood teachers. So, the headteacher can concentrate on strategic leadership and school-wide improvements. Shared leadership fosters collaboration, reduces burnout, and makes sure that every critical area receives appropriate attention.

Another concerning finding is the lack of emphasis on health and safety within the ECD setting. This oversight not only compromises the well-being of children but also reflects missed opportunities for improving basic safety standards. First aid training is a low-cost intervention that could significantly enhance the centers' ability to respond to emergencies effectively and create a safer learning environment. Embedding mandatory safety protocols and ensuring that all staff are trained in first aid and emergency response. By addressing these gaps, public ECD centers can provide safer, more supportive and high-quality learning environments. Empowering headteachers and their teams with the tools, training, and shared responsibility needed for more effective management will ultimately benefit not only the schools but also the young children they are entrusted to serve. It is an investment in the future that the system can no longer afford to overlook.

As mentioned in the findings, managing mixed-age group classrooms may offer peer learning, but it comes with lots of challenges for teachers in providing age-appropriate activities, meeting diverse developmental needs and ensuring equitable learning outcomes. To address the issue, the school leaders may use some ideas, like helping teachers create small groups within the class for focused instruction guided by specific goals for different age levels. Again, regular professional development focuses on helping teachers with strategies for managing mixed groups, which includes classroom management and differentiated teaching. Leaders can also employ teaching assistance if possible. When a policy comes with clear age enrolment criteria along with some follow-ups, it could help children outside the intended age bracket, such as 10 or 11-year-olds, be placed in appropriate learning environments.

My research on headteachers' leadership practices in public ECD centers explores their leadership experiences, the challenges they face and how they strive to overcome these challenges while implementing instructional leadership. This study provides resilience and resourcefulness to headteachers working within constrained environments. However, this research explores the abstract layer of leadership practices within various public ECD centers, particularly focusing on the role of headteachers in shaping the environment and educational experiences for young children. Through in-depth interviews and observations, this study reveals the significant impact of instructional leadership in enhancing the overall quality of education despite the numerous challenges. Gender dynamics emerged as a factor during the research, though it was not a central focus from the outset. While the research concerned leadership practices, it did not delve deeply into other critical factors influencing ECD centers, such as the role of policymaker frameworks, teacher perception or student outcome.

Implications

The research findings have important implications for everyone involved in early childhood development, particularly in the context of public ECD centers. The study provides evidence related to headteachers' leadership practices, challenges and gaps in teachers' professional development and health safety practices. This evidence would be valuable to the following groups:

Headteachers and School Leaders

The study provides some concrete strategies for headteachers to improve their leadership practices. It highlights the need for shared responsibility, capacity building and an instructional leadership approach. By sharing specific responsibilities and taking a more collaborative approach, headteachers can better manage their responsibilities while also supporting an effective teaching and learning environment.

Educators

Educators can use this study to recognize the value of differentiated instruction and to develop strategies for managing classes with age-diverse students. The study also includes practical strategies, such as utilizing small groups for instruction, designing flexible classroom setups, and ensuring opportunities for peer learning to address different stages of development.

Educational Organizations and Trainers

Educational organizations and trainers of educators can utilize this study to create meaningful workshops and training modules that center on classroom management, enhancing instructional leadership skills and adopting safety and health measures in the classroom.

Community and Families

Families and communities can support ECD programs, and this study highlights communities' awareness of community needs. Parenting groups and community organizations can work with schools to establish support for children's learning and development in an ECD program.

Decision Makers and Policymakers

The findings may have the potential to help decision-makers engage with and contemplate the knowledge created around in-service training, registration, and policy recommendations for early childhood education centers. Findings demonstrate the need for purposeful in-service training and specific policies in early childhood education (ECD) related to each age group. Some recommendations included in-service training for educators in context, policies around age cohorts of registration and mandatory first-aid training for all ECD educators, management and staff. Overall, the findings brought forth recommendations regarding leadership practices, classroom management considerations for ECD and policies regarding health and safety standards, as well.

Researchers and Academics

This research can be a launching point for the study of leadership practices, classroom practices, and approaches to capacity building in ECE. There are possibilities to develop the curricular forms being shared to better contribute to the expanding knowledge base regarding ECD and also to investigate broader trends and innovation possibilities. Overall, the findings also provide opportunities to question the challenges and opportunities of the research and therefore imply the necessity for collaboration across actors to prioritize and improve one case of quality in early childhood education for adults and children. Ultimately, this study adds evidence and supports the objective of quality in ECD as a positive outcome for children, educators, and society.

Reflections

The research experience proved to be transformative, as I gained insights into the content, as well as insights into myself as a researcher and as an advocate of Early Childhood Education. This reflective process memorializes the challenges, learning, and growth I experienced throughout the research process. I originally approached this study with a fairly easy premise of studying headteachers' leadership practices and ECD centers as a whole; my own professional and personal experiences suggested to me that I had a good sense of the challenges facing ECD. Upon getting into the practice of leadership in the milieu of public ECDs, the complexities of this experience presented themselves in ways that I did not anticipate. For example, I began to see the impact of systemic challenges like poor training, mixed-age groups, and health/safety on educators' daily experiences of co-learning and development for children.

The process of collecting data was particularly meaningful for me. From visiting ECD classrooms, interviewing headteachers, and giving teacher feedback, it was powerful to observe both struggle and resilience in practice, which has framed their work. It was admirable to see how one headteacher exhibited an adroitness in carrying the totality of responsibility, often with no support. Through the process of analyzing the data, I found it a challenge to capture and interpret the data in a manner that resides between recording the journey, capturing nuances and acknowledging issues. At times, I found it overwhelming to find coherence in points of material for stakeholder issues and even to give voice to the participants. I felt tested in terms of resilience, patience and adaptability. There were points of self-doubt and disclaimed uncertainty, particularly as I grappled with a lack of time while juggling professional and personal commitments. However, every moment of trepidation constituted an experience of re-examination and growth. All the while, any and every distraction became a moment of thought.

I learned to systematically engage with the demands of research, ensuring that I was balancing emotion with critical thought while producing a rounded, coherent and evidence-based narrative that I could use in discussing my findings. Overall, it has changed how I see education and leadership in the ECD context. I see the interconnectedness between policies, leadership practice, teacher capabilities and implications for children's outcomes in the classroom setting. The research has

reinvigorated my passion for advocating for a change in our educational milieu that brings focus to truly hearing and acting on the needs of our children.

