

The Current Status of Government Early Childhood Care and Education Programs in Bahir Dar City Administration

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Abstract: This study examined the current status of some government Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programs in Bahir Dar city Administration. Qualitative research approach, specifically, evaluation research design was employed. The Ethiopian Education Sector Development Program V (ESDP V) was used as an evaluation framework. Ewuqet Fana, Atsie Sertse Dingle, Felge Abay and Quliqua Meda preschools were the research sites. Data were collected from six teachers and three directors using available sampling technique. Semi-structured interview, observation and document analysis were employed to collect the data. Inductive analysis was applied to identify themes and analyze the data. The finding revealed that in the study ECCE programs, various ECCE modalities were being implemented, and some of which were not indicated in ESDP-V framework. Shortage of classrooms, lack of trained teachers, large class size, lack of child-sized chairs and tables, absence of water and sanitation facilities, and lack of play materials were found to be the major challenges affecting the status of the programs. School directors perceived that their preschools were providing low quality services and strategies. In other words, the services and strategies which have been outlined in ESDP V were not properly implemented. Finally, it was concluded that even though the government ECCE programs were expanded to address the need of children from disadvantaged groups, they were serving these children with low status and lots of limitations. Thus, it is recommended that the government should give much emphasis to the quality status of the programs, amend its policy strategies and directly involve in the construction of preschools for the ECCE programs.

Keywords: status, ECCE, preprimary school, preschools, ESDP V

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program is well recognized all over the world. It provides care and education services to children to enhance their holistic development and prepare them for primary education (Amogne, 2015; Mottee, 2014; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). It is found that children who attend high quality ECCE programs are more likely to demonstrate school-readiness, having acquired the cognitive, linguistic and self-regulation skills that create the foundation for their future learning and development (Amogne, 2015; Gustafsson-Wright, Gardiner, & Smith, 2016; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). High-quality ECCE service is also recognized as a core strategy for poverty reduction because it supports children and families early in life; well-delivered ECCE can also help to interrupt the cycle of poverty (Young Lives, 2010). So, it is not merely the existence of the ECCE program that makes a difference rather its quality.

Educating young children is a long time practice in Ethiopia. As it is indicated in Hoot, Szente, Mebratu (2004), prior to the 20th century, it was Church and Mosque education that had played a great role in educating young children. The first secular preschool was introduced in Ethiopia around 1901. It was established in Dire Dawa for children of French consultants who participated in the construction of the first Ethiopian railroad (Hoot et al. 2004). Since then, various efforts have been made by the government to expand preschools in Ethiopia. The establishment of few pilot pre-schools in urban areas in 1962 by the Ministry of National Community Development and Social Affairs, the establishment of the first six month training program for pre-school workers in 1971, the expansion of preprimary schools in rural areas in 1974 prioritizing childcare issues linked to government policy that encourages women's participation in public life were among the efforts made during the Derg régime (Hoot et al. 2004).

By 1994, a new Education and Training Policy (ETP) was developed by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) led government. This policy was framed in 5 years Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs). In the first two ESDPs (i.e ESDP I and ESDP II), ECCE was not the priority area of the government. Instead, the responsibility of ECCE service provision was given to private sectors, NGOs, and communities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2005). Because of this, the accessibility of ECCE was limited to children from wealthy urban families while those children from low-income urban families and from the rural families that cover the greatest portion of the country's population were marginalized from accessing the service (Young Lives, 2010). Consequently, quality of primary education had declined; high dropout and low reading achievement were prevalent in primary education system (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2005). This condition forced the government to consider ECCE in the ESDP III, but its direct involvement in the provision of the service was very limited until ESDP IV (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2005). In ESDP IV, the government accomplished different activities such as establishing strategic operational plan and guidelines for ECCE, expanding O-Classes or Child-to-Child instruction, and opening multiyear

diploma training for pre-primary teachers in 7 colleges of teacher education (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2010; Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015).

The current policy framework under implementation is ESDP V, and its basic objective in relation to ECCE is “to provide all children with access to pre-primary education for school preparedness” The priority groups of this plan are the most disadvantaged groups which include those children who live in rural areas, who have special needs and who came from poor families. Therefore, this study is designed to evaluate the current status of the implementation of government ECCE programs in line with ESDP V policy framework strategies in Bahir Dar city administration. In the manuscript, terms such as ECCE program, preprimary school, kindergarten (KG) and preschool are used interchangeably.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Early years are critical periods when the foundation of a child’s personality are laid out (Sigmund Freud, cited in Santrock, 2011) and basic skills for later life are acquired (Morrison, 2004; Wortham, 2006). One of the most helpful environments for the child to develop sound personality and basic skill during early years is an ECCE program (Bronfenbrenner, cited in Morrison, 2004). It can positively influence child development and produce capable citizens who contribute to the development of a country. But, this could be possible if and only if the quality of the program is enhanced and maintained.

