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## Engaging ECD Educators in Leadership Development: Unfolding the Practice

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### Abstract

This research article examines key leadership qualities of Early Childhood Development educators, such as passion, compassion, communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, organization, advocacy, reflection, innovation, and creativity. These qualities are vital in Early Childhood Education and Care settings, influencing interactions and relationships among children and staff. Studies show that such leadership impacts children's immediate learning and overall development. Focusing on preschools in urban Kathmandu, Nepal, the study examined the leadership development of ECD educators by exploring their past experiences, current positions, challenges, and transformative changes through participation in leadership programs. Interviewing ECD educators in leadership programs revealed their experiences and transformative impacts. The research also identifies challenges faced by ECD educators in leadership roles. Using a narrative interpretative approach, detailed insights from principals and ECD educators in Lalitpur highlight the importance of ongoing professional development and supportive policies.

**Keywords:** ECD leadership, professional development, transformative impact, preschool education

### Introduction

#### Setting the Stage

From a young age, I have always been passionate about teaching young children, with a focus on Early Childhood Development. My interest in ECD has grown through both personal experience and professional engagement. Quick decisions by leaders can

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have a significant impact, yet there is often too much emphasis on quantifiable metrics, like test scores, rather than on the behavioral and learning processes of students. Balancing these aspects is crucial. Leadership in education has been studied extensively, resulting in various leadership models, such as instructional, situational, transformational, and distributed leadership (Daniels et al., 2019).

Cabrera-Murcia (2021) highlights that while leadership has been widely examined in elementary and middle schools, early childhood education remains underexplored. The early childhood phase is critical for holistic development, necessitating a triangular relationship between the child, school, and parents. During this phase, teachers and caregivers play a pivotal role in providing good health, emotional care, nutritious food, responsive care, and intellectual growth. Bipath et al. (2021) emphasize the increasing need for education departments to support and manage the ECD sector to ensure high-quality outcomes.

Traditionally, leadership has focused on management functions, particularly directing efforts towards achieving organizational goals (Thompson & Strickland, 1993). However, effective leadership in ECD involves more than management, it requires fostering a supportive and enriching environment for both educators and children.

After working for years in the ECD field, I have identified various essential leadership skills, including commitment, understanding child development, empathy, effective communication, collaboration, flexibility, problem-solving, strong organizational skills, advocacy, ethical leadership, and cultural competence. When leaders fail to provide adequate support to teachers, the quality of education suffers. Effective leaders are crucial for guiding and supporting teachers, enabling them to perform at their best, which in turn enhances the educational experience for children. Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2023) suggest how to train leaders and improve the Early Childhood Education and Care system using a thoughtful approach. This study aims to explore the practices and experiences of ECD leaders and educators in leadership development.

### **Research Questions**

- a) How do ECD educators narrate their engagement in leadership development programs?
- b) What challenges do ECD educators share regarding their leadership practices?

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Effective leaders in early learning settings, such as preschools, significantly influence children's growth and development. They create positive learning environments, support teachers, communicate with parents, and design age-appropriate lesson plans. Hazegh (2023) examines the importance of strong leadership in establishing financially viable early childhood initiatives and supportive workplaces for competent teachers and program directors. Similarly, Zeichner (2012) explores the relationship between parent involvement and student achievement, while Lee (2012) criticizes traditional teacher preparation programs for lacking real-life context. Klevering and McNae (2018) investigate the connection between educational leadership and ECD education and care, highlighting the role of leadership in fostering positive educational outcomes for children. Similarly, Harwood et al., (2013) explore that the titles of those who help with learning are usually different, and people have different views about how valuable, helpful, and professional these roles are in education.

The findings are that Hazegh (2023) talks about how good leadership helps make early childhood programs financially strong and creates a positive workplace for teachers and leaders. Zeichner (2012) shows that when parents get involved, children do better in school. Lee (2012) points out that traditional teacher training doesn't prepare teachers for real-life classroom challenges. Klevering and McNae (2018) explain that strong leadership in schools leads to better care and education for young children. Leaders wield significant potential in shaping learning environments for both teachers and students, improving student learning outcomes by influencing teachers and impacting organizational policies and procedures. (Daniels et al., 2019).

