



Report on the Status of ECCD Programs in Bhutan using Pre-Primary Sector Analysis Tools:

From the Perspectives of Program Officers, District
Education Officers, and ECCD Facilitators

ECDAN Knowledge Fellows
program project

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Abbreviations

CIG	Curriculum Implementation Guide
CPD	continuous professional development
CSO	civil-society organization
DEO	District Education Officers
ECCD	early childhood care and development
ECD	early childhood development
ECDAN	Early Childhood Development Action Network
ECEC	early childhood education and care
ELDS	Early Learning Development Standards
MaX	Managing for Excellence
MoE	Ministry of Education
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
RCSC	Royal Civil Services Commission
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
QMTEC	Quality Monitoring Tool for ECD Centers
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund



Abstract

Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) is a term for the holistic development of children including physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development from conception to age 8. With ECCD being critical and essential, Bhutan has launched ECCD programming for more than a decade. This report aimed to explore the status of the ECCD program in the country, focusing on the five core functions that ensure an enabling environment as highlighted in Tool 2.2 Pre-primary Subsector Analysis of the ECE Accelerator toolkit. The report used a mixed-method strategy, both qualitative and quantitative. The report used a purposive sampling method to select the participants. For quantitative data, surveys were conducted via an online questionnaire, and for qualitative data, face-to-face interviews were conducted. The survey questionnaires were administered to the ECCD facilitators, district education officers (DEOs), program officers, and parent school principals. The report used descriptive statistics, a thematic analysis approach, and later employed a triangulation approach which enabled comparing, contrasting, and validating findings from quantitative and qualitative data.

Results showed that ECCD in Bhutan is performing adequately and there are not many significant challenges. Planning and budgeting are also consultatively conducted, and curriculum and necessary guiding documents are also in place. The ECCD programming was found to be widely engaging with parents and communities. For quality assurance and workforce development, numerous interventions have been instituted, yet fail to fill the gap with initiatives including training focal monitoring officials and giving continuous professional development (CPD) to ECCD facilitators. Demonstrative of an enabling environment, the results indicated that there is a lead ministry in the government overseeing the program. However, the ministry is faced with limited human resources to effectively spearhead implementation. Despite progress made, there exist major challenges of limited perennial, dedicated financing for the program, and lack of concrete ECCD policy and education policy to enable smooth functioning of the program in the country. The report findings recommend exploring dedicated financing for ECCD program development, and endorsement of education policy, strengthening CPD for facilitators, training monitoring officials, and enhancing multi-sectoral input for ECCD programming in the country.

Keywords: early childhood care and development, status, core functions, enabling environment



1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Early childhood is a period in life from conception until 8 years of age. The first eight years of life are a period of tremendous growth and development. The formation of synapses is exponential in the first three years and the potential for ensuring optimal development is remarkably high up to age 8. The Draft National Education Policy of Bhutan (2019)¹⁵ also indicates that the target age group of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) services is from conception to 8 years. There is diversity in usage of terminology related to early childhood. In Bhutan, the term early childhood care and development has been predominantly used. The plethora of neuroscience research showed the significant importance of early childhood development and its cascading benefits in the latter part of life. ECCD holds paramount importance to ensure benefits not only for individual children's development but also for the larger community. Early childhood education is widely recognized as a significant pathway to inclusiveness and social equity in education. Moreover, it acts as a powerful instrument to help in breaking the cycle of poverty in many countries.

Renowned professor, James J. Heckman stated that “learning starts in infancy, long before the formal education begins.”¹⁰ So, the success and failure at this stage lays the foundation for success or failure later in children's lives. Early intervention can prevent the consequences of early adversity. ECCD includes emotional and physical health, social skills and cognitive-linguistic capacities that emerge in the early years and act as prerequisites for success in school and in the workplace.¹⁰ Neuroscience indicates that early childhood development is more effective and less costly than attempting to address the consequences of early adversity later. ECCD helps in the development of both hard skills, such as math and literacy, and soft skills such as character skills and socio-emotional skills. According to Professor Heckman, ECCD reduces deficits and strengthens the economy.¹¹ It also can reduce social costs. The children receiving adequate ECCD will be likely to complete high school, less likely to be held back, need remedial help, or be arrested later in development.

The adverse impacts of genetic, parental, and environmental resources can be overturned through investment in quality ECCD. Investment in early education for disadvantaged children from birth to age 5 helps reduce the achievement gap, the need for special education, increase healthy lifestyles, lower crime rate, and reduce overall social costs. Investing early allows us to shape the future, while investing later leads to fixation of missed opportunities of the past.⁹ Campbell et al. found that high quality and intensive interventions in early years can be effective in preventing, or at least delaying the onset of disease in adulthood.³

The cost-benefit analyses of the Perry Preschool Program, the Abecedarian Project, the Chicago Child-Parent Centers, and the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy Project showed returns ranging from \$3 to \$17 for every dollar invested. This implies an annual rate of return, adjusted for inflation, of between 7 percent and 18 percent. Per senior economist Timothy Bartik, from the parental context, having an ECCD program enables parents to improve their productivity by putting in more work hours, missing fewer workdays, and experiencing less stress. Bakken et al. expressed that ECCD receiving children showed significantly more appropriate behaviors, were notably better at social interactions and were demonstrably



more emotionally mature than those who did not attend the ECCD Program.¹ Similarly, the impact study conducted for the ECCD program in Bhutan also showed that the children with access to ECCD programming gained more skills and developmental improvement than the children without access to the program.¹⁹

1.2 Project Purpose

ECCD programming in Bhutan is an emerging initiative still in its nascent stage compared to neighboring countries. With support from government, development partners and relevant NGOs, ECCD programs in the country have gained momentum in enhancing the access and quality of ECCD programs. However, enrollment rates for children availing ECCD services is surprisingly low compared to other countries. According to its Annual Education Statistics of 2021, the net enrollment rate for Bhutan is only 32 percent.¹⁴ Therefore, it is important to find the gaps and recommend solutions accordingly to increase access, ensuring that quality is not compromised. This report envisions studying the status of ECCD in Bhutan from the perspectives of pertinent stakeholders. The report will aid in finding strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and later provide actionable recommendations for the enhancement of ECCD programs in the country. For this report, a Pre-primary Subsector Analysis Tool was used, consisting of five core functions, including an enabling environment. The core functions are planning and budgeting, curriculum implementation, workforce development, family and community engagement, and quality assurance. The factors that determine the enabling environment in the tool are ministerial leadership, policies and legislation, public demand, and financing. This report aspires to facilitate reflection and self-assessment on the status of the five-core functions and enabling environments. Moreover, as there are only limited evidence-based ECCD studies conducted to plan and implement, this study also aims to expand the field of study for ECCD Bhutan, thus enabling development of comprehensive plans, realistic financing and ultimately increasing the ECCD access in the country to holistically develop children and succeed in their lives.

1.3 Objectives

The aim of the report is to explore the status of ECCD programming in Bhutan, highlighting the strengths and challenges, and providing recommendations using a pre-primary subsector analysis tool. The specific objectives are:

- To explore the status of planning and budgeting of ECCD programs in the country.
- To explore the status of curriculum development of ECCD programs in the country.
- To explore the status of workforce development of ECCD programs in the country.
- To explore the status of family and community engagement of ECCD programs in the country.
- To explore the status of quality assurance of ECCD programs in the country.
- To explore the status of the enabling environment of ECCD programs in the country.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The report employed a mixed-method strategy. The report adopted a Triangulation Design: Convergence Model. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed separately on the same phenomenon and then the different results were converged by comparing the different results during the interpretation.