Currently, linked to the mass expansion of government ECCE programs, the status issue is becoming an emergent issue which demands professional discourse, research emphasis and intervention in Ethiopia. There are some studies conducted in different sites of the country which examine the status of the programs by addressing the practice and challenges. Among the recent studies, Melese and Kifle (2017), for instance, have conducted research on practices and challenges in Woldia Town, North East Ethiopia, and found that absence of trained KG teachers, assistant teachers and caregivers in preschool education, absence of professional development in ECCE, lack of curriculum based books, low interest of the community to support preschool education, inaccessible physical environment for most children with disabilities, inaccessibility and high cost of educational materials, lack of standardized classroom space, absence of readiness to address the needs of children with disabilities, and lack of budget were among the challenges of the practice of private owned KG schools. Similarly, Yigzaw and Abdirahman (2017) have conducted research on the practices and challenges of public and private preschools of Jigjiga city administration and found that the practice in all sampled preschools was found to be below the standard; the teachers were unable to use local stories since they were not from the community; the knowledge of parents, teachers and directors about the contribution of the preschool was found to be limited; 82.4% of the preschool had no ECCE qualification; 64.7% of the preschool centers did not have age-appropriate chairs; 76.5 % of the preschool had no any out-door playing materials and 100 % of all preschools did not use an approved curriculum.

The study of Melese and Kifle (2017) focused on private KG whereas Yigzaw and Abdirahman's (2017) study focused on public and private preschools. But still, little or no studies were conducted on government preschools focusing on evaluating the status of the programs in line with the implementation of ESDP V ECCE framework strategies. As it is mentioned in the introduction section, the government ECCE programs were opened to provide care and education services to disadvantaged groups (children who live in rural areas, who have special needs and who come from poor family). So, evaluating how these newly opened programs are operating to serve the majority population is very essential for MoE, regional education bureaus, policy makers, directors, teachers, parents, and the community at large to identify the gaps of the program implementation and improve the practice.

The following basic research questions were formulated to guide the present research:

1. How do the ECCE modalities implemented in the study programs affect the status of the services provided to children?
2. What are the challenges of government ECCE programs which affect the status of the services provided to children?
3. What is the status of the study ECCE programs as perceived by the directors?
4. Are the strategies outlined in ESDP V fully implemented to enhance the status of the study ECCE programs?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

ECCE Modalities and strategic plan of ESDP V

ESDP V describes the education policy framework for education sector from 2015/16-2019/20. The goal of ESDP V with regard to ECCE programs is improving access and equity. The goal is “to provide all children with access to pre-primary education for school preparedness and access to nearby institutions in which they can complete the full eight years of primary and two years of general secondary education”. The document also indicates that there will be fair treatment for each child regardless of income, gender, creed, race, location or disability, and priority will be given to the disadvantaged groups (for example, children who come from low income families, rural areas, children with special needs, etc.).

To achieve this goal, different alternative modalities were outlined: the three-year kindergarten program for children of ages 4–6 (KG1, KG2, & KG3), 0-Class for children of age 6 who are approaching school entry age, and an interim accelerated child readiness program for children with no prior exposure to early learning, shortly before they enter grade one (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015). Various strategies have also been set to implement these modalities. Some of the strategies are: constructing O-Class (supported by community development and resources), equipping the classes with a minimum package of teaching and learning materials, providing Basic Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, offering pre-primary teachers training, extending access to children with special needs, expanding parental education, and establishing child health and nutrition programs.

In the document, it is also indicated that class-to- student ratio is 1:50, but no standard is indicated for teacher-to-child ratio. According to the document, the budget allotted to ECCE for five years implementation is 3% to 11 % of the total education budget (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015).

While reading these policy strategies, one may raise the question of quality. Does solely expanding ECCE solely enhance fairness without considering the quality of the services in addressing the developmental needs of every child? The answer may vary from person to person, but in reality, ECCE programs are overwhelmed with multifaceted needs of individual child. The following developmental theories describe the multifaceted needs of individual child in ECCE programs which help us imagine the difficulties of the implementation without having much focus and investment on quality.