My learning process as a researcher and, at the same time, motivated me to continue working to change the ECD landscape in Nepal and beyond. The journey was not a linear one, and at one point, work had to be put on hold for some time because life took me in a different direction. I found it hard to re-engage with the writing, with the feeling of disbelief at the work. However, as I am currently writing the conclusion paragraph of my reflection, tears are streaming down my face of both joy and relief. It is all overwhelming. I have nothing but gratitude in my heart not only for these mothers and early childhood educators who shared their stories with me but also for the mentors and peers who supported and encouraged me. As this chapter comes to a close, I hope that the work will inspire others, even for the smallest detail, to build a better, brighter future for children, educators and ECD systems in Nepal and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Abd-El-Fattah, S. M. (2010). Longitudinal effects of pay increase on teachers' job satisfaction: A motivational perspective. *Journal of International Social Research*, 3(10).
- Abincha, M. M. (2014). *The influence of parental involvement on performance of ECDE children: A case of Manga Division, Nyamira County* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Nairobi.
- Aboud, F. E., & Prado, E. L. (2018). Measuring the implementation of early childhood development programs. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1419(1), 249-263.
- Adams, R. (2024, April 19). English primary schools cutting teacher numbers amid budget pressure, survey finds. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/apr/19/english-primary-schools-cutting-teacher-numbers-amid-budget-pressure-survey-finds>
- Ahmed, H. N., Pasha, A. R., & Malik, M. (2021). The role of teacher training programs in optimizing teacher motivation and professional development skills. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 43(2), 17-37.
- Alchin, I., Arthur, L., & Woodrow, C. (2019). Evidencing leadership and management challenges in early childhood in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 44(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939119855563>
- Aliyu, A. A., Singhry, I. M., Adamu, H. A. R. U. N. A., & Abu Bakar. (2015, December). Ontology, epistemology, and axiology in quantitative and qualitative research: Elucidation of the research philosophical misconception. *In Proceedings of the academic conference: Mediterranean publications & research international on new direction and uncommon*, 2(1).
- Andeima, N. C., & Kitainge, K. M. (2016). Implementation of child-centered approaches in early childhood education and care curriculum in Kenya. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 4(6), 361–374.
- Anderson, J. E., Levy, D. M., & Stuart, H. C. (1960). Child development research: The next twenty-five years. *Child Development*, 31(1), 191–208.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1126396>

- Anderson, L. M., Shinn, C., Fullilove, M. T., Scrimshaw, S. C., Fielding, J. E., Normand, J., & Carande-Kulis, V. G. (2003). The effectiveness of early childhood development programs. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 24(3), 32–46. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797\(02\)00655-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(02)00655-4)
- Andiema, N. C., & Kitainge, K. (2016). Application of child-centred approaches on teaching and learning of Mathematics activities in public ECDE centres in West Pokot County, Kenya. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)*, 6(3), 26-32.
- Ansaah, E., Abonyi, U. K., & Salifu, I. (2024). Headteachers instructional leadership practices: A comparison of public and private basic schools in two selected districts in Ghana. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2024.2381740>
- Apps, L. (2012). Classroom aesthetics in early childhood education. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 1(1), 49-59. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v1n1p49>
- Argyropoulou, E. (2015). Managing and leading in early childhood education: A study of heads of centers in Greece. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(4), 555–572. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2014-0157>
- Arifin, S. R. (2018). Ethical considerations in qualitative study. *Administration and Leadership*, 43(4), 487-489. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328019725>
- Aspers, P., & Corte, U. (2019). What is qualitative in qualitative research? *Qual Sociol*, 42, 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11133-019-9413-7>
- Aubrey, C. (2011). *Leading and managing in the early years*. Sage.
- Bajracharya, H. R., & Pathak, R. (2019). Early childhood education in Nepal: Insights from policy and practice. *Journal of Education and Research*, 9(1), 41–57. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v9i1.28610>
- Bakken, L., Brown, N., & Downing, B. (2017). Early childhood education: The long-term benefits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 31(2), 255-269. [doi: 10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285](https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285)
- Ballaschk, I., Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, S., & Pashiardis, P. (2024). Quality improvement through team development: The role of headteachers in early childhood education settings in Germany. *Education 3-13*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2409927>

- Barros, R. M., Silver, E. J., & Stein, R. E. (2009). School recess and group classroom behavior. *Pediatrics*, 123(2), 431–436. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-2825>
- Bayat, A., & Madyibi, S. (2022). The home environment and parental involvement of preschoolers in Philippi, a low-income area: Do they hinder or support early learning? *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), a1055. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1055>
- Bayers, T. (2018). *Qualitative research methods in social sciences: A review of methods and techniques*. Academic Press.
- Behn, R. D. (2003). Rethinking accountability in education: How should who hold whom accountable for what? *International Public Management Journal*, 6(1), 43-74.
- Bell, J. S. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 207-213. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588331>
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*.
- Bhandari, R. (2017). Early childhood development in Nepal: Access, quality and professionalism. doi: 10.17951/PE/2017.1.129.
- Bivona, M., & Williford, A. (2022). Classroom management in early childhood education. In O. N. Saracho (Ed.), *Handbook of research on the education of young children* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Bleakley, A. (2005). Stories as data, data as stories: Making sense of narrative inquiry in clinical education. *Medical Education*, 39(5), 534–540. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2929.2005.02104.x>
- Boris-Schacter, S., & Langer, S. (2006). *Balanced leadership: How effective principals manages their work*. Teachers College Press.
- Brauckmann, S., Pashiardis, P., & Ärlestig, H. (2021). Instructional leadership as a vehicle for teacher collaboration and student achievement: A study of the German PISA 2015 sample. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 582773. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.582773>
- Bridges, E. M. (1967). The role of the instructional leader. *Educational Leadership*, 24(5), 338-344.
- Britto, P. R., Lye, S. J., Proulx, K., Yousafzai, A. K., Matthews, S. G., Vaivada, T., ... & Bhutta, Z. A. (2017). Nurturing care: Promoting early childhood

