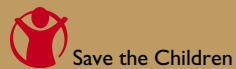


S U M M A R Y

What's the Difference?

An ECD Impact Study from Nepal

*Summary of key findings regarding the impact of participation in
ECD programs on school enrolment, achievement and retention*



Children's
Environments
Research
Group





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This report describes an early childhood program in Nepal and the dramatic effects it has had over just a few years, not only for young children, but for their families and communities. It looks in particular at the impact the program has had on children's transition to school, a significant issue in a country where many children never start school and where those who do start drop out in large numbers during the first and second year.

The study took place in 38 communities that have ECD centers in an extremely impoverished district in the eastern terai. The research on which this report looked at critical numbers and trends – enrollment rates, passing rates, school retention, gender and ethnic breakdowns. Equally important, it drew on people's experience, opinions and observations in an attempt to understand the dynamics underlying these trends. The early childhood program in the villages of Siraha, Nepal has been successful beyond expectations. We are also beginning to have some understanding of why this is so and what we need to do to build on this success.

Introduction

Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Inequitable access to land complicates the dependence of the largely rural population on subsistence agriculture, and has meant a growing reliance on the cash economy. This means increased migration for men for work, heavier workloads for women and children, and an erosion of traditional family patterns. Internal conflict over recent years has caused even greater hardship for the country's poor.

Mortality and malnutrition rates remain high for young children in Nepal, and their daily care is compromised by the focus on day to day survival. Most disadvantaged families feel powerless to promote their children's best interests and underestimate their capacity to support young children's learning and ability to interact effectively with the world.

Discrimination against girls and women in Nepal still affects almost every area of their lives – ten girls die for every seven boys, they get less to eat, less healthcare, less access to school, less chance to play, and less choice in their lives (ActionAid, 1999).

Twenty percent of Nepal's children still are not enrolled in school, and the figures are higher for girls and *dalits* and other disadvantaged groups. Those children who start school are poorly prepared, and schools are equally unprepared to respond to their needs. Attendance is low, failure is frequent, and

repeat and drop out rates are high, especially in the first two years. Problems associated with the transition to school require serious attention. One particular problem is the number of underage children that, lacking care at home, accompany older siblings to school, swelling the population in already overcrowded classrooms.

On many of these difficult fronts, ECD programs can provide effective support, relieving child care burdens for families whose support systems are stretched to breaking point, providing parents with a forum for discussion and information about children, filling significant gaps in children's lives, helping to smooth the transition to school, and providing positive alternatives for young children who otherwise contribute to serious overcrowding in grade one.

In recognition of this there has been significant expansion of ECD programs over the last 15 years. UNICEF and various NGOs, especially Save the Children, PLAN International, and the national NGO, Seto Gurans National Child Development Services, play key roles in ECD in Nepal, often in cooperation with different ministries, local government bodies, and community groups or local NGOs. However, still less than 14% of children currently enrolled in grade one have been exposed to any kind of early childhood program. The Department of Education hopes to increase this to 51% by 2009.

Early childhood field programs supported by Save the Children in Nepal consist of linked parenting programs and community-based ECD centers operated entirely by local partner NGOs. Parenting programs are the usual entry point for Save the Children's ECD work. Between 1998 and 2002, SC supported the start-up of more than 200 ECD centers, providing opportunities for about 13,000 deprived 3 to 5 year-olds in 12 districts. There is a large unmet demand for more centers, and recent breakthroughs in the sustainability of these programs has enabled more rapid expansion undertaken in partnership with the District Education Offices (DEOs) and Village Development Committees.



The centers, run by local women, provide an expanded range of experience for these children, encouraging culturally appropriate active learning and helping them develop skills which will enable them to make good use of whatever learning opportunities are offered in school and elsewhere. Facilitators lead the children in a simple planned program using a range of low cost materials, offering a mix of directed activities and opportunities for free play.

Children's gains from these centers, both cognitive and social, have been dramatic. Parents, teachers and others see these children, in contrast to their non-ECD

peers, as neat and clean, respectful and obedient, but at the same time as self-assured, capable and highly motivated. They are described as avid learners, quick to pick up new skills and information, and they are felt to have more highly developed social skills. In short, they appear to combine traits that have traditionally been emphasized for children within the culture with those that are critical for coping with a changing world.

Some of the most eagerly awaited findings of this study are in regard to the impacts of ECD programs on children's school success over subsequent years. It is this information which is summarised in the following sections.

Children in Schools

The ECD children are described by both parents and teachers as being well prepared and enthusiastic about starting school. Their confidence and communication skills (including in the case of minority group children, familiarity with the Nepali language), their ease with adults, their propensity for learning, the fact that they are accustomed to regular attendance, all help to smooth the transition. The schools offer few of the advantages they are accustomed to – small groups, close attention, songs and stories and a range of stimulating activities – and many of the children say they miss their centers. But nonetheless their teachers see them as involved, eager learners. In many cases, teachers make use of ECD children's capacity to encourage and support other children, and note that they are generally raising the level of expectation within classrooms.