Cognitive development theory

Cognitive development theory was developed by a Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, in 1952 (Santrock, 2011). Piaget has a constructivist view of development. He believes that children construct their own knowledge step-by-step through exploring objects in their environment, problem solving and interacting with others. They construct knowledge best in the context of experiences that are interesting and meaningful to them (Morrison, 2004; Santrock, 2011, Tassoni & Hucher, 2000; Wortham, 2006). This implies that ECCE programs need to provide meaningful and hand-on learning objects to children so as to construct their knowledge.

Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development

A Russian theorist, Lev Vygotsky, has developed another cognitive development theory in 1962 and introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding in the field of psychology and education. He believes that children can achieve best with the help of a more competent person. Communication or dialogue between teacher and child is very important and literally becomes a means for helping children scaffold, or develop new concepts and think their way to higher level concepts. Vygotsky also acknowledges the importance of play for concept development and said that when children play and explore ideas freely, they can easily understand and accommodate what they have learnt (Santrock, 2011; Tassoni & Hucher 2000). This implies that teachers in ECCE programs should have the knowledge on how to scaffold the learning needs of an individual child.

Self-actualization Theory

Self-actualization Theory has been developed by Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist and leading exponent of humanistic psychology. Maslow (1954) has identified five basic human needs: physiological needs, safety and security needs, belongingness, esteem needs, aesthetic and self-

actualization needs (Morrison, 2004). According to Maslow, the satisfaction of basic needs is essential for individuals to function well and to achieve all they are capable of achieving.

He has also connected child development and education with basic needs satisfaction and said that:

- Children who begin school without eating breakfast don't achieve well and may experience difficulty of concentrating on their school activities.
- When children think that their teachers do not like them or are fearful of what their teachers say, they do not do well in school, and they become fearful in their relationships with others.
- Children need to be loved and feel that they "belong" within their home and school in order to thrive and develop.
- Self-esteem needs, such as recognition and approval relate to success and accomplishment. Children who are independent and responsible, and who achieve well, will have high self-esteem.
- Children like and appreciate beauty. They like to be in classrooms and homes that are physically attractive and pleasant. Teachers can satisfy aesthetic needs by being well-dressed and providing a classroom that is pleasant to be in by including plants and flowers, art, and music.
- When children have the basic needs met, they become self-actualized. They have a sense of satisfaction, are enthusiastic and eager to learn. They want to engage in activities that will lead to higher level of learning (Morrison, 2004, p. 126).

Psychosocial Development Theory

Psychosocial Development Theory was developed by an American psychoanalyst, Erik H. Erikson in 1963 (Wortham, 2006). According to Erikson, children's personalities and social skills grow and develop within the context of society and in response to society's demands, expectations, values, and social institutions such as families, schools, and child care programs. Adults, especially parents and teachers, are key parts of these environments and, therefore, play a powerful role in helping or hindering children in their personality and cognitive development (Wortham, 2006). Erikson identified eight stages of psychosocial development. Of these stages, preschool children pass through the first three stages. At the first stage, Trust versus Mistrust (birth to 18 months), the child's need is love and affection; at the second stage, Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (18 months to 3 and half years), the child's exploration need emerges, and at the third stage, Initiative versus Guilt (3 and half to 6 years), the child's physical and mental ability expands and needs to explore more (Wortham, 2006). Thus, parents, caregivers, and teachers need to provide promising environment to satisfy the developmental needs of the child so as to promote healthy personalities.

Multiple intelligence theory

An American psychologist, Howard Gardner, has developed Multiple Intelligence Theory in 1983 (Morrison, 2004). Gardner said that intelligence is multidimensional and there are many ways of knowing and expressing knowledge. He identified nine intelligence types which have influence on the educational thought and practice, and children come to ECCE with various multiple intelligence and multiple learning needs. For example, children with Visual/Spatial intelligence like to see what teachers are talking about in order to understand. They enjoy charts, graphs, maps, tables, illustrations, art, puzzles, and anything eye catching. These children learn best visually and organize things spatially. The same is true for children with the remaining intelligences (Verbal, Mathematical, Kinesthetic, Musical, Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Naturalist, and Existentialist). Each of these children has unique learning needs (Morrison, 2004). So, addressing the learning interest of each and every child is the responsibility of the ECCE program.

Ecological Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner, an American psychologist, developed Ecological Model in the 1970s and 1980s, looking at children's development within the context of systems of relationships that form their environment. He identified five environmental systems: Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Each system influences and is influenced by the other. According to this model, the proximal system to the child is the microsystem which encompasses the environments of parents, family, peers, child care, school, neighborhood, religious groups, parks, and so forth. The child acts on each of these and is influenced by them and influences them (Morrison, 2004; Wortham, 2006). Thus, this implies that the environmental agents in the microsystem, such as family, peers, child care, school, neighborhood, religious groups, need to reciprocally interact to support the developmental needs of the child.