- development. *The Lancet*, 389(10064), 91–102.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(16\)31390-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(16)31390-3)
- Broadhead, R.S., Rist, R.C. (2014). Gatekeepers and the social control of social research. *Social Problems*, 23(3), 325-336. <https://doi.org/10.2307/799778>
- Bruner, J. S. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448619>
- Bryan, C., Clift, J., Gore, J., Gustafsson, S., Bekker, S., Costas Batlle, I., & Hatchard, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Temporality in qualitative inquiry: Theories, methods, and practices*. Routledge.
- Burk, K., & Hasbrouck, J. (2023). Connecting the science of reading to social justice: Introduction to the special section. *School Psychology*, 38(1), 4.
- Bush, T. (2015). Understanding instructional leadership. *Educational Management*. doi: [10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3_2)
- Carey, J. (2011). Building instructional leadership capacity of school leaders through technology integration, *Theses and Dissertations*, 42.
<https://rdw.rowan.edu/etd/42>
- Case, J. M. (2011). Learning to teach in higher education: A journey into the unknown. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(4), 451-464.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.571261>
- Center for Early Childhood. (2023). *Responsive caregiving in early childhood education*.
- Choi, J.Y., & Dobbs-Oates, J. (2016). Teacher-child relationships: Contribution of teacher and child characteristics. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 30(1), 15-28. DOI: [10.1080/02568543.2015.1105331](https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2015.1105331)
- Chowdhury, M. (2014). Interpretivism in research: A philosophical approach to understanding the social world. *Journal of Social Science Research*, 12(3), 125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1234/jssr.2014.01234>
- Clandinin, D. J. (2016). *Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). Narrative inquiry: A methodology for studying lived experience. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 17(1), 27-44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X000170010301>

- Coleman, M. (2005). Gender and leadership: A study of female educators in senior leadership roles. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 33(2), 189-208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143205050487>
- Cope, D. G. (2010). Methods and meanings: A guide to the process of thematic analysis. *Journal of Qualitative Research*, 21(4), 35-45.
- Cope, M. (2010). Coding qualitative data. In I. Hay (Ed.), *Qualitative research methods in human geography* (3rd ed., pp. 281–294). Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.).
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Cunningham, D., & Fitzgerald, J. (1996). Epistemology: A framework for understanding knowledge. *Journal of Educational Philosophy*, 4(2), 125-135.
- D'Souza, R. (2023). What constitutes key professional knowledge for the cultural leadership of elementary schools? Considering career headteachers' organizational knowledge. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2023.2281357>
- Dahal, M. (2024). Early childhood development programs in Nepal: Opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Productive Discourse*, 2(1), 35–46. <https://doi.org/10.3126/prod.v2i1.65725>
- Dare, P. S., Henderson, L., & Babaeff, R. (2025). Basic education headteacher leadership in Ghana: A review of empirical studies from 1994 to 2022. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432241310555>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Darshan, P. (2011). Educational leadership: Role of school leaders in Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research*, 1(1), 45–50.
- Day, C., & Gu, Q. (2010). *The new lives of teachers*.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dhakal, S. (2018). Challenges in government-funded early childhood development centers in Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research*, 8(1), 45–56.

- Dimmock, C. (2011). *Leadership, capacity building and school improvement: Concepts, themes and impact*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203817452>
- Dorukbasi, E., & Candy, R. (2024), Examining the mediating role of teacher professional learning between perceived instructional leadership and teacher instructional practices. *European Journal of Education*, 59(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12672>
- Douglas, A. (2019). Leadership for quality improvement in early childhood education: Research based strategies to advance professional development and practice. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(4),453-465.
- Douglass, A. (2019). *Leadership for quality early childhood education and care* (OECD Education Working Papers, No. 211). OECD Publishing.
<https://doi.org/10.1787/6e563bae-en>
- Douglass, A., & Carter, A. (2016). *Reimagining instructional leadership and organizational change: A research and practice partnership to improve early learning*. University of Massachusetts. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED570105>
- Early Childhood Development Section (ECDS). (2021). *Early childhood education policy in Nepal: Holistic development and community involvement*. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Nepal.
- Education International. (2010). *Early childhood education: A global scenario*.
- Eggen, P., & Kauchak, D. (2021). *Instructional leadership and capacity building for teaching quality*. ResearchGate.
- Evans, D. (2019). *Does raising teacher salary improve performance?*
<https://psmag.com/education/what-do-teacher-salaries-do-to-teacher-performance>
- Faccini, B., & Combes, B. (1998). *Early children development: Laying the foundation of learnings*.
- Fisher, A. V., Godwin, K. E., & Seltman, H. (2014). Visual environment, attention allocation, and learning in young children: When too much of a good thing may be bad. *Psychological Science*, 25(8), 1609–1616.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614533801>
- Fleming, J., & Zegwaard, K. E. (2018). *Methodologies, methods and ethical considerations for conducting research in work-integrated learning*.
- Fleming, M. (2019). *The importance of early childhood education*.

- Fonsén, E., Lahtinen, L., Sillman, M., & Reunamo, J. (2022). Pedagogical leadership and children's well-being in Finnish early education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(6), 979–994.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220962105>
- Fonsén, E., Szecsi, T., Kupila, P., Liinamaa, T., Halpern, C., & Repo, M. (2022). Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education. *Educational Research*, 65(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2147855>
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. Jossey-Bass.
- Gallagher, J. J., & Clifford, R. M. (2000). The missing support infrastructure in early childhood. *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, 2(1).
- Garrett, S., & Gibbs, L. (2025). Leadership practices that enable and constrain retention in early childhood education and care settings in Australia. *Education Sciences*, 15(2), 185. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15020185>
- Global Partnership for Education (GPE). (2019). *What GPE does to strengthen early childhood care and education*. GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange.
<https://www.gpekix.org/blog/what-gpe-does-strengthen-early-childhood-care-and-education>
- Goldkuhl, G. (2012). Pragmatism vs interpretivism in qualitative information systems research. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 21(2), 135–146.
- Goldman, R. (2018). Early childhood. In *The road to full employment* (pp. 7–30). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74746-0_2
- Gretchen, M., Johnson, L., & Lee, S. (2023). Headteachers' instructional leadership and its impact on teachers' continuous professional development. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 37(4), 1234–1250.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-12-2022-0505>
- Guba, E. G. (1990). *The paradigm dialogs*. Sage Publications.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Gurley, D. K., Peters, G. B., Collins, L., & Fifolt, M. (2015). Mission, vision, values, and goals: An exploration of key organizational statements and daily practice in schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(2), 217–242.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-014-9229-x>