2.2 Sampling Method and Participants

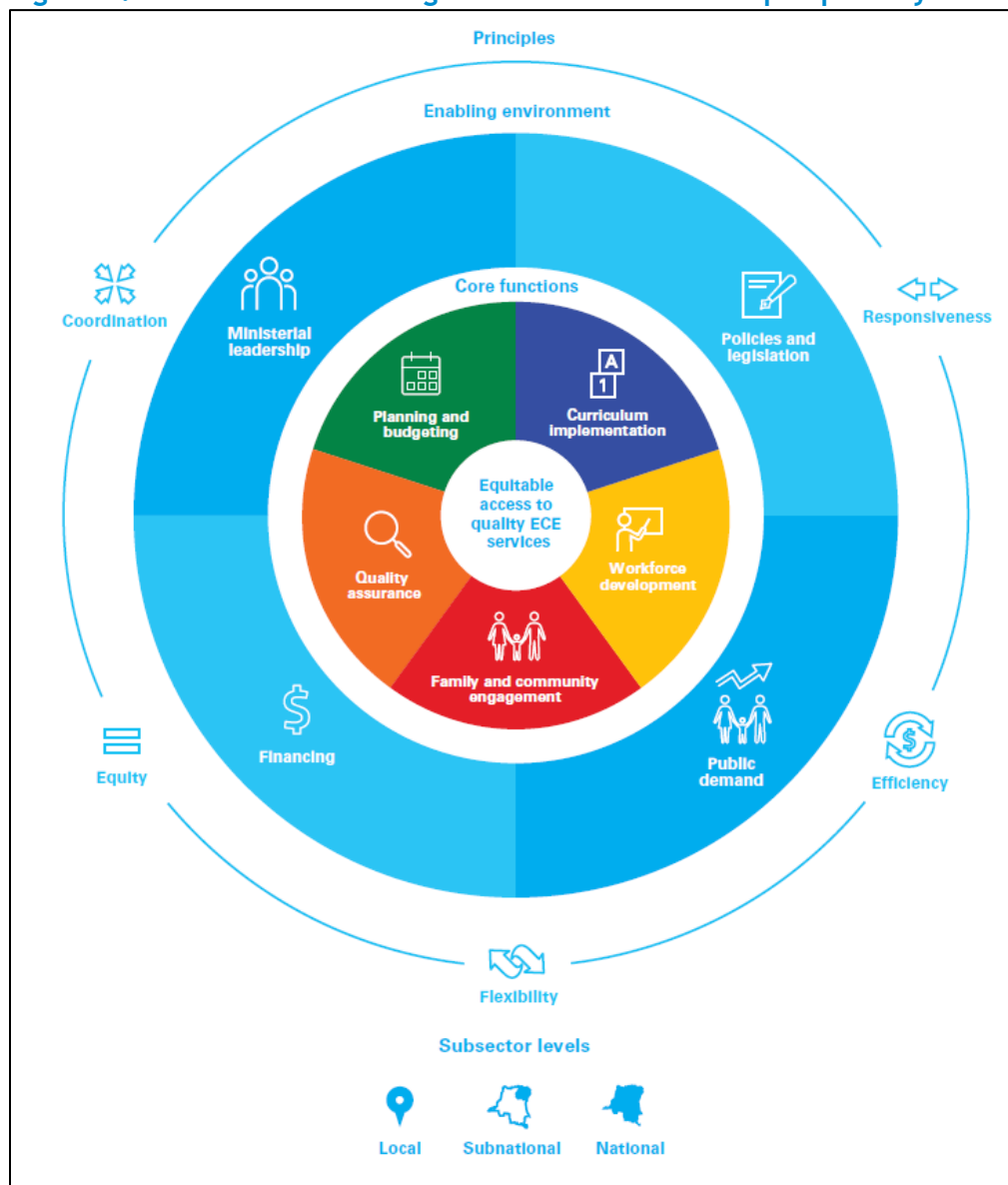
A purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for both quantitative and qualitative data. For the quantitative data, the research participants for this project were ministry ECCD program officers, district education officers, parent school principals and ECCD facilitators as they are main stakeholders of Early Childhood Development Care Program (ECCD) in Bhutan. However, for qualitative data, only seven respondents comprising ECCD program officers and district education officers were selected for the interview.

2.3 Data Collection Tools and Method

As the report employed both quantitative and qualitative strategies, data was collected in two ways: The survey questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data, whereas semi-structured face-to-face interview methods were used to collect qualitative data. An online Google form was used to construct survey questionnaires, which were administered to all focal ECCD District Education Officers (DEOs), ECCD facilitators, parent school principals and ECCD program officers via email and shared Google form link across social media apps. During the interviews, notes were taken and transcribed. In addition, the interviews were recorded with the consent of participants, and later transcribed. The Pre-primary Subsector Analysis Tool developed by UNICEF was used for setting online survey questionnaires and interview questions.



Figure 1. Fundamental building blocks for an effective pre-primary subsector.



Source: UNICEF^{24,25}

Abbreviations: ECE, early childhood education

2.4 Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel were used for quantitative data analysis. All the completed questionnaires were examined for completeness. Quantitative data were numerically coded and analyzed in SPSS. The analysis involved descriptive statistics whereby frequency counts, percentages, and mean values were used to summarize the data. For qualitative data analysis, all the interview transcriptions were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis methods and used to substantiate findings from quantitative data. For the deductive thematic analysis, themes were identified based on the core functions and enabling environment specified in the Pre-primary Subsector Analysis

Tool. It was then followed by a triangulation approach which enabled comparing, contrasting, and validating findings from quantitative and qualitative data.

2.5 Limitations

Due to limited time, the report adopted purposive sampling which is a non-probability-based sampling method, for which the result might include biases. In addition, there were different questionnaires for participants based on their designation and relevance which might have impeded holistic opinion on the statement. Finally, time constraints resulted in the exclusion of development partners, institutes, and private stakeholders in this project.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Profile of Respondents

Respondents of this study are the ECCD program officers, district education officers, parent school principals¹, and ECCD facilitators. Based on the relevance and designation, different types of questionnaires were administered. For the quantitative part, most of the participants were ECCD facilitators as there are limited staff in program officer level and district education officer level positions, however, the cadres hold significant roles in the program. For the interview, 5 DEOs and 2 program officers were purposefully selected due to the significant role they play and knowledge they have on all the areas related to the ECCD program in the country.

Table 1. Respondents profile.

Designation	Survey Questionnaire Participants	Interview Participants
ECCD Program Officer	2	2
District Education Officer	20	5
Parent School Principal	6	0
ECCD Facilitators	169	0
TOTAL	197	7

Source: Authors' data.

Abbreviations: ECCD, early childhood care and development

3.2 Core Function: Planning and Budgeting

Core Function 1 under the Pre-primary Subsector Analysis Tool is planning and budgeting. This core function aims to enable the development of strong and responsive ECCD plans across all levels of government for equitable provision of quality ECCD programs, making efficient use of available resources--financial, human, and physical resources. For this core function, four broad questions were devised. Based on relevance only DEOs and Program Officers were required to respond to the questions. Table 2 portrays the existing planning and budgeting status of the ECCD program in the country. More than 80 percent of the respondents agreed that there is an evidence-based and equitable plan to deliver ECCD services. In the case of

¹ Parent School Principals are principals from schools to which ECCD centers are linked for support and guidance.

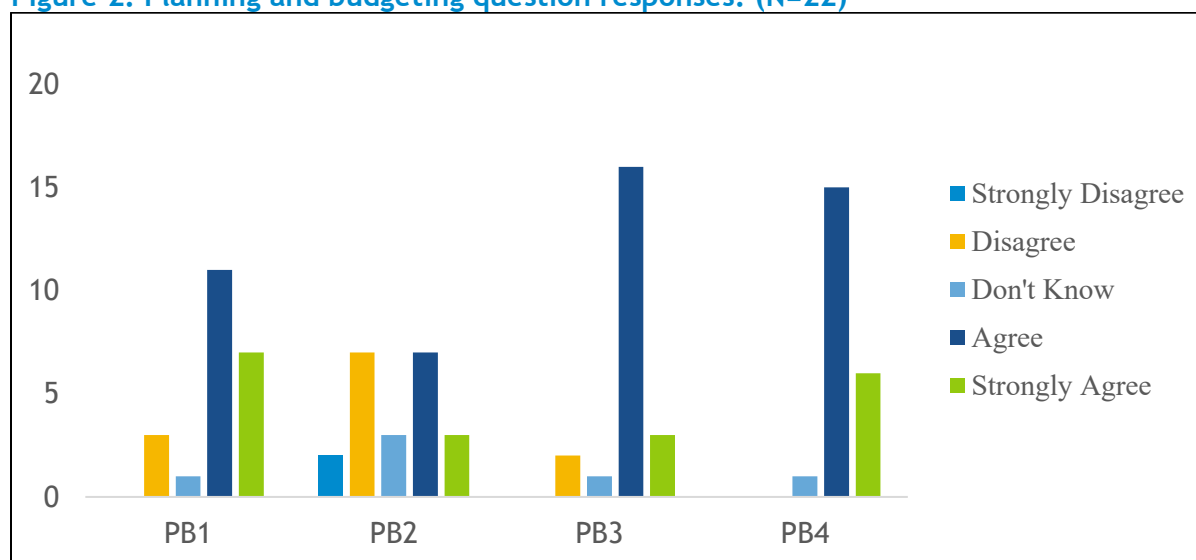
dedicated budget and financing mechanisms for ECCD services, 23 percent of the respondents did not agree, and 32 percent didn't have prior knowledge of them. The result also indicated that 87 percent of respondents agreed with having clear governance and accountability structures and strategies for implementing the plan. Almost every respondent (96 percent) agreed with the implementation of the monitoring plan and identifying crucial course corrections. Figure 1 shows the graphical representation of Core Function 1 responses.