To sum up, it is assumed that the practice of ECCE programs incorporates the insights of these developmental theories in an integrated manner as depicted in Figure 1 below.

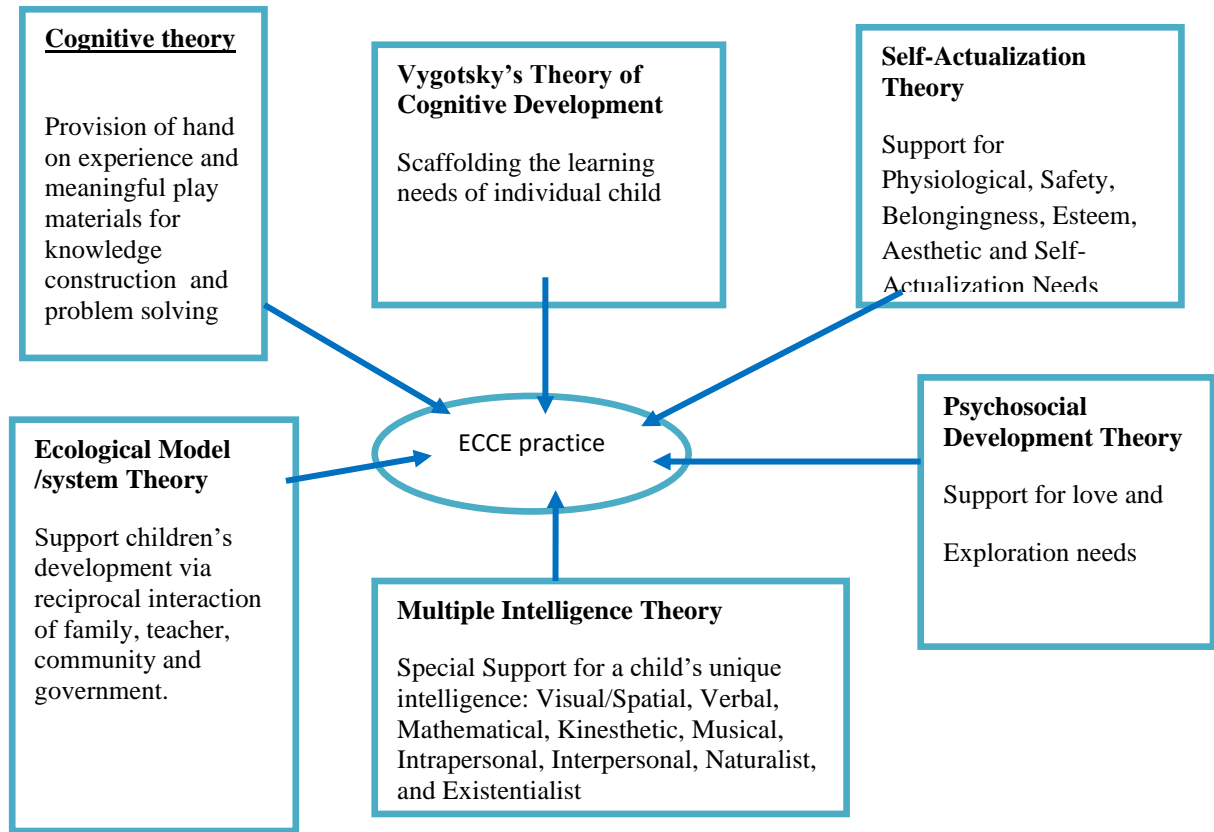


Fig1: ECCE practice with integrated theoretical insights

If this is so, children could learn through meaningful hand-on experiences if they are cared by professionally trained, enthusiastic, emphatic, friendly and honest teachers, get balanced diet, learn in safe, protective and loving environment, learn in a beautiful and attractive learning environment, learn in an environment that helps them actualize their natural intelligences, and have a family, teacher, community and government who reciprocally interact with each other to support their development (Morrison, 2004; Tassoni & Hucher, 2000; Wortham, 2006). So, to provide such kinds of welcoming and quality ECCE services to all children, the government needs to invest time, effort and money.

METHOD

Design

The research approach of this study was qualitative. From the various types of qualitative designs, evaluation research design was employed since the present research objective aimed to evaluate the status of the implementation of government ECCE programs in line with ESDP V policy

framework strategies, and the findings were expected to generate various suggestions for the improvement of the programs.