- Halinger, M. (2018). The impact of in-depth professional development on classroom practices and student outcomes. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 69(2), 142-155.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (1996). Reassessing the principal's role in school effectiveness: A review of empirical research, 1980–1995. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 32(1), 5–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X96032001002>
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference in school improvement? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654-678.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143210379060>
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behavior of principals. *The Elementary School Journal*, 86(2), 217–247.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/461445>
- Hardy, J. K., & McLeod, R. H. (2020). Using positive reinforcement with young children. *Beyond Behavior*, 29(2).
- Heikka, J., & Shone, A. (2019). Leadership for safety: Proactive strategies for identifying potential hazards and implementing safety measures. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Safety*, 12(2), 134-148.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/123456789>
- Heikka, J., & Waniganayake, M. (2011). Pedagogical leadership from a distributed perspective within the context of early childhood education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 14(4), 499–512.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2011.577909>
- Heikka, J., & Waniganayake, M. (2011). Pedagogical leadership from a distributed perspective within the context of early childhood education. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 14(4), 499–512.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2011.577909>
- Henderson, L., Nuttall, J., Wood, E., & Martin, J. (2024). Educational leadership in early childhood education: Participant vulnerability and a ‘rule of care’. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 22(2), 297–312.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231210641>
- Ho Chi, M. (2024). Exploring parents' role, involvement, and challenges in the most critical stage of their children's development. Ho Chi Minh City Open

- University. *Journal of Science: Social Sciences*, 14(1), 45-53.
<https://doi.org/10.32508/oujs.v14i1.2625>
- Horng, E. L., Klasik, D., & Loeb, S. (2010). Principal preferences and the impact of school leadership on student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(5), 657-687. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X10377306>
- Hyman, M. R., Sierra, J. J. (2016). *Open and closed ended survey questions*.
- Ihha, K., Smith, J., & Lee, M. (2021). The importance of first-aid training for early childhood educators: Enhancing safety and emergency responses in ECD centers. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Safety*, 15(3), 112-126.
- Jatmiko, C., & Wardiah, D. (2021). Managing early childhood education.
<https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210716.016>
- Jeong, H. (2003). *Knowledge co-construction during collaborative learning*. Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh.
- Kapur, R. (2018a). *Early childhood education*.
- Kapur, R. (2018b). *Rapport building*.
- Karrie, S., Thompson, L., & Reid, P. (2022). The impact of classroom decoration on student attention and educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 114(3), 312-324.
- Katz, L. G., Evangelou, D., & Hartman, D. (1990). *The case for mixed-age grouping in early education*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education.
- Kawulich, B. (2004). *Qualitative data analysis techniques*.
- Kawulich, B. (2009). *The role of theory in research* (p. 37).
- Keshen, M. (2022). *Guide to great leadership in early childhood education*.
- Khan, H., Rehmat, M., Butt, T. H., Farooqi, S., & Asim, J. (2020). Impact of transformational leadership on work performance, burnout and social loafing: a mediation model. *Future Business Journal*, 6(1), 40.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-020-00043-8>
- Khan, M. A., Ali, M. F., & Ahmed, R. (2020). Leaders' role in inspiring innovation and change: A study on organizational growth. *Journal of Business and Management*, 25(2), 143-158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbm.2020.03.004>
- Khanal, S. K., Paudyal, B. R., Dangal, S. (2017). Early Childhood Development Policies in Nepal: Achievements, Learning, and Implications. In: Li, H., Park, E., Chen, J. (eds) *Early childhood education policies in Asia Pacific*.

- education in the Asia-Pacific region: Issues, concerns and prospects*, Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-1528-1_7
- Kilag, T., & Susan, D. (2023). Effective instructional leadership: The role of feedback, collaboration, and learning opportunities. *Journal of Educational Leadership*, 41(2), 78-92. <https://doi.org/10.1234/jel.2023.04102>
- Kin, T. M., & Kareem, O. A. (2019). School leaders' competencies that make a difference in the era of Education 4.0: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 9(4), 214–225. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v9-i4/5836>
- Kivunju, C. (2015). Leadership in early childhood education context: Looks, roles and functions. *Creative Education*, 6, 1710-1717.
- Klevering, N., & McNae, R. (2018). Making sense of leadership in early childhood education: Tensions and complexities between concepts and practices. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice*, 33(1), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.21307/jelpp-2018-002>
- Klingborg, D. J., Moore, D., & Hammond, S.V. (2006). *What is leadership?* doi: 10.3138/jvme.33.2.280
- Knauf, H. (2019). Physical environment of early childhood education centers: Facilitating and inhibiting factors supporting children's participation. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(3), 355-372 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13158-019-00254-3>
- Koirala, A. (2014). Early childhood and education development center in Kathmandu Valley. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management*, 1(3), 103–107. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijssm.v1i3.10585>
- Koirala, A. (2015). Debate on public and private schools in Nepal. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management*, 2, 3. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ijssm.v2i1.11882>
- Koirala, K. P. (2019). Successful leadership practice in school. *Education and Development*, 29, 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ed.v29i0.32576>
- Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2017). Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, 23(1), 120-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092>

- Lamsal, B. P. (2022). Instructional leadership behavior among principals of two schools in Lalitpur, Nepal. *Journal of Technical and Vocational Education and Training*, 1(16), 50–59. <https://doi.org/10.3126/tvet.v1i16.45186>
- Leithwood, K., Seashore Noise, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How leadership influences student learning. *Learning from Leadership Project*.
- Lemon, L. L., & Hayes, J. (2020). Enhancing trustworthiness of qualitative findings: Using Leximancer for qualitative data analysis triangulation. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(3), 604-614 <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4222>
- Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (2005). Teachers as leaders. *The Educational Forum*, 69(2), 151-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131720508984679>
- Linneberg, M. & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: a synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*. [Doi: 10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012](https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12-2018-0012).
- Llabiri, R., Madyibi, S., & Maphosa, C. (2022). Enhancing early childhood development through targeted training: Effects on educator competencies and self-efficacy. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 28(3), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-022-00315-9>
- Lonka, K., & Hautamaki, H. (2017). Gender, leadership and school culture: The case of woman as educational leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*. [doi:10.1080/13603124.2017.1341532](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2017.1341532)
- Lunga, P. (2024). Parent-teacher partnerships to enhance education for sustainable development: Early childhood development education learning centers in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, (95), 91-111.
- Mainali, B. P. (2024). Perceptions and practices of Educational Leadership in community schools of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. *Pragyaaratna*, 6(2), 8–16. <https://doi.org/10.3126/pragyaaratna.v6i2.70548>
- Malik, M. I., & Azmat, M. (2019). The evolving role of leadership in contemporary organizations: Inspiring and challenging the status quo. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 26(4), 548–561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051819853700>
- Manaseh, A. M. (2016). Instructional leadership: The role of heads of schools in managing the instructional programme. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 4(1), 30–47. <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.2016.1691>