The topic, "Engaging ECD Educators in Leadership Development: Unfolding the Practice," is broad therefore, specific delimitations have been set to ensure a focused and manageable study. Geographically, the study is limited to urban preschools in Kathmandu, Nepal, to provide localized insights. It specifically examines ECD educators and principals engaged in leadership development programs, focusing on their experiences, challenges, and transformations. The research adopts a qualitative narrative interpretative approach, using interviews and reflective discussions as primary data collection tools. Additionally, the study concentrates on early childhood development from birth to eight years old (Dahal, 2024), with a focus on preschool settings. These delimitations help narrow the scope and context, ensuring the research provides targeted and meaningful findings.

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## Materials and Methods

This section details the approach I used to conduct my study. It begins by discussing the philosophical considerations that guided my research and explains the nature of the study itself. Next, it outlines the research design, including where the study took place and who participated. It then describes how I collected information and processed the data for analysis and interpretation. Additionally, it addresses how I ensured the study met rigorous quality standards and adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process.

The ontological belief guiding this research is subjective, positing that multiple realities exist within the topic of ECD leadership. According to this belief, knowledge comes from both observable phenomena and subjective beliefs, values, logic, and perceptions. Kamal (2019) explains that epistemology investigates whether awareness arises from external input or internal engagement. My epistemological stance is that close interaction with research participants is essential to obtain in-depth information. Axiologically, this study is value-laden, recognizing the influence of my value system on interpreting the information collected from participants about their experiences in enhancing leadership skills in early childhood development.

The research design served as a blueprint for the study, with the critical choice of research approach defining how vital information was gathered. Sileyew (2019) emphasizes the interconnected decisions contributing to a well-constructed research design. This study employed a qualitative, narrative interpretative research paradigm informed by the subjective worldviews of the participants, as articulated by Max Weber and Kornai (2000). The research site was in Lalitpur, where interviews with two head teachers and one ECE educator from various preschools were conducted to explore their engagement in leadership development.

In-depth interviews and observations during the interviews were the primary data collection method, utilizing purposive sampling to ensure the study's trustworthiness. Purposive sampling, as described by Punch (2005), involves selecting participants with specific purposes in mind. Primary data came from in-depth interviews aimed at eliciting participants' experiences, feelings, opinions, and knowledge. Secondary data was gathered from journals, articles, theses, dissertations, and publications on parental involvement in schools. I conducted interviews with the participants at their workplaces,

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and the recordings were done in audio format. Note-taking and recordings were carried out with their prior permission.

Data analysis followed the process outlined by De Vos et al. (2005), bringing order, structure, and meaning to the collected data. Tesch's (2013) technique was used to analyze the data. The key processes included familiarizing with the data, coding, forming themes, data reduction, interpretation, validation, and reporting. Recorded data was listened to multiple times, transcribed, and re-read to understand participants' perspectives. Texts were labeled to understand underlying meanings, organized into key themes, and refined to develop a coherent coding system.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality. The study adhered to ethical norms, avoiding undue pressure on respondents and respecting their time. Gajjar (2013) emphasizes that ethical norms, while seemingly common sense, require careful balancing of individual values and life experiences. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and potential impact, with commitments to causing no harm to animals or the environment. The study followed the moral standards of Kathmandu University School of Education ensuring ethical integrity throughout the research process.

## **Results and Discussion**

The thematic analysis contributes to investigating the participation of ECD educators in leadership development programs and the challenges they encounter. This analysis focuses on five main areas. It offers a thorough understanding of the elements affecting ECD leadership and highlights the support needed to improve leadership abilities in early childhood development.

### **Leadership Sprouts: Nurturing ECD Educators for Tomorrow's Leaders**

Sitting comfortably in a cozy corner of a small office room, I, Rati Sharma, took a sip of my glass of water and glanced around. The warm afternoon sun filtered through the windows, casting a golden hue on the wooden furniture. The gentle hum of conversations and the clinking of cups created a serene backdrop. As I settled in, I prepared to delve into the stories of Early Childhood Development educators and their journeys in leadership.

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I began, “Can you share your experience regarding your involvement in leadership roles within the Early Childhood Development sector?”