Starting School

Almost all the children who have participated in ECD programs in this study start school. At least 95 percent of the 935 children who have gone through the ECD centers included in this study have ended up on the school lists, and the great majority of these appear to have joined school at the appropriate age (six years old). ECD facilitators and the district supervisor all confirm that it is very rare for an ECD child not to start school.

In Siraha, where overall school enrollment for primary school is 57 percent¹, an estimated 75 percent of children start grade one. In other words, about 20 percent more ECD than non-ECD children actually start school in Siraha. Differences in school starting rates are especially striking for girls and for children from disadvantaged groups. National figures for the district for 1999 indicate that al-



¹ School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal 2001, HMG/MOES/DOE.

TABLE 1: Boy/girl ratios in grades 1 and 2 in the schools in 24 VDCs

	ECD group	Non ECD group
Boy/girl ratio grade 1	50/50	61/39
Boy/girl ratio grade 2	54/46	66/34

most twice as many boys as girls go to school.² Within the ECD group, initial enrollment of boys and girls is about equal. In the schools the study looked at almost equal numbers of boys and girls who had been in ECD centres were enrolled in class 1, as opposed to a 61/39 (boy/girl) ratio for children with no ECD centre experience. In class two, the figures are not quite as good - ECD group boy/girl ratio changes to 54/46, - but they are dramatically better than the non-ECD ratio of 66/34 (or about two boys for every girl).

In Siraha as a whole, only 30.5 percent of *dalit* children are estimated to be enrolled in the five primary grades.³ Among the ECD group, *dalit* children have started school at a slightly higher rate than their non-*dalit* peers — over 95 percent have started school. Given their low drop out rates over the first two years this represents a significant gain. They are likely to attend over five years at rates far higher than 30.5 percent.

School Readiness

ECD parents and facilitators are quite clear that children who have attended a center are better equipped to handle school than their non-ECD peers. But they may be biased observers. Teachers in the schools, however, have little reason for bias. These children, say their teachers, are ready for school

both academically and socially. Their familiarity with numbers, letters and a range of concepts, their experience and patience with solving problems, and their excitement about learning all stand them in good stead when they get to school. Their exposure to adults through the center equips them to handle teachers with poise and to answer questions confidently, and their familiarity with Nepali adds to their confidence. The ECD children are willing to ask questions about things they don't understand – an important skill for making the most of school. 11% have entered directly into grade two.

Attendance

According to teachers, ECD children's school attendance is considerably better than that of non-ECD children, not only from week to week and month to month, but even within the school day. Non-ECD children often go home for lunch and then do not return. The ECD children are there for the day. Because school records are so often missing or incomplete, it is not possible to figure children's overall attendance rates. But if all available attendance records are taken at face value, they indicate that ECD children attend school 11 percent more of the time – not a substantial difference, but it becomes more so if their tendency to stay throughout the day is considered.

² School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal 1999, HMG/MOES/DOE.

³ Siraha District Education Office, 2002



Success in year-end examinations

As might be expected from children who are both better prepared and more regular in attendance, their success in year-end examinations is dramatically better. In 2000 SC collected data on the pass rates of children in the schools in 24 VDCs in Siraha. Using this data in combination with data on 261 ECD children who attended some 20 of these schools during that year, it was possible to compare passing rates in grades one and two⁴ for the ECD chil-

dren and their classmates. In grade one, 81 percent of the ECD children passed, as compared to 61 percent of their non-ECD classmates. In grade two, 94 percent of the ECD children passed as compared to 68 percent of their non-ECD peers.⁵ There is virtually no probability that these differences were due to chance rather than to the ECD program ($p= 0.000053$ for grades one and two combined.) This one-year snapshot demonstrates the significant support that ECD can provide to children in their early years school.

TABLE 2 Grade one pass rate in 2000

	ECD Group	Non ECD Group
Boys passing	79%	58%
Girls passing	83%	64%
Total passing	81%	61%

TABLE 3 Grade Two Pass Rates in 2000

	ECD Group	Non ECD Group
Boys passing	96%	70%
Girls passing	91%	66%
Total passing	94%	68%

⁴ Although some of Siraha's ECD children have already gone on to grade three, and a few even to grade four, their numbers are still low enough to make us cautious about using them in comparisons of this kind. All indications are that these children are continuing to do well at school.

⁵ This means that pass rates were 32 percent higher for ECD children in grade one, and 38 percent higher for ECD children in grade two, than for their classmates.