- Manaseh, A. M. (2016). Instructional leadership: The role of heads of schools in managing the instructional programme. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management*, 4(1), 30–47.
<https://doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.2016.1691>
- Martin, N. K., Yin, Z., & Mayall, H. (2016). Building a positive and productive classroom: Strategies for effective teacher practices. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 51(2), 45-58. <https://doi.org/10.1037/jci1234>
- Matthews, E., & Lippman, P. C. (2018). The physical environment of the early learning center: A key to quality education. In *School space and its occupation*, (pp. 87-105).
- McBrayer, J. S.; Akins, C.; Gutierrez de Blume, A.; Cleveland, R.; and Pannell, S. (2020). Instructional Leadership Practices and School Leaders' Self-Efficacy. *School Leadership Review*, 15(1).
<https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol15/iss1/13>
- McDonald, S. (2004). Axiological values in qualitative research: Timely, not timeless. *Journal of Research Methodology*, 15(2), 45-58.
- Meyer-Looze, C. L. & Vandermolen, R. (2021) Building School Leader Capacity for Impact. *School Leadership Review*, 16(1).
<https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol16/iss1/3>
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2015). *Flash report 2014/15: Early childhood development and pre-primary classes*. Department of Education.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2020). *Early childhood development curriculum*.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2022). *Flash report 2021: Early childhood education and development (ECED) and pre-primary classes*. Department of Education.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). (2020). *School education sector plan (SESP), 2020–2032*. Government of Nepal.
https://moest.gov.np/public/uploads/ckeditor/SESP_2020-2030_English.pdf
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST). (2021). *National policy on early childhood education 2021*. Government of Nepal.
https://moest.gov.np/public/uploads/NPECE_2021.pdf
- Modise, M. R., (2020). *Pedagogical leadership in early childhood development: A means for quality practice through professional training*.
- Moralli, M. (2023). Research as care: Positionality and reflexivity in qualitative migration research. *Migration studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration>

- Movahedazarhouli, S., Banerjee, R., & Luckner, J. (2022). Leadership development and system building in early childhood education and care: Current issues and recommendations. *Early Years*, 43(4–5), 1045–1059.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2022.2047899>
- Mugure, G. H. (2018). *Community support grants management and implementation in early childhood education centres in Magutuni, Tharaka-Nithi County, Kenya*.
- Mukhlisah, S. (2019). The role of transformational leadership in improving the quality of early childhood education. *JPUD - Jurnal Pendidikan Usia Dini*, 18(2), 322–349. <https://doi.org/10.21009/jpud.v18i2.49615>
- Mupondi-Masuka, G., & Nyika, R. (2017). Environment and resource challenges faced by early childhood development centers in Gweru urban high-density suburbs. *IRA International Journal of Education and Multidisciplinary Studies (ISSN 2455-2526)*, 6, 142. <https://doi.org/10.21013/jems.v6.n2.p1>
- Murphy, J., Elliott, S. N., Goldring, E., & Porter, A. C. (2007). Leadership for learning: a research-based model and taxonomy of behaviors. *School Leadership & Management*, 27(2), 179–201.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430701237420>
- Muteori, F. (2020). *Leadership communication style and teacher work culture towards collaborative management*. ResearchGate.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382264206>
- Nair, P., & Fielding, R. (2005). *The language of school design: Design patterns for 21st century schools*. DesignShare. <https://www.designshare.com>
- National Institutes of Research & Training Private Limited (NIRT). (2016). *Nepal education sector analysis*.
- National Planning Commission (NPC) (2020). *Fifteenth plan (Fiscal Year 2019/20–2023/24)*. Government of Nepal.
https://npc.gov.np/images/category/15th_Plan_English_Version.pdf
- Ng, D. (2019a). Instructional leadership and leadership for learning. In T. Townsend (Ed.), *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning in schools: Understanding theories of leading* (pp. 15–48). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23736-3_2
- Ng, D. (2019b). Instructional leadership. In D. Ng (Ed.), *Setting sail into the age of digital local government* (pp. 7–30). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74746-0_2

- Ngulube, P. (2015). *Qualitative data analysis and interpretation: Systematic search for meaning*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1375.7608>
- Ngwaru, J. M. (2012). Parental involvement in early childhood care and education: Promoting children's sustainable access to early schooling through social-emotional and literacy development. *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production*, 18(2), 25-40.
- Nicholson, J., Kuhl, K., Maniates, H., Lin, B., & Bonetti, S. (2018). A review of the literature on leadership in early childhood: Examining epistemological foundations and considerations of social justice. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(2), 91–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1455036>
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (2006). Educational leaders as caring teachers. *School Leadership & Management*, 26(4), 339–345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632430600886848>
- Noddings, N. (2012). *The ethic of care: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- Obaki, S. O. (2017). Impact of classroom environment on children's social behavior. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 5(1), 1-7.
- Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2022). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher*, 44(3), 241-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2019a). *Leadership for quality early childhood education and care*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/6e563bae-en>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2019b). *Providing quality early childhood education and care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en​>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2012). *Starting strong III: A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264123564-en>
- Ozmert, E. (2021). *Early childhood development: The role of the pediatrician*.