Poppy’s (pseudonym) path to leadership within the Early Childhood Development sector in Nepal has been marked by a transformative journey of learning, adaptation, and advocacy. Originally from India with a background in finance, her transition into ECD leadership at one of the Master Franchise International Schools was initially challenging due to cultural and linguistic differences. Recognizing the significance of professional development, she advocated for structured leadership training programs within her school. She credits the mentorship provided by seasoned leaders and exposure to leadership seminars as key to her growth. Poppy actively implemented feedback mechanisms for teachers to improve curriculum delivery and student outcomes, which aligns with the Transformational Leadership Theory of fostering innovation and adaptability (Bass & Avolio, 1990). In addition to professional development, Poppy worked closely with local regulatory bodies to align the school’s policies with national ECD guidelines. Her leadership emphasized creating a supportive environment where educators felt empowered to take initiatives.

While conducting interviews, I observed the educators’ leadership practices in action. Poppy's ability to organize resources efficiently and interact warmly with her team reflected her adaptability. Her workspace, filled with charts and planning sheets, demonstrated a structured approach to leadership.

Daisy’s (pseudonym) journey into Early Childhood Development leadership unfolds against the backdrop of her deep commitment to education and community in Patan, Nepal. With a career spanning from teaching to founding her own school, Daisy incorporates inclusive practices and community involvement as part of her leadership plan. Her school participates in teacher exchange programs and hosts parental workshops to emphasize the importance of ECD. Recognizing the lack of structured leadership preparation, Daisy developed an in-house mentorship program, where experienced teachers guide younger staff on effective classroom management and curriculum planning. Daisy also integrates local wisdom with contemporary pedagogical strategies, ensuring alignment with Nepal’s National Curriculum Framework. Her emphasis on collaborative learning and resource-sharing within the community ensures that leadership is seen as a shared responsibility rather than an individual role.

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Daisy's school environment reflected her philosophy of community involvement. The walls were adorned with artwork created by students and parents together, showcasing collaborative efforts. During the interview, I noted her team frequently approached her for guidance, reflecting her accessibility as a leader.

Lily (pseudonym), the founder and principal of a preschool, has been a pioneer in nature-based learning within the Early Childhood Development sector. Since establishing her school a decade ago, Lily's leadership has been guided by her belief in experiential learning. She introduced professional development workshops for her staff, focusing on innovative teaching strategies, including nature-based pedagogy. Lily designed a five-year development plan for her preschool, focusing on building leadership capacities within her team. Teachers are encouraged to lead pilot programs and research projects, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Her advocacy for nature-based learning has garnered attention from policymakers, leading to the inclusion of these practices in local training modules for ECD educators.

Lily's preschool environment emphasized nature-based learning, with an open design and outdoor spaces filled with natural elements. Her leadership style was visible in her interaction with staff, where she encouraged their input during a casual meeting observed post-interview.

Each of these leaders brings a unique perspective and set of skills to the ECD sector in Nepal. Poppy's journey highlights the importance of adaptability and leveraging diverse skills, while Daisy's path underscores the value of community and continuous learning. Lily's story emphasizes the transformative power of innovative educational approaches and personal experience. Watkins et al. (2017) state that Leadership educators must develop leaders who can sense changes, adapt quickly, and stay true to their values. In complex situations, poor leadership can have significant negative impacts. Together, these narratives draw an exciting picture of leadership in Early Childhood Development, illustrating how dedication, resilience, and a commitment to learning can drive positive change in education.

### **Leadership Blossoms: Experience and Learning in ECD**

Poppy reflected on her path to leadership within the ECD sector in Nepal. "When I first started," she said, "I realized that leading in ECD requires more than just managerial skills." Originally from India with a background in finance, her transition into ECD leadership, a tone of the Master Franchise International Schools, was initially

challenging due to cultural and linguistic differences. The intricacies of early childhood education, combined with the unique cultural context of Nepal, demanded a deep understanding and sensitivity. Over time, through engagement with educators, parents, and local communities, Poppy developed a nuanced approach to leadership that prioritizes empathy and inclusivity. Her financial expertise also brought a unique perspective to the school's management, making her an invaluable asset.

