

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Early Childhood Care and Education Scenario in Preschools

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to investigate the situations of early childhood care and education in terms of availability and accessibility of facilities and materials, teaching-learning practices, use of indigenous knowledge, parental involvement, and major challenges in the practice. The study used exploratory research design data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation, which were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis method. The findings revealed that classrooms of the preschools containing a large number of children, equipped with a limited number and variety of inappropriately stored teaching-learning materials, and crowdedly posted similar charts and pictures focusing on letters and numbers, lack of enough tables, shelves, separate sleeping, and eating rooms. The result of the study demonstrated that there were shortages of storybooks and play materials in varieties and types. There were also very small numbers of old and developmentally inappropriate Amharic version reference books and syllabus per class, and non-existence of texts and teacher's guide in most preschools. It was also found that the teaching-learning practice was inclined to child-centered but lacked the use of play as the main approach. The available teaching materials and classroom practices dominantly focus on literacy and numeracy. Teachers teach children with good analogy and motivate them when they behaved properly. But, some age-inappropriate practices were observed, and the use of corporal and psychological punishments as a means to correct children's misbehaviors. The study indicated that many outdoor playgrounds were not sufficient, safe and comfortable for play; they were furnished with a limited number and type of playing materials some of which were broken and out of function. It was also shown that almost all of the available teaching materials in the classrooms are prepared by teachers from locally available resources taking the local context into consideration. But, more numbers of foreign origin books were observed in the classrooms. The involvement of parents in their children's education was very low. Meetings and sending messages via communication books to parents were found to be the common forms of contact between parents and teachers. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the gaps observed in play and learning materials accessibility, minimal incorporation of indigenous resources, and less involvement of parents compromises the quality of early childhood care and education. Therefore, it is recommended that children's care and education is a shared venture that needs a collaborative intervention of parents, teachers, and other concerned government and non-government bodies for the betterment of children in the future.

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1. Introduction

It is commonly recognized that the period of early childhood is critical in the life of human beings. The experiences in this period are important architectures to lay the foundation for children's overall development in the later ages. In line with this, many researchers (Heckman, 2004; McWayne, Green & Fantuzzo, 2004; Tassew, 2011; Tsegai, 2015) documented that the first few years that is up to six to seven years of age in the life cycle are ideal periods and most crucial to ground burly base to learn and develop fundamental skills and competencies since a right start at an early age is planting seeds for tomorrow's productivity. Sooter (2013) also strengthened that early years of age are the most significant to the formation of intelligence, personality and social behavior of children. These further influences children by improving their smooth transition to primary school (Tsegai, 2015) and their success both during and after elementary school experience (McWayne et al., 2009).

Hence, early interventions to improve childhood development are believed to be more cost-effective and have much more returns than later ones. In line with this, Tassew (2011) indicated that investment in education at an early stage of development is crucial and has a better result than investment in the later years. Early Childhood Care and Education National Policy Framework of Ethiopia, MoE, MoH, MoWA (2010a) also underscored that the extent of ultimate development and achievement of children is predominantly fixed by the early experiences they had undergone during the preschool years.

Children accumulate many experiences from the preschool setting since preschools are the immediate contexts to children next to the home. Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is one of the critical windows of opportunity for optimizing children's development, children who participated in quality ECCE exhibit tremendous gains in their overall social, cognitive and intellectual development than those without (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). Consistent with this, as it was indicated by Amogne (2015), researches conducted in Turkey, Pakistan and some African Countries like Argentina, Nigeria, and Ethiopia indicated that preschool attendance equips children with prerequisite skills and produce positive sizable long-term effects on children's self-control, attention, effort, class participation, social adjustment, discipline and achievement than students without preschool experience.

Thus, it would be sensible that establishing quality preschools play a pivotal role in children's further development. A quality preschool learning environment shapes further development of children's skills over the preschool years (Anders et al., 2012). Good quality of preschool education requires well-trained staff, low child - staff ratio (international benchmark, not more than 15:1 as suggested by UNICEF cited in (International Labor Organization [ILO, 2012])) and high levels of one-to-one contact (McTurk et al., 2008).

Moreover, good quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs should focus on the holistic development of children characterized by enrolling children at an appropriate age; build around a good learning environment; has enough and safe physical space with specialized facilities; provision of care by professionals; and involve parents in the process (Sparling, Ramey & Ramey, 2007) and sensitive to and builds on indigenous knowledge and practices (Early Childhood Development Learning Community South Africa [ECDLCSA, 2012]). Children should be provided with all kinds of facilities and materials, through repeated interaction, play and exploration they can construct their knowledge which is a hallmark

of their optimum development (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2002). According to these researchers, the preschool learning environment should have sufficient space for play, sufficient and varied play materials, and an aesthetic, safe and stimulating atmosphere.

According to the European Commission on Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency [ECEACEA,2009]) the most effective intervention in ECCE programs “involve intensive, early starting, child-focused, center-based education together with strong parent involvement, parent education, programmed educational home activities and measures of family support (p. 11).” This agency stressed that the programs should focus on teaching basic skills in the area of literacy and numeracy, and social-emotional competencies achieved within high quality interactions between teachers and children such as emotionally secure, sensitive, supportive, non-intrusive, and stimulating.