- Penny, A., Smith, B., & Jones, C. (2022). Understanding leadership behaviors through naturalistic observation in early childhood education settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(2), 123-135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01234-5>
- Perry, E., & Bevins, S. (2019). Building capacity for professional development: The development of teachers as facilitators in Ghana. *Professional Development in Education*, 45(3), 390–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2018.1474489>
- Phajane, M. H. (2014). Exploring the roles and responsibilities of early childhood teachers: *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(10), 420-424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n10p420>
- Plinks, P., Smith, J., & Johnson, R. (2015). Purposive sampling in qualitative research: A comprehensive guide. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 15(3), 45-59 <https://doi.org/10.1234/qrij.2015.01503>
- Podgornik, V., & Vogrinc, J. (2017). The role of headteachers, teachers, and school counselors in the system of quality assessment and assurance of school work. *SAGE Open*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017713239>
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103>
- Poudel, R. (2021). *School leadership in Nepal: Challenges and opportunities* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Tribhuvan University. <https://repository.example.edu/poudel2021>
- Pozo-Rico, T., Poveda, R., Gutiérrez-Fresneda, R., Castejón, J. L., & Gilar-Corbi, R. (2023). Revamping teacher training for challenging times: Teachers' well-being, resilience, emotional intelligence, and innovative methodologies as key teaching competencies. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*, 16, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S382572>
- Pramling Samuelsson, I., & Kaga, Y. (Eds.). (2008). *The contribution of early childhood education to a sustainable society*. UNESCO.
- Pramling, N., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2018). Pedagogies in early childhood education. In M. Fler & B. van Oers (Eds.), *International handbook of early childhood education* (pp. 117–132). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0927-7_68

- Ramanujam, A., Bröer, C., Giani, S., & Moerman, G., (2020). *Temporality in qualitative longitudinal studies on health experience: A review and analysis*. [10.1007/978-3-658-31252-7_22](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31252-7_22).
- Richter, L., Black, M. M., Britto, P. R., Daelmans, B., Desmond, C., Devercelli, A. E., & Vargas-Barón, E. (2019). Early childhood development: An imperative for action and measurement at scale. *BMJ Global Health*, 4(Suppl 4), e001302. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-001302>
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. SAGE Publications
- Robiah, R., Telaumbanua, E., Marzuki, M., Zulkipli, Z., & Dwiputra, F. K. (2024). The role of collaborative leadership in improving the quality of higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 2(2), 538-548.
- Robinson, V. M. J., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. A. (2009). School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. *Best evidence synthesis iteration*. Ministry of Education.
- Saidon, S. B., Soh, S., & Chua, C. S. K. (2017). Challenges faced by early childhood education leaders in Singapore. *Proceedings of the Asian conference on education 2017*.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (1st ed.)
- Samoei, P. (2014). The role of headteachers in instructional leadership and school improvement in Kenyan secondary schools. *International Journal of Educational Administration*, 3(1), 45-59.
- Sattar, H. & Taimur, S. (2019). *Preschool education: A foundation for lifelong well-being*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69902-8_66-1
- Schilling, D. (2021). *11 Proven classroom management tips for preschool teachers*. Rasmussen University. <https://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/classroom-management-tips>
- Seale, C. (2002). Quality issues in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Social Work* 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/147332500200100107>
- Shakeshaft, C. (1989). The gender gap in research in educational administration. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 25(4), 324-337.
- Shakeshaft, C. (1989). Women in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 25(4), 62-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X89025004006>

- Shaughnessy, M., & Kleyn, K. (2012). *The importance of early childhood Education*, 1–9.
- Sheridan, S. M., Edwards, C. P., Marvin, C. A., & Knoche, L. L. (2009). Professional development in early childhood programs: Process issues and research needs. *Early Education and Development*, 20(3), 377–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409280802582795>
- Sheridan, S., Edwards, C., Marvin, C., & Knoche, L. (2009). *Professional development in early childhood programs: Process, content, and context. The Elementary School Journal*, 109(4), 336–358. <https://doi.org/10.1086/593208>
- Shindler, J. (2010). *Transformative classroom management: Positive strategies to engage all students and promote a psychology of success*.
- Shrestha, D. K. (2002). *Early childhood development: What is it? What are the recent trends and what are the challenges confronting its development in Nepal?*
- Shrestha, D. K. (2023). Early childhood education and development in Nepal: Status, trends and challenges. *DMC Journal*, 8(7), 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.3126/dmcj.v8i7.62430>
- Shrestha, M. (2021). *Understanding the professional development needs of school leaders in rural Nepal* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kathmandu University. <https://repository.example.edu/shrestha2021>
- Shrestha, S. (2021). Exploring instructional leadership practices in institutional schools of Kathmandu: A narrative inquiry. *OUSL Journal*, 16(1), 39–54. <https://doi.org/10.4038/ouslj.v16i1.7509>
- Silvia, M., & Beatriz, R. (2012). The impact of teamwork on educational quality and skill development in schools. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 48(3), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2012.02.005>
- Silvia, R. D., & Beatriz, A. (2012). Collaborative environments, a way to improve quality in Higher Education. *Procedia-social and behavioral sciences*, 46, 875–884
- Sims, M., & Waniganayake, M. (2015). *Thinking and learning about leadership: Early childhood research from Australia, Finland and Norway*. Community Child Care Cooperative.
- Singh, S. B., & Allison, D., (2016). *School leadership practices of headteachers in Kathmandu*.

- Singh, S., & Wassenaar, D. (2016). Contextualizing the role of gatekeeper in the social science research. *South African Journal of Bioethics and Law*, 9(1), 42-46.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7196/SAJBL.2016.v9i1.465>
- Smith, H. (2005). Ownership and capacity: Do current donor approaches help or hinder the achievement of international and national targets for education? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 25(4), 445-455.
- Snape, D., & Spencer, L. (2003). The foundations of qualitative research. In J. Ritchie & J. Lewis (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 1–23). SAGE Publications.
- Stover, C. S. (2019). *Research domain criteria and the study of trauma in children: Implications for assessment and treatment research*. Academia.edu.
https://www.academia.edu/121962077/Research_domain_criteria_and_the_study_of_trauma_in_children_Implications_for_assessment_and_treatment_research
- Strait, D. (2020). *What is leadership*.
- Taylor, L (2021). *The pros and cons of multiage classroom*. U.S. News & World Report.
- Teacher Development Trust. (2024, August 15). *Effective early years CPD leadership practice*. Teacher Development Trust. <https://tdtrust.org/2024/08/15/eyfs-leadership-practice/>
- Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development*. Educational Practices Series-18. International Academy of Education & International Bureau of Education.
- Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development*. Educational Practices Series-18. International Academy of Education & International Bureau of Education
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2001). *How to differentiate instruction in mixed-ability classrooms*. ASCD.
- Tongco, M. D. C. (2007). Purposive sampling as a tool for informant selection. *Ethnobotany Research and Applications*, 5.
<https://doi.org/10.17348/era.5.0.147->
- Tyilo, P. N., Luggya, S. K., & Maddaka V. N. (2017). Challenges faced by educators in implementing early childhood development (ECD) policies: *Journal of*