Daisy's journey into Early Childhood Development leadership unfolds against the backdrop of her deep commitment to education and community in Patan, Nepal. Starting humbly as a substitute teacher, she discovered her passion for teaching and strong bonds within her community. "I wanted to be a journalist," she recalled, "but my path led me to teaching, and eventually, to establishing my own school." This early experience laid the foundation for her future endeavors in education leadership. Daisy's leadership style emphasizes empathy and collaboration, informed by years of practical experience and engagement in various ECD programs and international exchanges. Benmira & Agboola (2021) examines that effective leadership is crucial for organizational success, emphasizing human capital and management. The distinction between leaders as visionaries and managers as maintainers of stability is debated, with some seeing these roles as distinct and others as complementary.

Lily, the founder and principal of a preschool, has been a pioneer in nature-based learning within the Early Childhood Development sector. Since establishing her school a decade ago, Lily's approach has been deeply rooted in her understanding of the significant role nature plays in early childhood education. With a bachelor's degree in education and over two decades of experience in ECD, Lily's journey is marked by her innovative leadership and commitment to holistic child development. "95% of brain development occurs in early childhood," she emphasized. Lily's own childhood experiences in a hostel, observing administrative roles and teacher responsibilities, have given her insights into effective management. At her preschool, she implements nature-based learning, drawing from her understanding of the importance of holistic development. Parents often express satisfaction with this approach, which integrates nature into the learning process and fosters emotional and mental well-being in children.

The leadership journeys of Poppy, Daisy, and Lily provide valuable insights into the practice of engaging ECD educators in leadership development. Their stories reveal that effective leadership in ECD extends beyond traditional managerial skills,



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encompassing empathy, community involvement, and innovative educational practices. Jewitt (2022) also highlighted the importance of creating a sense of belonging, which involved creating safe learning spaces, fostering connectedness, providing time for relationship building, offering meaningful engagement opportunities, and changing organizational culture to professionalize the Early Learning and Child Care field. As a researcher, I am inspired by their dedication and the positive changes they have brought to early childhood education in Nepal.

### **Foundations of Leadership: Qualifications and Educational Background in ECD**

Poppy's educational journey has been instrumental in shaping her leadership philosophy. Her MBA provided a solid foundation in management, while her specialized training in STEAM Education and AI-equipped her with innovative strategies to enhance curriculum development and instructional practices. "Understanding the intersections of technology and education has been crucial," she explains, "especially in adapting teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles." Hallinger (2018) found that research on educational leadership and management indicates that effective school leadership is crucial for improving school performance. There's a broad consensus that key leadership practices, such as target setting and people development strategies must be tailored to suit the distinct contexts found in various schools.

Armed with dual master's degrees in Mathematics and Economics, Daisy initially approached education with a strong academic background. However, recognizing the specialized needs of ECD, she pursued further training in Early Childhood Education and Care. "I realized the importance of specialized training," she explains, "and integrated new methodologies directly into my school's curriculum." Her commitment to educational excellence led her to undertake a transformative one-year program under Lawanya's mentorship, solidifying her understanding of effective ECD leadership.

Lily's qualifications extend beyond her bachelor's degree in education. She has participated in various trainings that have equipped her with diverse skills. These include media training, social training, interpersonal skills, handicraft training, and Microsoft training. "All these skills have been applied in the ECD field," she notes, highlighting how her diverse educational background has enhanced her effectiveness as a leader.

Poppy's integration of management expertise with STEAM and AI training underscores the importance of technological innovation in enhancing educational practices. Daisy's transition from a strong academic background in Mathematics and

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Economics to specialized training in ECEC reflects a deep commitment to adapting educational methodologies for young learners. Lily's comprehensive skill set, ranging from media and social training to interpersonal skills and Microsoft proficiency, demonstrates the multifaceted approach necessary for leadership in ECD. Storey (2016) argues that leadership has become more important than other organizational concerns like structure and process, emphasizing transformative change. Collectively, these narratives illustrate the evolving landscape of educational leadership, where continuous learning and diverse skill sets play pivotal roles in driving positive outcomes for early childhood education in Nepal and beyond.