TABLE 4: Promotion, Repetition and Dropout Rates

		Promotion %	Repetition %	Dropout %
Grade one	National	41.7	36.7	21.6
	ECD group	83.5	5.5	11
Grade Two	National	73.9	17.6	8.5
	ECD group	95.1	2.2	2.7

National figures from School Level Educational Statistics of Nepal 1999, HMG/MOES/DOE

Promotion, Repetition and Dropout Rates

These higher pass rates translate into higher promotion rates for ECD children, and lower dropout and repetition rates. Although schools do not keep track of these figures, it was possible to calculate them for a large number of the ECD children based on their individual records, and to compare these figures with rates for the country as a whole. Tables 4 presents the combined promotion, repetition and dropout rates for ECD children for the years 1998, 1999 and 2000, and compares them to the government's national figures for 1999 (the middle of the three years in question.)

ECD children's higher pass rates mean that , they are far less likely, to drop out or to repeat a year. These results are especially marked for grade one; 36.5 percent of grade one children repeat the year nationally, but only 5.5 percent of the ECD group repeated grade one. It is worth considering the implications of these reduced repetition figures. If grade one repetitions were to drop from 41.8 percent nationally (the figure for 2000) to the 5.5 percent rate experienced by this ECD group, class sizes for grade one would drop by over one third. Furthermore, if underage children were all attending ECD, rather than informally attending grade one, (20% of grade one children are estimated to be under age) the number of children in these grade one classes would drop still further. Grade one classes could be around 50% smaller - allowing for quality improvements.

ECD children tend to move on to grade two at approximately double the national rates. Because of the absence of school records for consecutive years, the promotion, repetition and dropout rates for the ECD children cannot be compared to those of their classmates. As a very low percentage of Siraha children actually pass grade five (24 percent of those who start grade one, according to district figures), we can assume that ECD children would compare even more favorably within their own schools and district.

Given these striking results it would be reasonable to ask if the ECD children are better off in the first place. In fact the program deliberately targets disadvantaged groups and the majority of children are from extremely poor families—with dalits well-represented.

Indeed school success and retention rates for *dalit* children who have attended ECD are startlingly good. Our sample of 79 grade one *dalit* children was 2.12 times more likely to move on to grade two than the rest of Nepal's grade one population, and almost five times less likely to drop out. Because we have been unable to find national or district figures that compare the success of *dalit* and non-*dalit* children, it has not been possible to determine what role ECD has played in this higher *dalit* success rate. However, these outcomes are compatible with findings from ECD research around the world pointing to the fact that the most disadvantaged children are most likely to experience dramatic benefits from ECD programming.

Parents and Partnerships

The parents of the ECD children, accustomed to an active role at the centers, are more likely to talk to teachers, to show an interest in their children's progress, to engage actively with the school management committee, raise issues that concern them, and even to call for accountability from teachers and administrators. Like their children, these parents provide a model and a catalyst, raising expectations and pointing to alternative kinds of engagement within the schools.

These parents have learned the value of involvement and while they may not spend much time at school, according to teachers they are far more likely to visit than non-ECD parents are. This kind of parent involvement is more likely to occur where there are friendly links between school and center – the kinds of links that are currently being promoted through the child friendly school initiative and SC's partnership with the District Education Office. In one school, for instance, where the headmaster is also a member of the ECD management committee, parent involvement is especially strong.

Parents who two years ago complained that their children "only played" in the centers and were not at all enamoured of child-centered teaching methods are now making the comparisons with Grade 1 methods. There is conviction that their children learned much more in the centers and an inclination to discuss this with the school. This increased willingness of parents who have been involved with an

ECD center to engage with the formal school system is an unanticipated yet highly significant outcome. It's been established in other settings that the involvement of parents is one of the most robust predictors for a child's success in school. In some cases ECD parents are even challenging the schools. For example, a *dalit* child who had successfully passed her Grade 1 examination was not promoted to Grade 2 the next year – a result of the kind of mix-up that is common in situations where classes are large and record keeping is poor. The ECD facilitator, who remains close to all her "graduates", heard about this and talked with the family. The child's parents went to the school and insisted she be promoted. This may appear to be the obvious parental response to this kind of mistake. But in fact, for *dalit* parents whose own rights are so routinely denied, it is a big step to do something this assertive on behalf of their child.

The success of these programs is testimony to the potential of constructive partnership. The collaborative efforts of community members and ECD centers, of the centers and local Village Development Committees, of Save the Children and local NGOs, have all been critical to the program. Most recently, the partnership with the District Education Office offers the promise of bringing these benefits to many more of Siraha's children. Such partnerships are clearly the key to reaching hundreds of thousands more children and families in Nepal, helping them in tangible ways to recognize and achieve their rights.