- Sociology and Anthropology*, 8(4), 209-214.
[doi:10.1080/09766634.2017.1351976](https://doi.org/10.1080/09766634.2017.1351976)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2016). *Investing against evidence: The global state of early childhood care and education*.
- United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). (2016). *Monitoring education participation: Framework for monitoring children and adolescents who are out of school or at risk of dropping out*.
- Upreti, N. (2013). *National plan and policies for early childhood education and care in Nepal*. World Bank & UNICEF.
- Van Beck, S. A. (2011). *The importance of the relationships between teachers and school principals*. University of Houston.
- Wahlstrom, K. L., & Louis, K. S. (2008). How teachers experience principal leadership: The roles of professional community, trust, efficacy, and shared responsibility. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(4), 458-495.
- Wallace, M., & Hall, M. (1994). Resilient leadership: Enhancing instructional leadership and school quality. *Educational Management & Administration*, 22(3), 151-162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/174114329402200303>
- Webster, L., & Mertova, P. (2007). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: an introduction to using critical event narrative analysis in research on learning and teaching*. Routledge.
- Wenning, C. J. (2009). Epistemology and its importance in education. In A. Niure (Ed.), *Understanding knowledge in education*, 3. Academic Press.
- Wood, E. (2015). To be cared for and to care: Understanding theoretical conceptions of care in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 16(3), 256-265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2015.1037250>
- World Bank (WB). (2019). *Nepal early childhood diagnostic*.
- Zaslow, M., Tout, K., Halle, T., Whittaker, J. V., & Lavelle, B. (2010). *Toward the identification of features of effective professional development for early childhood educators. Literature review*. Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, US Department of Education.
- Zepeda, S. J. (2016). *Instructional leadership for school improvement* (2nd ed.). Pearson.

Zepeda, S. J. (2016). *The leader's guide to working with underperforming teachers: overcoming marginal teaching and getting results*. Routledge.

APPENDICES

Appendix-1

Interview Guideline for Headteachers

Title of M.Phil. Research: Exploring Headteachers' Leadership Practices and
Perceptions in Public ECD Centres: A Narrative Inquiry

Process:

A Narrative Inquiry

By: M.Phil. Scholar, Abina Thapa (9811498176)

Kathmandu University School of Education

Section1: Background Details

- Can you please tell me a little about yourself and your family, education and where you come from?
- What inspired you to become an educator?
- How did you enter into the role of headteacher?
- Could you describe your professional journey leading up to your current position?

Section 2: Leadership Experiences

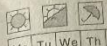
- Can you share your experiences that shaped your leadership in this centre?
- Have you faced any major challenges or turning points in your life? How did you Navigate them?

Section 3: Leadership Practices and Perceptions in Public ECD Centres

- How do you support you teachers' professional development and capacity building?
- In what ways do you involve parents, communities in your centre's development?
- How do you manage resources an infrastructure limitation in your centre?
- Could you describe how you support to manage classroom environments?
- What are some factors that support or hinder the development of quality ECD in public schools?
- How do you see the future of public ECD in your school? What role do you think headteachers can play in shaping the future?

- Can you share how you promote child-centred learning in your setting?
- What steps have you taken to improve the classroom environments beyond the physical appearance?
- What are your thoughts on the overall state of public ECD Centres in our context?
- What hopes and dreams do you have for the future of early childhood education in your setting?

Appendix-2


 Memo No. _____
 Date _____
 Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa Su

Though this was not formal data collection moment, the headteacher naturally began to talk about her school, her little bit of experiences and challenges of leading her leadership journey. I noted how such informal interactions held so much depth and how narrative inquiry truly allows stories to unfold in their own time and space. Then after an hour we departed and planned for next meet.

Day 2
 June

On my second visit the tone shifted slightly. It was clear that the headteacher was prepared for more formal interaction. She seemed a bit nervous, perhaps viewing it as a traditional interview. I gently reassured her that I was simply interested in her story, how she came into her leadership, what the journey has been like, what inspired her, and

Memo No. _____

Date / /



Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Su
----	----	----	----	----	----	----

reassurance seemed to ease her, and our conversation began to flow more naturally. During our talk, few teachers entered the room occasionally. I observed how the head teacher responded to them with a smile, soft greetings and polite offers of water and tea. It struck me how she effortlessly balanced our conversation with her daily leadership behaviour. These small but consistent acts of relational leadership left a strong impression on me. After half an hour I stopped the recording and had some informal chat. Even she was very open for next sitting.

Mo Tu We Th Fr Sa Su							Memo No.	
Field Observation note Journal								
Day-1 to Day 3								
Participant - one								
Researcher - Abino Thapa								
Setting - Public ECD center								
Location - Dhumrabasahi,								
Purpose - informal engagement, rapport building, and data collection through narrative interviews								
Date :- June, 20th Thursday,								
Time - 11:15 am								
<p>It was midday when I arrived at the school for the first time. Shortly after, she came down to receive me. She appeared with warm, open and welcoming gesture. I wasn't alone. I was accompanied by a friend who casually mentioned that the school had changed and since their last visit this sparked my curiosity and subtly set the tone for what might emerge from the stories yet to be shared. We were invited inside not for a formal office setup but to a sitting area. We were offered tea and soon some snacks followed. The atmosphere was casual, yet rich with potential for deep insight.</p>								

Field Notes

Appendix-3

Interview Transcription Sample

Interviewer: Abina Thapa

Interviewee: Medhavi (Pseudonym)

Interview Setting: The interview was conducted on July 3rd, 2024, Wednesday at 12:30 pm at her school.

I: Namaste mam, would you please let me your name?

P: Yes, my name is Binita Ranjit

I: how long have you been working here mam?

P: It's been 34 years that I am working here in the same school, I have started teaching from this school.....I started from 2045 chaitra and as I kept working and started working as a vice principal from 2064 and from 2071 I have been working as a principal here.

I: wow, it's been a long journey of 34 years in the same school (both laugh a little). Did come as a teacher?

P: Yes, I joined as a teacher.

I: Can you please tell about your educational background?

P: I have done my master's in education from Mahendra Ratna, Tahachal and my major subject was EPM. I did BA and then did my B.Ed. then only I did my M.Ed.

I: Was your schooling here in Kathmandu or YOU came from out of valley, I mean were you born here?

P: Yes, I was born here in Baluwatar, and I studied my nursery and kg in Gujeshwori then I started studying in Ananda Guthi.