Research settings and participants

The research settings of this study were the ECCE programs in Ewuqet Fana, Atsie Sertse Dingle, Felge Abay and Quliqua Meda schools. They were selected purposely since they were government owned and recently opened programs (after 2014) in Bahir Dar city Administration. The data were collected from 6 teachers and 3 directors of the study programs using available sampling technique.

Data collection tools

The data were collected via semi-structured interview and observation. Interview guide and observation checklist were prepared based on the research objectives, ESDP V policy framework, and the theoretical insights mentioned in the theoretical framework section. The data were collected by the researcher through face to face interaction with teachers and directors, direct observation of the natural setting, and making comparison of what is described in ESDP V ECCE policy strategy vis-a-vis the implementation of the study programs. Audio recorder, video recorder and note taking were employed to record the data.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted beginning from the first day of the data collection in order to see whether there is a need of design modification to the subsequent data collection process. After the necessary information was collected from all study ECCE programs, the data were analyzed using inductive analysis. In the process, the recorded data were transcribed, and then reviewed, categorized, coded and described thematically, and finally the interpretation was made to create meaning from the data.

Trustworthiness

To confirm the trustworthiness of the inquiry, various data sources (teachers and directors) and data collection methods (interview, observation and document analysis) were employed. Then the findings identified from various data were triangulated and crosschecked for their consistencies. In addition, peer debriefing was also conducted through discussion with colleagues to get various views for better understanding and interpretation of the data.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from research participants to respect their rights. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate with their will. They were also informed that the information they give would be kept confidential, and it is used only for the research purpose, and they could terminate their participation at any time if they felt any discomfort. In addition, audio and video recordings were used with their permission.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of ECCE modalities and its influence on the status of the programs

The Interview and observation findings revealed that in the observed government ECCE programs of Bahir Dar city administration, various modalities (types of ECCE programs) have been implemented, and some of which were not indicated in ESDP-V framework. In the framework, four types of modalities were proposed: kindergarten for children of age 4-6 (i.e. KG1, KG2, & KG3), O-Class (for children of age 6), child to child instruction, and accelerated child readiness. In the study programs, however, it was found that two types of mixed modalities of kindergarten and O-Class were being implemented. In Atsie Sertse Dingl and Felge Abay preprimary schools, all preschool children (KG1+KG2+KG3+O-Class) were made to learn together in a classroom regardless of age and learning experience differences. But in Ewuqt Fana and Quliqua Meda preprimary schools, it was observed that children were learning in two different classrooms: in one classroom, age 4 and age 5 children (i.e. KG1 and KG2) and in the other classroom, age 6 (KG3) and age 6(O-Class) children were made to learn together.

This kind of mixed age practice has been observed in Montessori approach (Morrison,2004). This approach may be applicable in the context where there is a small class size, well trained teachers, an adequate learning space, play and learning materials (Green, 2002). However, in a context where the scarcity of resource materials is prevalent, and a large number of children are placed in a classroom under the custody of one teacher, mixing children with different age and learning experience may make the implementation of the program double burden and lower the quality status of care and education services.

While describing the burden of the program, one of the interviewed teachers of mixed classroom of age 6 (KG3) and age 6 (O-Class) mentioned the following:

KG3 children can easily identify letters and numbers. They can even construct short sentences, but everything is new to O-Class children. When I ask a question, KG 3 children respond quickly while O-Class children feel confused. When I tried to help O-Class children to identify letters and numbers separately, KG 3 children stop attending the class start disturbing the primary school students. There is one extra teacher in our school, but he is assigned to assist the two KG classrooms. He sometimes comes here to assist me and goes to the other classroom. I found this approach very difficult. I reported the issue to the director so many times, but no solution was given.

This practice also contradicts with the theoretical perspective of multiple intelligence of Gardner which states ECCE centers should address the needs of children with varied intelligence (Morrison, 2004). This shows that Gardner's Multiple Intelligence is difficult to practice in the above mentioned environment. So, in this situation, it is unlikely to provide quality services and produce capable children for the country.

The challenges

It is found that the status of the study government ECCE services has been affected by various challenges which include shortage of classrooms, large class size, lack of child-sized chairs and tables, absence of WASH facilities, lack of play materials and trained teachers, and these were the major challenges. These findings are also similar with the findings of Yigzaw and Abdirahman (2017), Melese and Kifle (2017) and Woodhead (2009) which were conducted in other parts of Ethiopia.