Table 2. Planning and budgeting question responses.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	Mean
PB1 - There is an evidence-based & equitable plan to deliver high-quality ECCD services.	0	3	1	11	7	22	4.00
PB2 - There is dedicated budget and financing mechanisms for ECCD services.	2	7	3	7	3	22	3.09
PB3 - There is an establishment of clear governance and accountability structures and strategies for implementing the plan.		2	1	16	3	22	3.91
PB4 - There is an implementation of monitoring plan and identify crucial course corrections.	0	0	1	15	6	22	4.23
TOTAL	2	12	6	49	19		3.81

Source: Authors' data.

Figure 2. Planning and budgeting question responses. (N=22)



The interview findings also resonate with the survey findings. The core goals of the ECCD program in the country focus is enhancing access and quality. Respondent 3 stated, “The plans are all based on global evidence, current data and evidence of our own good practices and evaluation of the program. ECCD Planning is part of the education sector plan of the country.” It was evident from Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, and Respondent 5 that who expressed similarly that for ECCD program, Net Enrollment is given emphasis at planning level which is accompanied by the other critical subtopics. Currently, there is no dedicated budget for the program. Now there is no dedicated percentage of a country's gross domestic product for the ECCD program. The ECCD program in the country has been supported by development Partners like UNICEF, Global Partnership for Education, and Save the Children for the last 15 years. The Royal Government of Bhutan helps in giving the facilitators salaries and initial training. However, at the district level they mobilize and allocate some funds for enhancing access by jointly financing ECD center establishment and allocating budgets for professional development programs.

Respondent 4 pointed out, “The lack of education policy is the real impediment for smooth functioning of the program and getting perennial support. Nevertheless, the responsibility and accountability for implementation and financing are clear and well-coordinated.” Respondents 3, 4, and 7 expressed that formulation of plans involve development partners, planning, commission, and line ministries including finance and other relevant stakeholders. The development partners give funds based on the ministry's proposal and needs which has been clearly informed by the ground implementers at the district level. There is a clear pathway for checks and balances of fund release, implementation, and reporting, which involves funders, implementers, and the Ministry of Finance, which facilitates fund requests and release processes for implementing partners. To monitor the plan implementation, the Ministry of Education (MoE) closely works with the district education sectors whereby plan implementation progress is updated through a back-and-forth communication system. Based on the findings and needs expressed, plans are reviewed and amended.”

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative findings portray similar findings. Most of the plans for ECCD programming in the country were informed by relevant data and evidence considering the specific context in which the program was being implemented. This suggests that the planning process was thorough and considered multiple factors, which may increase the likelihood of success in delivering ECCD services. Similarly, both the survey and interview findings showed the challenges of dedicated budget and financing mechanisms for ECCD. Although the government, development partners and NGOs finance ECCD programming in general, there is a lack of dedicated and perennial financing. This could be due to priority setting during the fund allocation between agencies and ministries or a lack of awareness of the significance of ECCD programs. The Bhutan ECCD Investment Case Report found that three primary sources of funds for center-based programs are governments, UNICEF, and Save the Children.¹⁶ Despite the lack of a dedicated budget, there are clear governance and accountability measures between stakeholders. At the initial planning phase, relevant stakeholders are being involved for effective and successful implementation of plans. Moreover, both the findings showed the presence of monitoring the implementation of plans and reviewing the plans whenever necessary.



3.3 Core Function: Curriculum Development and Implementation

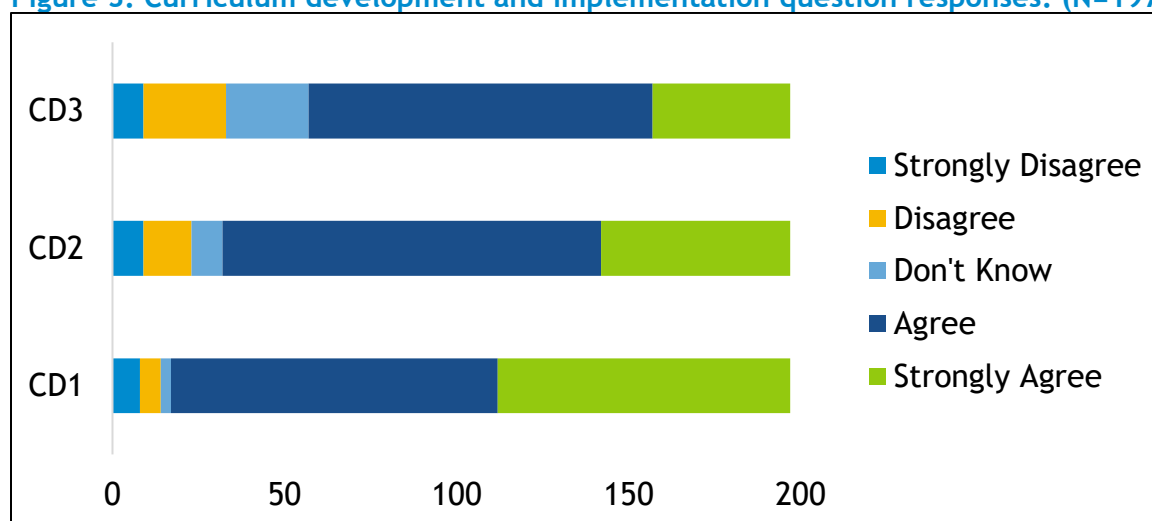
Core Function 2 explores the curriculum and implementation of ECCD programs in Bhutan. The purpose of the curriculum and implementation core function is to examine whether children receive the benefits of a developmentally appropriate curriculum and have access to play and learning materials that stimulate their development. For this core function, three broad questions have been asked to all the participants- DEOs, program officers, parent school principals and ECCD facilitators. Table 3 shows that more than 90 percent of the respondents agreed that there is a framework and content for ECCD curriculum defined in the country. Moreover, most of the respondents (84 percent) agreed with ECCD curriculum/ guiding documents being disseminated and implemented widely in the country. The result indicates that nearly 70 percent of the respondents agreed that content has been reviewed but 30 percent of the respondents encompassed those who have no idea and who disagreed on that statement.

Table 3. Curriculum development and implementation question responses.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	Mean
CD1 - There is framework and content for ECCD curriculum defined.	8	6	3	95	85	197	4.23
CD2 - ECCD Curriculum has been disseminated and implemented widely.	9	14	9	110	55	197	3.95
CD3 - The content of the curriculum and its use has been reviewed regularly.	9	24	24	100	40	197	3.70
TOTAL	26	44	36	305	180		3.96

Source: Authors' data.

Figure 3. Curriculum development and implementation question responses. (N=197)



According to the interview findings, the ECCD Program in Bhutan is guided by the Early Learning Developmental Standards (ELDS) which transcends curriculum framework and works as a mother document for ECCD program. ELDS is contextually relevant and consultatively developed and validated and approved by the MoE to widely adopt and implement. ELDS holds a vision to promote child-centered, play-based, and age-appropriate. To know how to use the ELDS there is a curriculum implementation guide which helps the facilitator to determine whether required standards are being achieved at the required age. Moreover, suggestive additional activities have been incorporated in the Curriculum Implementation Guide (CIG). Respondents 3 stated, “We have developed an emergent literacy and math activity book and integrity activity book. Those documents have been widely implemented in the country. The implementers have been initially given face-to-face curriculum orientation during basic training and sometimes through on-site coaching mode. At the district level, they also provide refresher courses where curriculum orientation is provided. However, there is an occasional need for reorientation on the curriculum as there are new ECCD facilitators and interns who are onboarded to ECCD centers.”

The participants shared that the curriculum, ELDS, and other documents have not been reviewed. All participants interviewed expressed the need for curriculum and other guiding documents to be reviewed at the earliest. Moreover, there is no appropriate data collection and assessment methods used to evaluate the curriculum’s effectiveness and ongoing relevance to children’s needs and skills, including the needs of children from the most vulnerable populations and children with disabilities. Respondent 1 shared, “We did not review the guiding document yet but as part of education reform- we are aligning the mother document with the Bhutan Baccalaureate which is part of reviewing.” All the respondents shared that the curriculum implementation in Bhutan is being monitored by the DEOs, parent school focal person, program officers, and education monitoring officers from the MoE. Initially all the monitoring persons were trained, however, upon changing the focal persons, additional training on monitoring tools became necessary. Informal communication with ground-level implementing stakeholders is the main mechanism that helps in taking suggestions for improvement of content and teaching practices.