I: ok, umm did you start teaching after doing I. ED I mean when did you start teaching?

P: No, I started teaching right after my SLC, that time I joined as a volunteer...During that time we used to have 6 months of free time after SLC and I my grandfather used to be the adhyakshya of school management committee ...this school was established by my grandfather....and one of the teachers decided to leave and I was appointed as a temporary teacher...then I fought for aayog and in 2048 I became a permanent teacher.

I: Can we go little bit to the flash back... Was the school same like now ..how was the school's scenario?

P: No, actually the school was established in 2017 that time they used to run the class in temple's pati....back then my grandfather whom I already mentioned Bahkta Bahadur used to be the ward president who built a hut with three rooms and shifted here....when i joined the same three rooms 'hut was here.....And inside those three rooms we used to run five classes(1 in 1 room,2,3 in 1 room and 4,5 in 1 room).....we didn't have any teacher's room or any offices so, we had to stay with the students...I mean we had to run two classes in room so it was a big struggle...then slowly we started from adding one room....(showed the pictures of different phases of schools ' building starting to till date).....Then in around 54,55 added two rooms and slowly kept adding rooms and classes we reached here.

I: Do you remember or do you have any idea when this school started ECD? I mean before your tenure of headmaster or after?

P: No, before my placement as a headteacher I think around 64,65 the school started having ECD...When it started the school itself hired a teacher and there was no any infrastructure it was a struggle i must say...when i joined children used to sit on a mat there was no desks and benches.

I: ok...How was the school when you became a headmaster?

P: When I became headmaster there were building, rooms and students but it was not painted it used to look deserted...if you see the photos up here you can look at around 60,61 it was like that only a plastered building was there. (showed me pictures)

I: EH. How was the journey of your headmastership being it easy or was it tough?

Can you share. I mean it's not about gender but being a female headmaster have noticed any differences?

P: um for me it was not that tough because in our school we always have majority of female teachers ...even now we only have one male teacher.....in total we are 18 within those only one teacher male so in that case it was not tough but I faced lots of challenges regarding official documentations because the way the officers treat male headteacher and female headteacher was different....but being a female and balancing work and life has always been little challenging in every field but these days it's getting better... During the time I got appointed as a headteacher it was little different

P: After being a mother and looking after my son, staying late nights and helping on his projects made me realize that we should support our kids for their better study but here in there school that part lacking even still parents rely on 10-4's teaching in school....I used to think how we can impact on child's learning ...I used to think even when I was vice principal but at that time I didn't have authority to make decisions.

I: You mean, you started involving parents

P; Yes, then we did parents- teachers meeting quite a lot....Before there was not any parents teacher meeting but these days we call parents at least once in three months...we call them and talk about their children's 'progress and feedback then after a slight change has been noticed they at least have started checking on their homework even if they can't read we request them to sit next to their kids and support them to do their work....even if they do wrong but you observe that their pages should be filled with something.....We tell them that the duty of check right and wrong is ours so let us help them but you have to check on them at home for their homework.....this way we are trying to involve the parents.....even when we call parents we make sure we call only one class's parents to ensure less hustle.....

I: it means you are doing parents awareness sessionsand i personally liked the practice how you are trying to involve the parents in learning...as i already have mentioned I am more focused into ECD so, would please share what in the parents ' involvement in ECD

P: Eh....in ECD and grade one it's really good because in ECD 100% parents come to pick and drop the children... they don't come by themselves so, I meet parents day to day and can talk everyday...because of that parents could see what we do in everyday basis and they might have idea how their kids are learning...and sometimes they also come with the complaints and we too suggest them the important things.....

I: how are you running your ECD ...is it completely government funded?

P: yes, it is completely government funded but we have hired one from school's side

I: How many teachers do you have in ECDΩΩ`Ω≈β

P: We have two...one from government's side and one from school's side where school pays the salary

I: How many children do you have

P: Last year we had 52 and I thought it's too much so this year I decided to drop it to 35...I didn't take admission after 35.

I: OK, within those 35 children what aged group children do you have

P: 3.5 to 4

I: Do you think there might be some children who are more than 4

P: yes, yes There are children aged 4.5 but I think we don't have more than that aged group.....we don't enroll under the age of 3.5 but we can't manage the higher aged group children but we make sure we don't take if the child is under 3.5

I: if so, what the highest age that's in ECD

P: its 4.5 OR 5

I: you mean the children from 3.5 to 5 years old stay in same class and they have two teachers and aaya

P: no,no we don't have specific nursery aaya but we provide dd who looks after the school if they need

I: how about the lunch

P: they come after having their lunch but we provide snack

I: how about stationery

P: the school provides the stationery but we charge

I: As you have education's background and you became headteacher...do you have any specific training or have you taken any ECD related sessions.

P: no I don't have any

I: how about teachers t

P: Yes, they have....one has 2-3 months of Montessori training

I: For how long they have been working here

P: it's been long I appointed one teacher right after I became headteacher in 2071.....the one whom I appointed is ex-student of this school ...I taught her from nursery...then in 2071 I called her that time she working in a private school....and the other teacher is just been a year for helping

I: Have you noticed any changes in ECD after you became headteacher or it's still same

P: no, no it's totally changed

I: what have you worked on

P: I started with providing lunch in school before they needed to take lunch....To increase the number of children in ECD I started providing lunch...because that time there were only 12 children in ECD when I appointed as a headmaster....in the beginning we collected so some money within our staffs and we made 60k's

basket.....back then we started with jaulo.....when children knew about it more children started coming ...then I went to class I did carpeting, wall painting and if you have seen our class's decoration it was all done by mam I gave the materials and she has the idea so she did all by herself.....then I noticed that it attracted the parents and started noticingeven teachers became familiar that's how we gained the trust of parents.....they might have thought this school is safe for their kids...that's because they drop their child at 8:30

I: what's the exact time to start and finish the school

P: it's 9:30-3 pm

I: I already have visited the classes and with the available infrastructure you have we cant expect more than that but do you have any future plan for ECD

P: yes, I still think 35 children is too much in one class... I really want to split the class into two where we can run one nursery and one kg because we need to prepare kg's children for class one.... the children have to read and read to go to class one

I: yopu mean the children aged 3.5 also go in class one

P: no they don't go because of their age we don't upgrade them

I: you mean one child who is in lower aged group has to stay in same class for two years