Classrooms

All the interviewed school directors and ECCE teachers said that in their schools, no classrooms have been designed and constructed for the preprimary school. One school director of the observed preschools said:

No classroom construction was made for preprimary education. We are using the classrooms designed and constructed for primary school. As you see, this classroom is overcrowded. It is very difficult to manage children in this class since they are 85. We have one extra ECCE teacher, and if we had had one extra classroom, we could have divided the children into two.

Another school director also said:

Last year, we enrolled 37 preschool children and assigned them in a poor hygiene classroom due to lack of classrooms. Because of this, children leave the school in the middle of the academic year. Consequently, this year, we changed the classroom by taking one from the primary school, but it is not enough to have only one classroom for all children. We are caring and educating 4-6 years of age children together.

As it is indicated in ESDP V document, constructing O-Class by development community resources is one of the strategies of ESDP V (MoE,2015). However, it is not implemented in the study programs. So, if this strategy is unrealistic for various reasons, the government needs to amend the policy strategy and make ECCE program construction one of the priority areas which is administered by its own budget so that the basic requirements of the program could be fulfilled. Otherwise, simply sending children to preschool could not bring the intended child outcome.

Large class size

The class size of the observed preschools was found to be extremely large which made applying the major principles of ECCE and meeting the learning interest (what Gardner called multiple intelligence) of each and every child impractical (Morrison, 2004). The following table presents the class size of each preprimary school.

Table 1

Class Size of the Observed Schools

No	ECCE programs	KG1+KG2+KG3+O-Class	KG1+KG2	KG3+O-Class
1	Felge Abay	25	-	-
2	Atsie Sertse Dingle	40	-	-
3	Quliqua Meda	-	70	60
4	Ewuqet Fana	-	60	85

All of the classrooms listed in Table 1 were facilitated by one teacher except Ewuqet Fana which has itinerant assistant teacher. Class-to-student ratio standard set by the government in ESDP V policy framework is 1:50 (MoE 2015), but in the observed preschools children learn in a crowded manner. The smallest class size is the Felge Abay's which is 25. However, the observation data revealed that these children were also facing similar problem since the room where they were placed was constructed for office purposes. The area of the room was not much more than 9 square meters. The interview response revealed that this happened because of lack of classrooms.

Green (2002) indicated that the minimum space requirement in an early-year setting for children between 3 and 7 years old is 2.3 square meter per child. With regard to teacher-to-child ratio, she recommended that, in nursery schools and classes, the ratio is 2:20 (minimum), and there should be one qualified teacher and another qualified nursery assistance. She also suggested that the maximum class size of children in a room should not exceed 26 except for special cases. Similarly, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2013) suggested that the ideal teacher-to-child ratio for kindergarten is 1:10 for a group size of 20, 1:11 for a group size of 22, and 1:12 for a group size of 24. Of course, adhering to these standards might be difficult in the Ethiopian context for various reasons, like large population size, low level of awareness of the requirement of ECCE programs, and lack of ECCE program construction. However, applying the class size standard set in ESDP V should be mandatory.

Child sized chairs and tables

Among the observed four preprimary schools, Quliqua Meda is well furnished in terms of child sized chairs and tables. The remaining preschools lack proper working places. Atsie Sertse Dingle is furnished with child sized plastic chairs and tables; however, it is observed that children fell down frequently because the chairs slide easily. On the other hand, children in Ewuqet Fana learn on mattresses stretched on the floor using their laps as a desk to write and draw.

The interviewed teacher of Ewuqet Fana said:

“My students have no working place since there is no any desk. Thanks to Bahir Dar University for providing us these mattresses. I have reported the problem to the school so many times, but we didn’t get any solution. This problem may not be solved by the school. There must be a room to involve the community. If the community is insisted and calls for collaboration, let alone buying desks, it can even construct classrooms. ”

The observation finding also supports the finding of the interview. In this preschool there is a great deal of disturbance in the mixed classroom of KG 3 and O-Class. The room is highly crowded; some children sleep on mattress while others jump and disturb those who want to write using their laps as a desk.

Such kind of learning environment contradicts with Maslow’s principles of safety and security needs satisfaction (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012; Morrison, 2004). It places children at risk of health and behavior problems and hinders them from learning the basic skills necessary for future education.

Basic Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (Wash) Facilities

Lack of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities were big challenges for all of the observed preschools. There was no child sized sanitation facilities, such as sink and toilet in the observed preschools. Even the available toilets were dirty which might expose children for communicable diseases. The water pipes at Atse Sertse Dingle and Ewuqet fana were not functional.