Both findings revealed having the defined framework and content for ECCD programming. However, there is no fixed curriculum for ECCD like that of school curriculum in Bhutan. ELDS is the main guiding document which focuses on developmental outcomes and has been widely implemented in the country. The document is child-centered, encouraging play-based learning and age-appropriate learning. The ELDS and other documents were developed consultatively and involving diverse stakeholders. Those documents are tested for effectiveness and contextual relevance. Bertram and Pascal² found that the national curriculum guidance, which frequently provides guidance on learning standards and content, has been developed for most of the countries’ early childhood services. This is comprehensive and offers detailed guidance on learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, and assessment. Similarly, Bhutan uses the CIG to assist the ECCD facilitators while using the guiding documents. Both findings revealed that the ELDS and CIG are widely implemented in the country and are introduced during basic training prior to joining the workplace. There are contrasting findings in review of the curriculum and its use. Table 3 showed that curriculum has been reviewed but interviewed respondents firmly disagreed. This discrepancy has been attributed to the fact that most of the respondents were ECCD facilitators who assumed that the guiding documents have been reviewed.



3.4 Core Function: Workforce Development

Core Function 3 aims to study the workforce development of the personnel involved in ECCD programming in the country. This core function explores the processes of recruitment, professional development, and approaches towards retention of ECCD workforce. Furthermore, it covers whether the essential competencies, training and support required to promote children’s development and early learning were given or not. The survey findings on workforce development have been presented in Table 4. The table illustrates that most of the respondents (75 percent) agreed that there is an established a strategy for recruiting ECCD staff and competency and staff qualifications have been clearly defined. Similarly, 78 percent of the respondents agreed with having effective and flexible pre-service programs. In the same way, 67 percent of the respondents agreed with having evidenced-based continuous professional development programs and implementation of setting up career pathways for ECCD subsectors. Likewise, 72 percent of the respondents agreed on the need for continuous improvement and staff retention which includes promotion of coordinating and monitoring ECCD workforce development programs.

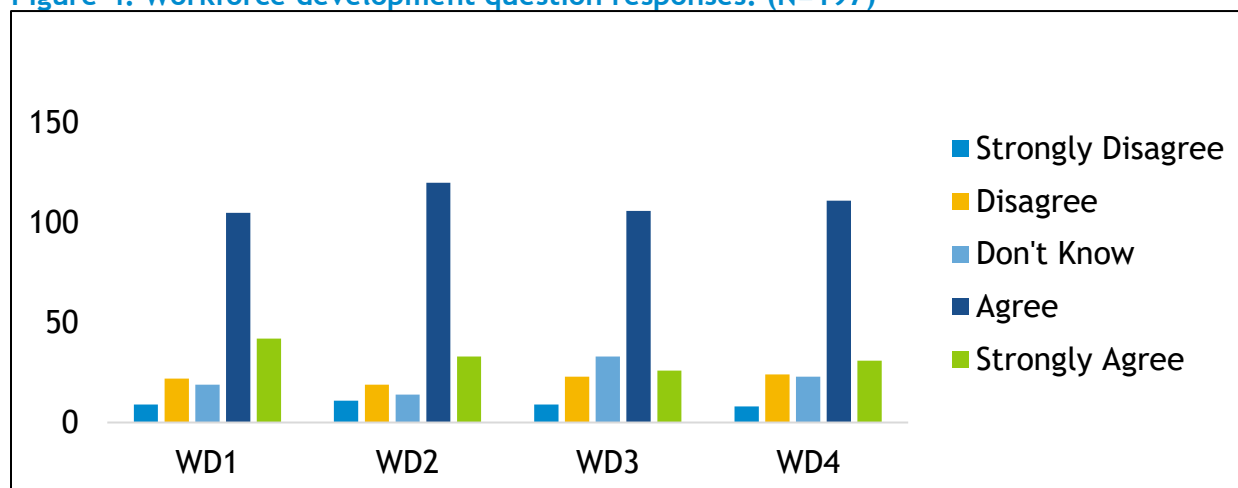
Table 4. Workforce development question responses.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	Mean
WD1 - There is established strategy for recruiting ECCD staff, based on clearly defined staff qualification requirements and competency profiles.	9	22	19	105	42	197	3.76
WD2 - Effective and flexible pre-service training programs, including alternative pathways to qualification and initial training have been implemented.	11	19	14	120	33	197	3.74
WD3 - Evidence-based programs for continuing professional development, including setting up career pathways for the subsector (ECCD) have been implemented.	9	23	33	106	26	197	3.59
WD4 - Continuous improvements and staff retention, including by coordinating and monitoring ECCD workforce development programs have been promoted.	8	24	23	111	31	197	3.68
TOTAL	37	88	89	442	132		3.69

Source: Authors' data.



Figure 4. Workforce development question responses. (N=197)



The interview results indicate slight differences and similarities in statements. One finding is that the early education system in Bhutan is unique compared to other countries where the pre-primary sub-sector is already integrated in mainstream primary schools which have set curriculum and lack early learning pedagogies and trained and qualified early learning educators. The minimum qualification to be an ECCD facilitator is 12 years of education. The ECCD facilitators in non-governmental ECCD centers recruit among themselves, selecting other facilitators who hold the minimum qualification of 12 years of schooling. Some private centers offer in-house coaching and some recruit facilitators who are trained in ECCD by other institutes. However, government ECCD facilitators are recruited following the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) recruitment process. Respondents 3 and 4 expressed the lack of clearly defined competencies for recruiting facilitators however, during recruitment, they give priority to those who have experiences, good attitude and those who are from that locality which help in assuring smooth initial experiences in ECCD centers. On top of that, one of the pertinent challenges is that salaries for all government ECCD facilitators are the same regardless of qualifications, competencies, and experiences because their jobs are under the consolidated contract category.

All the respondents expressed that currently, the MoE facilitates and provides intensive two-week basic training for newly recruited ECCD facilitators prior to joining their workplace. This training is mandatory for ECCD facilitators to help build their capacity in ECCD concepts through hands-on training. Several private institutions provide ECCD training for a few months which is pre-service training existing for the ECCD workforce. The current concern pertaining to workforce development is that there is no system of accrediting ECCD training other than training offered by teacher training institutes. Therefore, there is a need for an accrediting system to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the training being offered by other institutes under the Royal University of Bhutan. However, government-facilitated training modules were developed through rigorous consultation with ECCD experts and field practitioners. In addition, this training is very pragmatic and impactful as it involves field practitioners in hands-on training. Although 67 percent of survey respondents agreed that there is a program for continuous professional development, interview results are slightly contrasting. This can be attributed to the fact that most of the respondents are ECCD facilitators and they felt the training received is continuous and adequate in supporting professional development. All the participants indicated that Continuous Professional Development Programs (CPD) depend on the availability of funds. Although CPD are very

crucial, they are impeded by fund availability. Some districts allocate funds for CPD, but there are concerns vis-à-vis the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of the program due to lack of monitoring of effectiveness and content accreditation. Most of the interview respondents shared the inadequacy and the need for professional development programs to enhance the knowledge and skills of ECCD staff.

The DEOs and program officers shared that setting career development pathways for ECCD facilitators is difficult as they are in consolidated contract mode.² It is evident from Respondents 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 expressing that there is a dearth of professional development programs compared to the number of jobs. The only current career development pathway is providing an in-service mixed-mode diploma in ECCD which is accredited. There are only 27 percent of ECCD facilitators who have pursued and completed the course. Respondent 5 stated that “since ECCD facilitators are recruited in contract mode that lacks the vision of long-term recruitment of ECCD facilitators, it affects the retention of ECCD facilitators. In addition, their nature of job limits the opportunity for ECCD facilitators to attend long-term training programs. To help retain facilitators, contractual terms should stipulate that facilitators should be in service for a minimum of two years and provide a clear career progression pathway. All the interview respondents revealed that ECCD facilitators are minimally paid compared to primary grade teachers. There is also no formal system of assessing notable performances and no significant non-monetary incentives are provided to high performers. Nevertheless, to recognize high performing and hardworking facilitators, they are invited to workshops and meetings to help resource the meetings/workshops. Respondent 3 stated, “Some facilitators who take up the arduous ECCD models like mobile ECCD, are prioritized for the diploma program.” Respondent 1 shared, “Issuing the recommendation letter when they renew the contract of the ECCD facilitator is also a part non-monetary incentive.”