### **From Learning to Leading: Training and Skill Development in ECD**

Recent training in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and AI has further enriched Poppy's leadership toolkit. "NLP taught me how to effectively communicate and connect with my team," she emphasizes. Such skills have been pivotal in fostering a collaborative and supportive environment within her school and among ECD educators at large. "Continuous learning is key," she adds, "especially in a field as dynamic as early childhood education."

Recent years have seen Daisy actively engaging in leadership development initiatives. From conducting independent parent workshops to completing a PGDP and implementing cutting-edge teaching methodologies like the 5E model, her dedication to ongoing skill development is evident. "Continuous learning is essential," she asserts, "especially in a field where new ideas and technologies are constantly emerging."

In the past two years, Lily has focused on nature pedagogy, studying through the Natural Start Alliance and adapting her teaching methods during the lockdown to include online classes. "Learning about nature pedagogy has shown me the importance of using nature to support overall child development," she explains. This approach keeps children engaged and curious, fostering lifelong learning. Lily believes that education should not be confined to four walls and that incorporating natural elements can significantly enhance the learning experience. Falk (2003) argues that the study identifies context-specific profiles of leader attributes at each stage of this cycle. It contributes to the new theory by emphasizing that while individual leader traits are important, they alone cannot fully explain effective enabling leadership. This research underscores the complexity of leadership interventions and the need to consider broader contextual factors in achieving effective leadership outcomes.

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Lily has gained several key insights from her participation in leadership development initiatives. "Letting children play in nature helps them become more disciplined and develop a sense of gratitude," she says. Nature teaches children to be good human beings, and being apart from nature is linked to issues like hyperactivity and mental health problems. Spending time in nature boosts the immune system and overall well-being, reducing the need for medicines. These insights underscore the importance of integrating nature into early childhood education to foster healthier development.

Lily's approach to supporting educators involves active collaboration and sharing of knowledge. She conducts training sessions twice a month through the Nature Start Alliance and holds monthly parenting sessions. "I share all the information and insights from the sessions and classes I attend with my teachers," she states. She also plans to implement nature play initiatives, organizing weekly sessions where parents and children can play together in nature. This strategy aims to build a strong connection between home and school, inspired by nature-based practices in Australia.

Lily believes that continuous participation in diverse skills development opportunities is crucial for ECD educators. "Ongoing skill development, particularly in areas like play practices and nature-based learning, significantly contributes to the overall quality of early childhood education," she asserts. By focusing on practices such as play, educators create an environment where children can learn and grow holistically.

The stories of Poppy, Daisy, and Lilyas revealed a dynamic and evolving landscape in Early Childhood Development leadership. Each leader's journey underscores the importance of continuous learning, innovation, and adaptive approaches in enhancing educational practices. Halpern et al. (2021) claim that Both administrators and teachers emphasized collaborative and culturally diverse leadership, focusing on teaching practices that support children and parents, and expressed a commitment to leadership training aimed at promoting social justice through democratic approaches in early childhood education. These narratives collectively illustrate that effective leadership in ECD not only supports educational excellence but also fosters inclusive, supportive, and innovative educational environments that benefit young learners and their communities.

As a researcher, I found that active leadership in ECD includes more than just basic management skills. Leaders like Poppy, Daisy, and Lily show continuous learning, innovation, and a strong commitment to the community.

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**Navigating the Maze: Overcoming Challenges in ECD Leadership**

Despite achieving significant milestones, Poppy recognizes ongoing difficulties in Early Childhood Development leadership in Nepal. She points out that one of the major issues is the perception that ECD is seen as a less important profession. This perception influences the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, posing challenges in securing sufficient funding and support for preschools.

Low salaries and a lack of professional recognition also remain big obstacles to improving the quality of early childhood education. Schwartz et al. (2019) state that the study highlights several key findings regarding early childhood education teachers in under-resourced settings and their responsiveness to professional development. It identifies significant barriers across personal, professional, and contextual dimensions within the bio-ecological model that impact teacher outcomes. Low job satisfaction is linked to higher rates of teacher attrition, while teachers facing moderate to severe depression are less likely to attend PD sessions.