All the above challenges, that is, lack of classrooms, large class size, lack of desks and WASH are highly interrelated and linked with construction and they may be solved if and only if the government prioritizes constructing classrooms and equipping preprimary schools. This can be done first by changing the policy strategy and then giving much emphasis for the design and construction.

Play materials

Many developmental theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson and Gardner acknowledged that children can learn best through play (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, , 2012; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). Play can enhance children’s holistic development. For instance, construction play such as blocks and puzzles can enhance children’s creative thinking, problem solving skills and memory (cognitive development). Dramatic plays, such as make-believe play and role play can enhance children’s social skills, self-concept, emphatic feeling, prosocial behaviors, impulse control skill, conflict resolution skills (psychosocial development). Outdoor plays, such as running, jumping, somersault can enhance their body strengths and flexibility (physical development) (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999).

However, in the observed schools, there is a scarcity of both indoor and outdoor play materials that facilitate children’s learning. The observation result revealed that in Atsie Serts Dingle, there was only one indoor learning material that could help children learn the English

alphabet, and there was no any learning material for Amharic alphabets at the time of observation. The teacher has been using chalkboard, wrote both English and Amharic alphabets and taught children by saying the letters repeatedly which is a behaviorist approach, and this not that much recommended for early child learning. In the remaining schools, alphabet learning materials were available to some extent, but other indoor play materials, such as blocks, puzzles, dolls and sociodramatic toys that enhance children's cognitive and social development (Erikson cited in Wortham, 2006) were still scarce.

It was found that playground and outdoor play materials were also big challenges in most of the observed schools. The observation result revealed that it was only Qulqual Meda that was better equipped compared to others. In Atsie Sertse Dingle, only three outdoor play materials, Merry Go-Round, Seesaw, and Swing were available in a small play ground. In Ewqet Fana, the children had outdoor play materials, but it was not accessible to them. One teacher of this school said: "The outdoor play ground is locked because older children broke the play equipment while they play". The observation finding also confirmed that there was lack of proper play ground in this school. KG1 & KG2 children were playing in dust and dirty area while KG3 children have been playing on the play ground of the primary school children.

This finding contradicts with the constructivists views of development which state that children construct their knowledge through exploration and manipulation of objects (Morrison, 2004; Santrock, 2011; Tassoni & Hucher, 2000; Wortham, 2006). So, children need to have the access at least to the basic learning environment, such as safe play grounds and spacious classes, age appropriate play and learning materials, and trained teachers and staff (Morrison, 2004).

ECCE programs can be supported by community members, but the interview response confirmed that there is no any community involvement in these programs. Thus, it is very essential to invite volunteers, businessmen/women and even parents to support the program.

Lack of trained teacher

ESDP V has planned to have 2 /2 licensed teachers holding ECCE diploma by 2016/2017 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015, p.126). This means, if there are two teachers in a school, both of them should have ECCE diploma. However, this plan was not actualized in the observed preschools. Lack of trained ECCE teacher was found to be one of the major challenges of the implementation. Of the interviewed six ECCE teachers, two of them have a certificate in ECCE; one teacher has a short term training while the rest have no training at all. One of the untrained teachers said: "I completed grade 12 and was hired here without having any training. I need training". Similarly another interviewee said that "I have been teaching here for the last three years, but I have no any training".

This finding contradicts with many literature found in the area of child development. The literature in ECCE arena indicates that preschool teachers should have knowledge of child development to address the needs of each child across age; they should have pedagogical trainings to facilitate children's learning, and they should have pediatric first aid training to provide first aid service when children face accident while playing (Morrison, 2004; NAEYC, 2009; Wortham,

2006,) but these things were not realistic in the study programs. Therefore, accelerating the knowledge and skills development of teachers will also be another basic responsibility of the government in order to improve the quality of ECCE service provision.

The evaluation of preschool directors

The interview conducted with the preschool directors (they are the directors of the primary schools as well) revealed that the status of the study ECCE programs was low. All of the interviewed directors said that their preschools were not providing ECCE services to the children as expected. In describing the status, one school director says

“In my school, it is difficult to say we are offering proper ECCE services compared to private schools. There is sacristy of classrooms; we enroll all children who come to this school. We don’t say we don’t have any more place when the classroom is full. Children are in overcrowded classrooms and are highly exposed to communicable diseases as well. Emotional support cannot be provided properly in this school since the class size is too large. There are no enough places for children to learn and play. There is scarcity of indoor and outdoor play materials. So, for me, developing policy directions is not enough, rather constructing kindergarten compounds as well as fulfilling them with the necessary facilities is very crucial”.