The report’s findings revealed that there is a lack of a clear and comprehensive recruitment system in the country, particularly for non-governmental ECCD. Moreover, having only 12 years of basic education as the minimum qualification also raises the concerns of quality and competencies. Bertram and Pascal found that although countries have variation in staff qualification, most of the countries employ staff with a minimum qualification of a diploma in relevant fields.² Additionally, there is a lack of adequate pre-service training in Bhutan. Although there are some private institutions giving pre-service training for a few months, most of the government ECCD facilitators rely on in-service training that they receive after being recruited. Mitter and Putcha asserted that in-service training opportunities are most effective when they are ongoing, tailored to individual needs, and incorporate peer learning.¹⁷ However, a study conducted by the European Commission found that participation of staff in high quality initial education and training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs is key to improving the quality of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision.⁵ The report’s findings also revealed that there is a lack of clearly defined competencies being developed for ECCD workforce recruitment. The study conducted by the European Commission (2020) suggested that establishing and employing a common set of core competencies for staff will assist in managing expectations and give more clarity on the knowledge and skills of ECEC staff.⁵ Moreover, due to low qualifications, significant variations in pay were found. The Organization for Economic Development (OECD) noted that ECEC teachers’ salaries remained below those of other tertiary-educated workers in most countries.

² Consolidated contract is one of the recruitment systems whereby they must renew their contract every after certain years.



On average, pre-primary teachers in OECD countries earned only 74 percent of the average salary of those with tertiary education. Many countries made efforts to make pre-primary teachers' pay at par with primary teachers, if they have similar qualifications.^{18,19}

Slight contradictions have been observed regarding CPD. Quantitative findings showed that there is adequate CPD whereas qualitative findings revealed a dearth of both CPD and clear career progression pathways. Although CPD is being provided, it is not adequate for the nature of the jobs shouldered by educators, as lack of funds is a prominent factor that impedes CPD. One aspect of working conditions which can influence the attractiveness of the sector is the availability of full-time and permanent contracts, ensuring professional and financial stability.⁵ Conversely, in ECCD roles within the Bhutan government, all staff are recruited by contract systems, do not guarantee them long term job or professional security. Furthermore, there are no financial incentives such as yearly salary increases and awards for exceptional performance. Therefore, countries should invest in setting clear career progression pathways to retain educators in the profession. Despite the lack of career progression pathway and low pay scale, there are many staff still working in this profession, which could be because of the good leadership and passion an individual has for the profession as indicated in study conducted by McDonald et al.¹³ Bhutan may also explore establishing a career framework raising qualification standards and pay rates, developing the national CPD system, and supporting recruitment, retention, diversity, and regulation of the profession as suggested by the Government of Ireland in their reports.⁶

3.5 Core Function: Family and Community Engagement

Core Function 4 is Family and Community Engagement, which aims to ensure that families and communities are active participants and partners in supporting children's learning and development across family and community environments. This section explores the status of family and community engagement in the ECCD program in Bhutan. Three broad questions were asked under this core function and the survey findings are shown in Table 5, which shows that 90 percent of respondents agreed that families and communities are included as strategic partners in ECCD programs in Bhutan. Similarly, 89 percent of respondents agreed that ECCD programs support families in fostering positive home learning environments. Most of the respondents (86 percent) agreed that family and community engagement capacity has been built in the country.

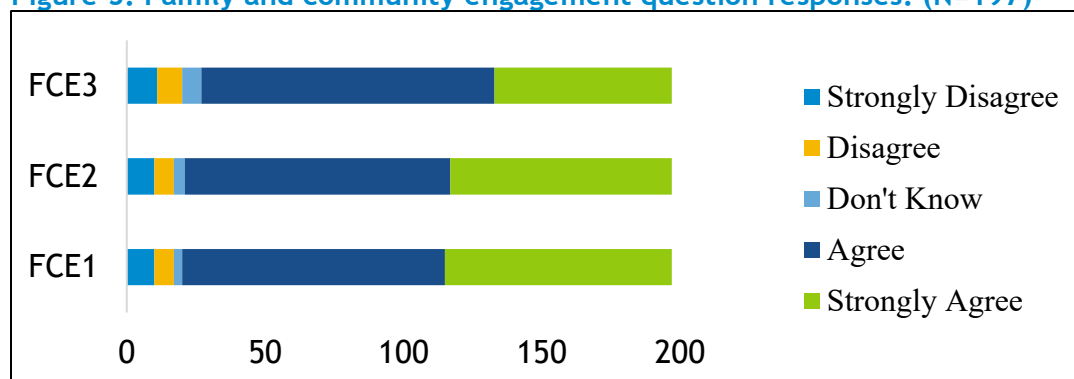
Table 5. Family and community engagement question responses.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Don't know	Agree	Strongly agree	Total	Mean
FCE1 - Included families and communities as strategic partners in ECCD education/program.	10	7	3	95	82	197	4.18
FCE2 - Supports families in fostering positive home learning environments.	10	7	4	96	80	197	4.16
Build capacities across the subsector (ECCD) to engage effectively with families and communities.	11	9	7	106	64	197	4.03
TOTAL	31	23	14	297	226		4.12

Source: Authors' data.



Figure 5. Family and community engagement question responses. (N=197)



Interview findings also align with survey findings: ECCD programs in the country put significant emphasis on family and community engagement. This is because the current program is localized and contextualized. Moreover, families are involved enough to understand the program well. Family engagement and parenting is an integral part of any training being offered and courses related to ECCD in Bhutan. In some cases, the local government took ownership and jointly financed the construction of ECCD centers, establishing home visit programs which encourage participation and support from families and communities.

All the interview participants shared that ECCD programming in the country fosters positive home learning. Bhutan also has a parenting education program which helps provide education and resources on positive parenting methods for parents. Findings revealed that there is a culture of parent volunteer engagement. It is evident from all the respondents noting the practice of parent volunteers who assist ECCD facilitators and facilitators sharing their experiences and knowledge with parents and children. ECCD programming encourages and involves parents in material development and in some cases, home learning kits have been supplied centrally to foster and encourage positive home learning environments. Moreover, local leaders and parent's representatives are members of the center management committee aiming to take ownership of the community, mobilize resources, and render support for the betterment of ECCD center and well-being of children. To facilitate parenting education in the community, ECCD facilitators and DEOs were provided with relevant training. Additionally, the parenting education program is integrated in basic training which is provided prior to joining the ECCD profession.

The significance of family and community engagement was expressed by numerous studies and reports. Harris and Goodall indicated that supporting parents to actively engage children in learning at home is an effective approach to determine children's later engagement and adjustment.⁸ Furthermore, Cotton stated that the earlier the role and involvement of communities in the lives of young children is recognized, the better the chances children will have of achieving at school and in life in general.³ Considering the significance, ECCD programs in Bhutan place massive emphasis on parenting education and community involvement. In fact, community leaders were appointed as chairmen of the Center Management Committee of most of the community ECCD centers. This encourages them to take ownership of the centers and provide lasting support to them. Waluyo et al. found that village administrative participation in implementation of ECCD is needed because without cooperation with the village government, ECCD centers cannot run optimally.²² On the other

hand, a study conducted by OECD pointed out the significance of training to develop the skills needed to promote family-center partnerships and community involvement because leadership is critical in family and community engagement.¹⁸ Considering parenting education and community engagement are fundamentals, sessions on how to provide and engage are usually offered in basic training, which they attend prior to joining the workplace. Furthermore, specific refresher training is being provided whenever there is an adequate budget. Report findings also revealed that home visits are a routine practice in the ECCD program in Bhutan. Halgunseth and Linda stated that home visits boost parent’s confidence in educating and interacting with their children and broadens their knowledge of child development.⁷ Additionally, children who receive home visits have been found to have greater engagement in literary and group activities. Home visits will also benefit staff by building positive relationships with children and families and allow them to better understand the effect of home environments on children’s learning and development.

3.6 Core Function: Quality Assurance

Core Function 5 of the tool is quality assurance. The purpose of quality assurance is to ensure that a comprehensive framework for ECCD monitoring, and quality assurance is in place and that quality monitoring is used to promote ongoing improvements in both policy and practice. Four broad questions were asked considering the relevance. QA1, QA2, and QA4 have been asked of all the respondents whereas QA3 was asked of all other respondents except ECCD Facilitators. Table 6 shows that 77 percent of respondents reported having comprehensive standards for quality ECCD programs. Similarly, 82 percent of respondents reported having quality assurance mechanisms and it being implemented. Most respondents (89 percent) agreed that there are strengthened capacities to monitor quality across the ECCD sector. Likewise, 84 percent of respondents agreed that monitoring facilitates quality improvement.