Despite her achievements, Daisy acknowledges persistent challenges in ECD leadership. She notes that ensuring consistent and timely training delivery is difficult. Juggling administrative responsibilities with professional development commitments sometimes makes it hard to effectively teach leadership skills to educators. Furthermore, managing student enrollment and resources continues to be a challenge, requiring innovative strategies to sustain and expand educational programs.

Despite her successes, Lily recognizes the difficulties in involving ECD educators in leadership development. She highlights that one of the current gaps is the time it takes to address various challenges and changes in early childhood education. These challenges include meeting the various needs of children and adapting to the growth and changes in the field. Successfully navigating these obstacles demands patience, ongoing learning, and dedicated effort.

Reflecting on the insights gathered from interviews with ECD leaders in Nepal, several critical conclusions emerge regarding the challenges and opportunities in early childhood education leadership. Firstly, there persists a significant hurdle in the perception of ECD as a lesser profession, which impacts both the employment and retaining of qualified educators and the acquisition of sufficient funding and support for preschools. In this context McDonald et al. (2018) claim the key findings regarding low pay in the early childhood education sector indicate that despite salaries often barely

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meeting minimum wage thresholds, a significant number of educators remain in the field due to intrinsic job satisfaction and a strong sense of purpose derived from positively impacting children's development.

By fostering a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility, schools can harness the diverse talents and insights of their team members, ultimately leading to more sustainable and impactful improvements in educational outcomes and school performance. Harris (2002) claims that the study's empirical evidence from teachers, senior managers, pupils, and head teachers suggests a leadership approach focused on fostering positive relationships and empowering others to take on leadership roles.

Effective leadership should involve everyone, not just a few, by sharing responsibilities and empowering all staff members. This team approach can lead to better educational outcomes and school performance.

### **From Challenges to Change: Impact and Solutions in ECD**

In response, Poppy has been proactive in advocating for greater recognition and investment in ECD. Through initiatives like the KMC project, she has championed community engagement and professional development among educators. "It's about empowering educators to see themselves as agents of change," she explains, "and fostering a sense of pride and professionalism in their work."

In response to these challenges, Daisy has implemented strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing leadership practices among ECD educators. "Expanding our school's class offerings incrementally has been key," she explains. By gradually introducing new classes and curriculum improvements, she ensures a measured approach to quality education delivery. Moreover, fostering a culture of continuous improvement through mentorship and shared learning experiences has empowered her team to innovate and excel.

Daisy's leadership contributions extend beyond her school's walls. She actively participates in local and international educational forums, sharing her insights and best practices with peers and policymakers. "Collaboration is vital," she emphasizes. "By exchanging ideas and experiences, we can collectively advance ECD practices and policies." Her involvement in parent workshops and community engagement initiatives underscores her commitment to holistic child development, fostering partnerships that benefit both educators and families. Pence et al. (2004) explore how international, regional, and local factors shape early childhood development policies, focusing on

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diverse dynamics in African countries through the experiences of ECDVU participants from government and NGOs. It underscores the complexity of ECD policy development and implementation across different contexts, advocating for collaborative efforts to enhance ECD practices and policies globally.

One of Lily's significant successes has been developing leadership skills across the entire school. "Everyone has been using their skills well," she observes. Empowering each teacher and recognizing their contributions has revealed hidden talents among the staff, benefiting the children. Despite the challenges, Lily finds satisfaction in managing her responsibilities efficiently and fostering an environment where both teachers and children can excel.

Lily's vision for her preschool extends beyond the confines of the classroom. By integrating nature-based learning and fostering a strong community spirit, she aims to create an educational environment that nurtures not just academic growth, but also social and emotional development. Her approach encourages active parental involvement, which she believes is important for the whole development of children.

Lily organizes various events and activities that bring together students, teachers, and parents. These activities are designed to enhance learning and build a sense of community. "We hold nature walks, gardening sessions, and outdoor play activities that involve everyone," she shares. This collaborative approach not only strengthens the bond between the school and families but also enriches the educational experience for the children.

Looking ahead, Lily plans to expand the nature-based curriculum at her school. She envisions a more extensive integration of outdoor learning environments and the development of specialized programs that cater to the diverse needs of children. "We are exploring ways to incorporate technology in a balanced manner, ensuring that it complements our nature-based learning approach," she explains. This forward-thinking strategy aims to prepare children for the future while maintaining a strong connection to nature and traditional learning methods.