In a similar way, another director said that “In our school there is only one section for preprimary education. There are no play materials; the teacher has no any training, and the outdoor play ground is very small. If the government constructs the KG compound separately, the class and play ground problems can be solved”. These responses also coincide with the responses provided by teachers in the challenges section of this paper.

The implementation of ECCE strategies outlined in ESDP V

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), has outlined various strategies in ESDP V policy framework to make ECCE services accessible for disadvantaged children: those children who live in rural areas, who have special needs and who come from poor family (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015). Thus, based on the strategies that should be implemented at preschool level, Table 2 presents the comparison between the plan and its implementation in the study preschools.

Table 2

Planned vis-a-vis Implemented ESDP V ECCE Policy Strategies at Preschool Level

ESDP V Strategies	Implementation
Constructing O-Classes (supported by community development and resources)	No construction of KG/O-Class
Equipping preprimary schools with a minimum package of teaching and learning materials	Some of the preschools were supported by NGOs for outdoors play materials but not properly managed. Scarcity of indoor play and learning materials.
Providing basic WASH facilities in pre-primary setting	No child size toilet is available. Only one direct water line was functional.
Teacher training	2 teachers have got one year certificate training 1 teacher has a short term training 3 teachers have no training
CtC/ACR/ facilitators training	The schools were not familiar with these concepts at all.
Extending access to children with special educational needs	No children with special needs were enrolled in all schools during the observation time.
Expanding parental education	The preschool teachers were not familiar with this concept.
Establishing child health and nutrition programs	One school had school meal initiative program (Qulqual Meda)

From the above table, it is possible to say that most of the strategies planned to enhance the status of government ECCE service were not properly implemented.

Organizing and running ECCE programs need investment. Although the government of Ethiopia is trying to expand ECCE throughout the country, the investment on construction and fulfillment of the necessary learning and play materials, inclusion of children with special needs, expanding parental education, supporting children health and nutrition programs seem to have been given little attention. In ESDP V framework, it is indicated that the construction of classrooms has to be done by the support of development communities (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education (MoE), 2015). However, the specific responsible body for doing this activity is not clearly indicated in the policy document. This may create confusion on the implementation and hamper the progress of the program.

The education history of Ethiopia revealed that the development of government ECCE programs posed for the first 3 ESDPs (ESDP I, II, & III) may make the program left behind. So, the government needs to prioritize and invest much on the quality enhancement of ECCE program in an accelerated manner so as to achieve the intended child/student outcome across the education system. While explaining the consequence of being lenient to invest on preschools, Mottee (2014) said that not investing on ECCE means not only losing of opportunities but also contributing to the accumulation of inequalities and condemning generations to deprivation and under performance.

CONCLUSION

From the findings, it is possible to conclude that although children were accessing services from the study government ECCE programs, they were served in low status programs with lots of limitations. This implies that little attention was given for the proper implementation of ESDP V strategies and improvement of programs. Educating children in such kind of learning environment may hamper the development of children, produce unintended child/student outcome, and place the country in vicious poverty cycle.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Producing healthy and capable citizens through education is one of the primary responsibilities of the government of a country. So, instead of merely depending on community development, the government (MoE/Region education bureau) should take the major responsibility and invest on the construction of ECCE centers and fulfill the basic play and learning materials so that the majority of the challenges can be resolved and the status of the programs can be enhanced. In addition, the inclusion of children with special needs, expanding parental education, supporting children health and nutrition programs are also issues that need intervention for implementation.
- The majority of the government ECCE centers were not facilitated by trained teachers. So, teachers training needs to be accelerated by establishing special ECCE training programs in some selected universities besides College training centers. It is also better to upgrade the training level from certificate and diploma to bachelor and masters degree levels so that the service could be provided by highly qualified professionals for the coming generation.
- Large class size hampers children's healthy development. Thus, policy makers need to reconsider class size and teacher to child ratio of preprimary schools for the next ESDP.
- The involvement of the community development is vital for improving the quality of ECCE programs. So, the policy makers should clearly indicate in the policy document what kind of support a particular stakeholder or funding agent needs to provide so that confusion on accountability can be resolved.

- The community should be involved in supporting ECCE programs. So, it is very helpful if Education Bureau officers, supervisors, directors and teachers invite volunteer individuals, businessmen/women, ECCE professionals and even parents of children, to be involved in the enhancement of the programs.

FUTURE DIRECTION

This study was conducted on urban preschools and did not represent the rural ones. So, to capture the clear picture of the status of government ECCE programs, further investigation that addresses both urban and rural preschools need to be conducted at a regional as well as country level.

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