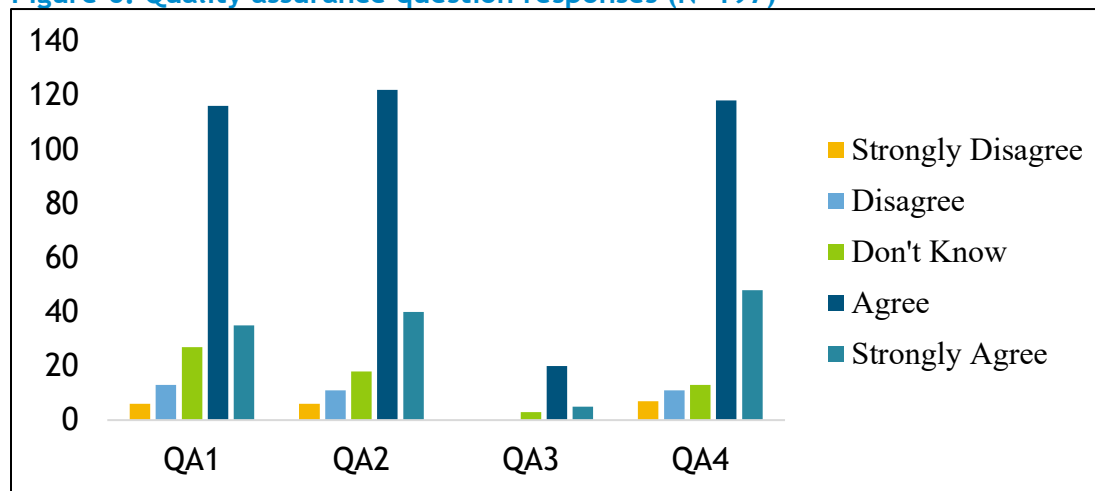
Table 6. Quality assurance question responses

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
QA1 - There is an established comprehensive standard for service quality.	6	13	27	116	35	197	3.82
QA2 - There are quality assurance mechanisms based on the overarching goals for ECCD education developed and implemented.	6	11	18	122	40	197	3.91
QA3 - Capacities to monitor quality across the subsector (ECCD) has been strengthened.	0	0	3	20	5	28	4.07
QA4 - Monitoring facilitates the quality improvements.	7	11	13	118	48	197	3.96
TOTAL	19	35	61	376	128		3.94

Source: Authors’ data.



Figure 6. Quality assurance question responses (N=197)



Generally, qualitative analysis findings also resonate with the survey findings. During the interview, all the respondents reported having comprehensive standards to ensure quality control. The quality standards were developed consultatively with the relevant stakeholders as a pilot program and are now widely implemented in the country. The quality standards are user-friendly and have been incorporated and reflected in monitoring tools for assessing and improving the quality of ECCD programs. Respondent 3 stated, “To monitor the quality of the ECCD, a tool called Quality Monitoring Tool for ECCD centers (QMTEC) is broadly used in the country. This tool is holistic, contextual and covers all the domains of ECCD. Currently, parent school principals use this tool to monitor the ECCD centers attached to their schools. The roles and responsibilities for quality monitoring have been clearly outlined. The challenges pertaining to quality monitoring are lack of monitoring budget and not having the web-based integrated system/tool to monitor the centers. The existing practice of monitoring the center is using the printed tool which is drudgery having to manually fill the form and it is likely to get misplaced prior to compilation of the monitoring data.”

All the respondents shared that the monitoring officials commit at least half a day of their time, as the tool is very exhaustive and covers many aspects. The compiled data at district level are submitted to the Ministry of Education for further analysis and documentation. Concerns about the capacity of the monitoring officials are pertinent. Although in previous years, all the parent school focal people were trained, as there are changes when a focal person is transferred, there are many monitoring officials who did not receive the training. Additionally, consistent quality monitoring is a challenge despite being mandated to monitor each center at least twice a year. The findings revealed that the monitoring of the centers and programs is not limited only to using QMTEC as there is constant monitoring from program officers, education monitoring officers and DEOs using the comprehensive monitoring checklist, which takes less time. Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 expressed that monitoring facilitates quality improvements of both centers and programs. The report findings of the monitoring data are shared with stakeholders and used for decision-making and program planning to address challenges and fill any loopholes. Feedback and recommendations are also given onsite during each monitoring visit for quality improvement. However, there is no culture of rewarding quality achievements and improvements, although it is being acknowledged at the site.

Quality in ECCD is broadly categorized and examined under two types-structural and process. Structural quality refers to center facilities, staff-to-child ratio, and staff qualifications, which are more easily measurable. On the other hand, process quality focuses on the nature of interactions between child and teacher, child and child, teacher and teacher and parent and teacher.¹¹ The quality frameworks and QMTEC both took those types into consideration. Those areas have been clearly defined in quality frameworks which are also being integrated in monitoring tools. Similarly, the EU quality framework also encapsulates areas such as access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, governance, and funding.⁵ The European Commission reported that to ensure quality, monitoring and evaluation is indispensable. It points out strengths and weaknesses thereby providing support to stakeholders and policy makers in undertaking initiatives that address the needs of children, parents, and local communities. The current prominent challenge in quality monitoring is the lack of an online system to log monitoring data. Monitoring officials print the monitoring tool and later manually enter the data in an Excel sheet. This approach is not only time consuming but also has a high risk of data error and loss. Another challenge is pertaining to sufficient staff training in quality monitoring of ECCD centers. As the number of ECCD centers increases yearly, the number of parent school principals monitoring quality also increases. Thus, it is imperative that all monitoring officials should be trained to ensure effective monitoring. Ishimine et al. reported that quality in ECCD should be meant to provide recognition and acknowledgement for the work of centers and facilitators because the idea of incentives is positively correlated with quality of a center.¹² This practice is not widespread in the current ECCD program of Bhutan; therefore, it needs to be strengthened.

3.7 Enabling Environment

The enabling environment section covers the status of a broad set of interrelated factors that affect the development of an effective and robust ECCD sector including the ability to achieve intended program goals. In this section, fifteen questions were asked based on four key factors as identified in UNICEF's framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education: Ministerial leadership, Policies and Legislation, Financing and Public Demand.^{24,25}

Factor 1: Ministerial Leadership

It takes ministerial leadership, early childhood education knowledge, and staff from key government authorities and government-affiliated organizations to advance the ECCD program quality and access. ML1 has been asked to all the respondents but ML2 and ML3 were asked to only the relevant respondents. Table 7 shows that 78 percent of the respondents have indicated having the lead ministry that holds the ECCD vision and works along with other relevant ministries and stakeholders. Similarly, almost all the respondents (93 percent) agreed that there is a well-established channel of communication and coordination between national, subnational, and local governments for the success of ECCD. However, regarding having sufficient early childhood expertise within the lead ministry and other bodies to support policy development and implementation, only half of the respondents (50 percent) agreed.

The interview findings also echo the same as the survey findings. The respondents agreed on having a lead ministry that looks after the ECCD program in the country. The ECCD and Special Educational Needs Division under the Ministry of Education and Skills Development looks after the ECCD program in the country and collaborates with other ministries and agencies. However, respondents shared the concern over having limited experts/staff at ministry level. Moreover, they expressed that considering that ECCD is multi-sectoral and



cross-cutting in nature, all relevant stakeholders should have expertise in ECCD. For instance, in India, the Ministry of Women and Children is the responsible ministry looking after early childhood care and education. In Nepal, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST) is responsible for overseeing Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) programs.

Table 7. Ministerial leadership question responses.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
ML1 - There is one lead ministry to hold the ECCD vision and actions together while linking with other relevant ministries and stakeholders.	5	10	29	111	42	197	3.89
ML2 - Channels of communication and coordination are established between national, subnational and local government authorities and leaders who are collectively responsible for ECCD success.	0	0	2	23	3	28	4.04
ML3 - Sufficient staff with early childhood expertise are present within the lead ministry and other bodies to support policy development and implementation.	1	8	5	12	2	28	3.21
TOTAL	6	18	36	146	47		4.12

Source: Authors' data.

Factor 2: Policies and Legislation

To advance access to and quality of ECCD programs, policies and legislation must be comprehensive, well-coordinated, and related to implementation. Table 8 portrays the survey findings of policies and legislation related to ECCD in Bhutan. PL1, PL2, and PL3 were asked to all the respondents except PL4 which was asked to the relevant respondents. The results show that 64 percent of the respondents responded that having at least one year of ECCD education is a public good in policies, but 15 percent of respondents disagreed. Similarly, 81 percent of the respondents responded that there is a well-articulated vision of ECCD in Bhutan's policy documents. Likewise, 75 percent of respondents also indicated that ECCD policies are well-coordinated at national, sub-national and local government levels. Similarly, 79 percent of respondents indicated that ECCD is a core component in national multi-sectoral ECCD policies and frameworks.