Lily is also committed to continuous professional development for herself and her team. She actively seeks out new learning opportunities and encourages her staff to do the same. "I believe in lifelong learning and strive to stay updated with the latest developments in ECD," she emphasizes. This dedication to growth and improvement is reflected in the dynamic and evolving environment of her school. It is important to teach

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sustainability early as both learning content and a way of learning. This approach not only aligns with recent research findings but also supports international policies promoting sustainable practices. By starting early, we can instill in children a lifelong commitment to understanding and addressing environmental and social issues, preparing them to be responsible global citizens. Campbell-Barr (2017) examines the critical role of the early childhood workforce in ensuring quality ECEC beyond formal training structures.

This chapter covered information, interpretation of information, and discussion. The findings reported here were gathered via my observations of the natural setting and the educators' interviews in the ECED Centers and preschools.

### **Insights and Discussion**

The thematic analysis of ECD educators' engagement in leadership development programs has revealed several critical insights into the dynamics and challenges within the early childhood education sector. Central to these insights are the diverse experiences and learning trajectories of educators in leadership roles. Across the narratives of Poppy, Daisy, and Lily, we observed how their unique backgrounds and educational journeys influenced their leadership philosophies and practices. Poppy's transition from a finance background in India to ECD leadership in Nepal highlighted the importance of adaptability and cultural sensitivity in effective leadership. Daisy's evolution from a substitute teacher to a school founder underscored the role of hands-on experience and community engagement in shaping leadership approaches. Lily's pioneering efforts in nature-based learning emphasized the integration of innovative educational practices rooted in personal experiences and educational theory. Spies (2011) explored how early childhood development can serve as a gateway to sustainable community development. It emphasized the importance of ECD in shaping lifelong skills and values, crucial for addressing global challenges like climate change and poverty. The research highlighted integrated, ecological ECD as pivotal in fostering children as agents of positive change at community, national, and global levels, despite challenges such as teacher capacity and leadership.

Shonkoff & Fisher (2013) suggested ways to improve theories on changing developmental paths, create innovative interventions, rethink two-generation strategies for more effective impacts, and initiate new investments in young children and their families. The goal is to significantly reduce intergenerational disparities in learning,

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behavior, and health beyond what current best practices achieve. These insights underscore the significance of continuous learning and diverse skill sets in driving positive outcomes for early childhood education.

It advocates for policies that enhance professional recognition and support for ECD educators, including initiatives to improve working conditions, salaries, and career advancement opportunities. Haslip & Gullo (2018) state that Early childhood education is undergoing rapid transformation due to a blend of favorable and unfavorable trends impacting the sector. It emphasizes the importance of comprehensive, interconnected curricula, pedagogical standards centered on children, and a dedicated focus on social equity. The discussion also underscores the role of continuous professional development in equipping educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to address emerging challenges and opportunities in ECD leadership.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of leadership in the Early Childhood Development sector, emphasizing the need for adaptability, empathy, and innovative practices. The experiences of Poppy, Daisy, and Lily illustrate how cultural sensitivity, community engagement, and transformative approaches shape effective leadership in diverse ECD settings. Adaptability, as seen in Poppy's ability to leverage her financial expertise, Daisy's emphasis on community collaboration, and Lily's pioneering nature-based pedagogy, underscores the dynamic demands of ECD leadership. Effective leaders in this field demonstrate emotional intelligence, a commitment to lifelong learning, and the ability to navigate complex challenges. To foster such leadership, the study underscores the importance of structured professional development, mentorship programs, and supportive regulatory frameworks. These findings affirm that ECD leadership extends beyond managerial skills, requiring a holistic approach that nurtures educators as change-makers committed to the holistic development of young learners.

### **Implications**

The implications of this study underline the necessity for collective efforts from policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to foster supportive environments for ECD leadership development. Recommendations include initiatives to enhance professional



recognition, improve working conditions, and promote continuous professional development for ECD educators. By investing in leadership capacities and aligning policies with international best practices, stakeholders can advance inclusive and quality early childhood education that supports holistic child development and prepares children for lifelong learning.

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