Interview findings show slight contrast with the survey findings. Interview responses revealed that there is currently no ECCD policy in the country and that the National Education Policy of the country is also in draft stage and not yet endorsed. However, Respondent 3 and Respondent 4 shared having well-established guidelines and documents pertaining to ECCD



which all ECCD stakeholders abide by. The guidelines are well communicated and implemented at both the national and local government levels. Moreover, ECCD is considered as one of the core components of any guidelines, planning documents, and notifications issued by the Ministry. All the respondents asserted that the ECCD services in the country are considered as public goods and provided freely to children ages three to five, however, there is no policy that mandates compulsory ECCD education or enrolment in ECCD centers. There are also private ECCD centers in urban areas that collect fees for services rendered. Respondent 3 stated that, “There are children who are from low economic background who cannot afford private ECCD centers. For those children, to be given equal opportunity, there are few government ECCD centers in urban areas which provide ECCD services. Moreover, in some cases, private ECCD centers also give scholarships/free entry to children that have a low economic background.” Regarding the existence of ECCD related content in policy documents, the constitution of Bhutan broadly covers it under fundamental rights but in the 12th Five Year Plan document of the country, ECCD has been specifically mentioned under National Key Result Area 7: Quality Education and Skills.

There are few contradictions between quantitative and qualitative findings related to the existence of ECCD policies and the perception of provision of at least one year of ECCD education for all children as public good. Although ECCD services are free in government centers for children ages three to five, there is no policy that states that provision of at least one year of ECCD education is mandatory. In fact, the country has both ECCD policy and National Education Policy in draft stage. This can be validated by the findings of UNICEF and MoE in their report on the investment case for ECCD which shared that the lack of an integrated national legal and strategic provision through a legislative act or a policy for ECCD program is a foundational gap in Bhutan’s ECCD progress.¹⁶ There is a need for policy and, if possible, an ECCD or Education Act to spearhead activities effectively, consultatively, and holistically.

Table 8. Policy and legislation question responses.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
PL1 - The provision of at least one year of ECCD education for all children is established as a public good in policies and/or legislation.	7	22	41	91	36	197	3.64
PL2 - A well- articulated vision of ECCD education is presented in a comprehensive set of ECCD policy directives, or this vision is well articulated in an overall policy or law.	8	10	19	120	40	197	3.88
PL3 - Communication and implementation of pre-primary (ECCD) policies is well- coordinated between national, district, and local levels of government.	9	22	19	108	39	197	3.74
PL4 - Clear policy statements assert that	0	2	2	20	4	28	3.93



ECCD is a core component of national multi- sectoral ECCD policies and frameworks.							
TOTAL	24	56	81	339	109		3.76

Source: Authors' data.

Factor 3: Financing

Sufficient governmental investment, combined with other potential private and international financing sources, is needed to advance the ECCD program access and quality. Table 9 shows data gathered related to the financing environment for ECCD in Bhutan. The enabling environment factor three questions have been asked only to Program Officers and DEOs as they are the only relevant respondents. The findings show that 46 percent of respondents disagree, and 23 percent of respondents are not sure, that adequate government funds are allocated to support progress towards universal ECCD. However, 64 percent of respondents indicated that various sources of funding and collaborative arrangements are explored for ECCD. The findings show that 59 percent of respondents agreed that structures and processes are in place to ensure accountability of funds allocation to ECCD and education programs from the central level to the local level through transparent mechanisms and policies. Similarly, 59 percent of respondents indicated that plans and targets are matched with realistic assessment of available budget.

Table 9. Financing question responses.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
F1 - Adequate government funds are allocated to support progress towards universal ECCD, taking into consideration the importance of ECCD in relation to other education subsectors	1	9	5	5	2	22	2.91
F2 - Varied sources of ECCD funding and collaborative arrangements are explored, including private funding, corporate and business sector investment, and other options.	0	4	4	11	3	22	3.29
F3 - Accountability for allocation of funds to the ECCD program and education from the central level to the local level is secured through transparent policies and mechanisms. All appropriate stakeholders have access to information	0	5	4	11	2	22	3.45

on government funding for ECCD.							
F4 - Pre-primary targets, such as expansion and quality improvement plans, are matched to realistic assessments of the available budget, considering all potential resources.	0	3	6	12	1	22	3.50
TOTAL	1	56	81	339	109		3.36

Source: Authors' data.

The interview findings also validate that there is a challenge of having a dedicated source of funding for the ECCD program. Respondents shared that the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) and development partners are the main sources of financing for the ECCD program in the country. RGoB bears most of the recurrent costs for the ECCD program which helps in maintaining services sustainably. Development partners like UNICEF, Save the Children, and Global Partnership for Education provide significant support. However, there is no perennial support from some of the development partners as they offer project-based financing. It is evident from Respondent 4 who stated, “Currently, there is no dedicated budget for ECCD as it is subsumed under the broad budget of the Education Ministry. Therefore, there is no concrete data on the budget invested in ECCD. In addition, ECCD, being multi-sectoral in nature, has contributions from other ministries and civil society organizations who also invest in ECCD by creating awareness and conducting relevant training. Moreover, there is no dedicated percentage of a country’s GDP being invested for ECCD.” All the respondents suggested that it would be important to dedicate a percentage of the country’s GDP for the ECCD program to ensure sustainable financing for equitable and quality ECCD programming across the country.

Respondents shared that funds received from RGoB and other funding sources are mobilized and used efficiently, and not misused, unspent, or inequitably distributed to regions and parts of society. At the local government level, respondents indicated that some budget is also dedicated to the ECCD program. Accountability for allocation of funds to the ECCD Program from the central level to the local level is secured through transparent policies and mechanisms, aligning with financial rules and norms. Bhutan has an online system that facilitates the release of funds, verification of balance, and liquidation of funds.

Professor James Heckman attested that early childhood education is an efficient and effective investment for economic and workforce development. The earlier the investment, the greater the return on investment.¹⁰ Despite that, most of countries face challenges in adequate ECE financing and Bhutan is also one of them. According to the ECCD Investment Case study, Bhutan lacks detailed exclusive ECCD expenditure which could be because of a lack of dedicated financing.¹⁶ Although the exact financing and delivery arrangements for ECCD differ by context, in general, there are three main sources of funding: public, private, and household contributions.²¹ However, for Bhutan, public and international financing through development partners are the main sources of funding. Government bears recurrent costs whereas development partners provide finances for activities which increase access, offer professional development, and conduct research studies. Putcha et al. found that international financing is important for low- and middle-income countries where domestic financing is insufficient to support essential services that support young children and their



families.²¹ Bhutan also faces a challenge of getting adequate funds allocation to the ECCD sector like that which is allocated to the primary and secondary education sectors. This could be due to the ECCD sector being small and at a nascent stage compared to higher levels of education in the country. Furthermore, it could be due to lack of awareness and competing priorities from other sectors.

UNESCO Financing for Early Childhood Care and Education guidelines state that risk factors which undermine adequate and sustainable financing for ECCE are 1) insufficient government expenditure, 2) lack of sustainability of ECCE financing, and 3) absence of enabling governance model and lack of coordination.²³ To address these issues, the UNESCO recommends embarking on innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships which encourage corporate social responsibility to promote ECCE, per capita financing by the government, partnership with development partners, and conditional cash transfers.²³ The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that OECD countries spend on average just over 0.8 percent of GDP on early childhood education and care.¹⁹ In Bhutan, there is no clear accounting system to capture the actual percentage of GDP invested in the ECCD program. Despite this reality, respondents reported that mobilized funds were used efficiently not misused, unspent, or inequitably distributed to regions and parts of society.

Factor 4: Public Demand

Widespread understanding of the significance of early childhood education and recognition of these services as a public benefit are prerequisites to advance access and quality of ECCD programming. All the questions related to public demand were answered by all respondents except PD1 was asked to only the relevant respondents, which included DEOs, Parent School Principals, and Program Officers of the Ministry. Table 10 portrays the status of public demand for ECCD in the country. The data shows that 75 percent of respondents believe that there is a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities in the ECCD system by stakeholders. Although 79 percent of respondents stated that the ECCD program in the country is viewed as a public good and viewed similarly to primary and secondary education, 13 percent of the respondents disagreed. Likewise, while most respondents (79 percent) agreed that a broad range of individuals and groups currently advocate for quality early learning services nationally and sub-nationally, there are few respondents (9 percent) who disagreed. Most of the respondents (79 percent) agreed that there are social policies in place to respond to the needs of families and communities in hard-to-reach areas.



Table 10. Public demand question responses.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
PD1 - Stakeholders in the ECCD system have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities and know how they are expected to work together.	0	3	4	17	4	28	3.79
PD2 - The belief that ECCD program is a public good, similar to primary and secondary education, is widely held among the population.	8	17	17	107	48	197	3.86
PD3 - A broad range of individuals and groups advocate for quality early learning services nationally and sub-nationally.	5	13	34	109	36	197	3.80
PD4 - Social policies are in place to respond to the needs of families and communities, including those who have been hard to reach.	9	12	21	117	38	197	3.83
TOTAL	22	45	76	350	126		3.83

Source: Authors' data.

The interview findings reveal that there has been a drastic increase in awareness and understanding of the importance of ECCD in Bhutan over the last decade. Stakeholders like parents and communities also give importance to ECCD and consequently render support and participate in the ECCD program. Additionally, respondents observed that, over the years, most parents and communities have elevated their views on ECCD such that they now consider it a public good, like primary and secondary education. On the contrary, Respondent 1, Respondent 2, Respondent 3, Respondent 4, and Respondent 7 shared that although there is increasing demand for ECCD, the major focus is still on primary and secondary education which needs to change. This perspective is likely because the ECCD program is relatively new compared to primary and secondary education levels in Bhutan.

Respondents shared that the lead ministry, health ministry, civil-society organizations, local government, and development partners invest in advocating for ECCD at national and local levels. The lead ministry collaborated with development partners in creating advocacy materials such as posters, brochures, videos, and recordings. The video recordings and voice recordings are being aired through a variety of channels including national television, radio, social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, and educational websites. At the district level, DEOs raise the awareness of local leaders on ECCD during the Dzongkhag Yargay Tshogdu (meeting of local leaders at District level).

Respondents 3 stated, "Though there is no policy in place to provide a framework for ECCD services in hard-to-reach areas, the lead ministry explored various alternative models and



have guidelines to ensure that there is access to ECCD services in hard-to-reach areas. Most places have adopted center-based program models, however, for more remote areas, mobile-ECCD models and home-based intervention models have been implemented. In the mobile-ECCD model, ECCD facilitators handle more than one center and allocate certain days of the week to one center and the remaining days in other centers. This model is being applied where the center-based model is not feasible. The home-based intervention model is used in locations where villages are scattered and in very remote areas where there are a smaller number of children who qualify for ECCD. This model focuses more on parenting education and support. The identified ECCD facilitator from a nearby ECCD center seldom visits the villages and facilitates face-to-face interventions/learning activities. They also use provide guidance and share materials online to help parents facilitate play and learning.”

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The report focused on assessing the current state of ECCD programming in Bhutan. Moreover, it aimed to study the strengths, challenges, and to provide recommendations. The report covered five core functions and enabling environmental aspects reflected in the ECE Accelerator Pre-primary Subsector Analysis Tool. The report showed that the ECCD plans are usually evidence-based and equitable and there is a monitoring structure of the plans being implemented, which identifies crucial course corrections. However, there are several disagreements over having dedicated budget and financing mechanisms for ECCD programs. Most of the respondents reported having the curriculum and guiding documents in place, a strategy which has been implemented nationwide, however, it was not being reviewed.

There is a clear strategy for government ECCD staff but for nongovernmental ECCD centers, the recruitment process requires that the minimum qualification of ECCD facilitators should be 12 years of general education. There are also few pre-service training and in-service training offers. However, most of the respondents expressed the inadequacy of the professional development programs for ECCD staff. Additionally, the report shows an unclear career pathway and retention mechanism for current ECCD staff. The report found that families and communities are included as strategic partners and involved in ECCD programming. Moreover, ECCD programs encourage setting up positive home learning environments. Communities and families are advocated for in ECCD via the parenting education program, which is a critical sub-project of ECCD programming and receive additional support through other activities.

The report also revealed that there are quality assurance mechanisms and tools in place which have been developed consultatively and involving diverse stakeholders and experts. QMTEC has been broadly used for monitoring ECCD centers and program quality in the country. The parent school principals use printed copies of monitoring tool frameworks to audit the quality of ECCD centers. The main concern regarding quality assurance is the capacity of monitoring officials and some not being thoroughly trained, which was being attributed by initial monitoring officers leaving the profession or being transferred. In addition, due to lack of budget and time constraints, consistent monitoring was a pertinent issue. The final results of the report generated from the monitoring tool will be shared with



relevant stakeholders and then be used for planning and decision-making. The report's findings revealed that there is a lead ministry--the Ministry of Education and Skills Development, which oversees ECCD programs in Bhutan. There are well established communication channels between stakeholders, however, there are concerns over the adequacy of human resources in the lead ministry's oversight of programs. The report revealed that ECCD services are generally free in all government ECCD centers, but private ECCD centers charge fees for services rendered. Currently, there are no policies that mandate compulsory enrollment in ECCD centers. The main source of financing for ECCD programs in the country is the RGoB and other development partners. The study revealed that understanding of the importance of ECCD and public demand for it has increased over the years. They have similar regard given to primary and secondary education. Organizations, groups, and individuals have advocated for high-quality early learning through various means such as national television, radio, social media, recordings, brochures, and posters. Moreover, several alternative ECCD models have been explored and implemented to ensure wider ECCD access over the country.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this project, there are several limitations. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small for parent school focal persons and may not be representative of the larger population. Additionally, the study was conducted over a relatively short period of time, which may have limited the depth of analysis that could be achieved. Furthermore, other stakeholders, including development partners and institutions were not able to be involved due to time constraints. Nevertheless, the report contributes to improving the understanding of key issues, enhancing the research base of the ECCD field in the country, promoting evidence-based policymaking, and enhancing effective planning. Therefore, the report generated a few recommendations mentioned below.

4.2 Recommendations

A list of recommended actions to take is included below.

- To ensure sustainable financing, approaches such as dedicating a certain percentage of Bhutan's GDP could be explored after consultation with relevant stakeholders.
- As there is no guiding policy for education in the country, the development and endorsement of Bhutan's national education and ECCD policies are very critical and pertinent.
- Bhutan must enhance and strengthen multi-sectoral planning, coordination, and implementation for the sector from various stakeholders (finance, health, education, protection, development partners, NGOs, and civil society organizations).
- As curriculum guiding ECCD documents have not been reviewed, it is very important to review them regularly (every five years) to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and user-friendliness, and avoid producing obsolete and improved content.
- The current continuous professional development training for ECCD staff was reported to be inadequate. Therefore, building relevant professional development programs is encouraged to enhance knowledge, skills, and competencies.
- Regularization of ECCD facilitators and long-term vision of staff recruitment is highly recommended considering the current recruitment of government ECCD facilitators is



conducted on a contract basis, which prevents them from receiving incremental salary raises and associated benefits as the number of years in service increases.

- Recruitment of government ECCD facilitators should be decentralized to the district level, as local governments may expedite recruitment by using their own human resources programs.
- Bhutan must strengthen the regulation and enforcement of recruitment systems in private ECCD centers to ensure the recruitment of competent facilitators and ensure the delivery of high-quality ECCD services.
- There are several institutions that offer the ECCD training which have not been accredited. Therefore, an accrediting mechanism is needed to ensure the quality and relevance of programs and training.
- There needs to be a system that recognizes, and values notable performances exhibited by ECCD facilitators which would motivate them to work hard.
- Bhutan should strengthen the culture of engaging parent volunteers to help ECCD staff in imparting local and indigenous knowledge and assist the staff whenever necessary during operation hours.
- All monitoring officials should be immersed and oriented in QMTEC to avoid biases and generate accurate data, which would help in decision-making and providing timely interventions for high-quality ECCD programs and centers in the country.
- Development of web-based systems is needed to monitor the quality of ECCD centers and services. This would enhance the generation of accurate and current data which further enables effective planning and decision-making.
- As ECCD is technical and involves multi-sectoral input, human resource recruitment by the lead ministry or concerned divisions overseeing ECCD programs should prioritize candidates who possess ECCD backgrounds and the passion to have high-quality and technical inputs. As the program is multi-disciplinary, adequate human resources should be assigned at the ministry-level to look after the program.
- Mandatory one year enrollment in ECCD centers should be explored after conducting multiple studies on program cost-benefit analyses and effectiveness for children's holistic development, taking access, quality, and equity aspects in consideration.
- Strengthening of alternative ECCD models is needed to ensure enhancing access to ECCD which helps children to play, learn, and propel towards holistic development.
- Bhutan must strengthen its ownership and support by local governments (districts, municipalities, and community) of ECCD centers bearing recurrent expenses.
- Exploration is needed in subsidizing ECCD services for low-income families and the effectiveness of conditional cash transfers to encourage availing poverty and investing in early childhood services and programs.



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