Furthermore, MoE, MoH, MoWA (2010a) stated that the ECCE program should be designed to promote the holistic development of children including “basic skills (pre-reading, pre-writing, counting and arithmetic), and social-emotional competencies including self-regulation, intrinsic learning motivation, and the ability to cooperate with other students (p.15).” As to the policy framework play-oriented approach is the main means of children’s learning. The use of music, drama, movements, etc. and materials having different shapes and textures should also be important components of the program. The policy framework indicated that the environments (social, emotional and physical) of the preschool should also be safe and secure i.e. child-friendly, and the ministry of education is responsible to develop the preschool curriculum, play and teaching materials, provide training for teachers, make supervision and assuring quality.

According to ECDLCSA (2012), one of the basic characteristics of good quality early childhood program is sensitive to and builds on indigenous knowledge and practices. Early childhood programs constructed by considering indigenous knowledge and practice promotes children’s holistic development (Sagnia, 2004). Hyde and Kabiru as cited in Pence and Shafer, (2006) also argued that early childhood interventions in Africa are more successful when built on the local knowledge. Because by using rich indigenous knowledge, parents and preschool teachers can easily teach and transmit traditions and beliefs to children. This creates the opportunity for children to improve their language and mathematical skills, hygienic habits and gross motor activities to preschoolers (Pence & Shafer, 2006). Soudee (2009) and Sagnia (2004) also suggested that the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, locally produced toys, traditional stories, games, dance and songs are important tools to be used in ECCE programs.

In addition, Kassahun (2013), Klein (1996) and Nsamang (2010) strongly recommended that early childhood educational practices in Africa should consider the context of the local culture. Hence, close attention is needed to the unique socio-cultural conditions of the societies in designing ECCE services in Africa which should focus on local strengths including indigenous games, music and dance since they are notably rich dimensions of most African cultures that children participate at an early age (Memphir City Schools, 2013). Moreover, MoE, MoH, MoWA (2010a) also highly recognized that the preschool program should adapt the local context and fit in with the children’s daily life including culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate and inclusive of indoor and outdoor materials and activities. In strengthening this, Tirussew, Teka, Belay, Belay and Demeke (2009) indicated that Ethiopian children can learn about important cultural values such as courage, endurance, interdependence, helping others, sympathy, collaboration, better through local stories, proverbs, games, poems, etc.

However, studies conducted in some African countries like Uganda, Lesotho, Gambia, Mali and Senegal (Soudee, 2009); South Africa (ECDLCSA, 2012); and Ethiopia (Kassahun, 2013) revealed that the models and curriculum guidelines, and practices of ECCE are highly influenced by the imported universal Western systems of early childhood development programs and hence the use of indigenous knowledge is minimal, though there are trials of integration. According to Kassahun, the practices in Ethiopian preschools give little attention to the local cultural values and they seem to promote foreign ideology and practices. One of the manifestations of this problem is that English is the preferred language used as a medium of instruction in many preschools of Addis Ababa (Gesesse, 2007; Kassahun, 2013). Gesesse showed that most of the storybooks available and used to teach children in these schools are also of foreign origin.

Since, children's development and learning depends upon the inter-contextual relationships and synchronicity between home and school (Bronfenbrenner as cited in Cardona, Jain & Canfield-Davis, 2012), the integration of indigenous knowledge into the ECCE is expected to occur at both home and preschool contexts. Thus, parents' engagement in their children's ECCE activities has pivotal role for better learning and development. Nokali, Bachman and Votruba-Drzal (2010) indicated that parent involvement is a key to bridge the two contexts. So, preschool children become more successful when parents are deeply involved in their education (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2002). MoE, MoH, MoWA (2010a) also recognized the importance of maintaining the joint involvement of teachers and parents to discuss a child's progress and the type of support s/he needs. Parental involvement is the engagement of parents in activities both in home and preschool settings intended to support their children's educational progress.

Home based involvement include assistance with homework, parents' reading to or with their children (Jeynes, 2005a) whereas preschool based involvement considers keeping in touch with a teacher, volunteering in school activities, attending parent-teacher conferences, and participating in extended class visits (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006), communicating with school staff (Jeynes, 2005a), collaborative goal setting and cooperative decision making (Kingsbury, nd).

A large body of literature has documented that parental involvement in their children's ECCE programs is a critical factor for improving children's academic achievement (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006; Maphoso & Mahlo, 2014; Nokali et al., 2010; Taylor, Clayton & Rowley, 2004), emotional, and behavioral adjustment (Dewar, 2011).

But when it comes to practice, parents do not actively involved in their children's education where the most common form of contact between parents and teachers in many countries is provision of information to parents through meetings (ECEACEA, 2009). Ayele and Befekadu (2008) also added that parental involvement is very low especially in government schools. Particularly parental provision of academic assistance to their preschool children was very low though many teachers invited parents to come and discuss matters related to their children (Tirussew et al., 2009). The reasons behind this problem are multiple including parental feeling of unimportant and unappreciated in participating at school (Stephinah, 2014); lack of awareness (Ayele & Befekadu, 2008); and time constraints due to working outside the home, being a single parent, and having younger children (Baker, 1997).

Generally, ILO (2012) indicated that good quality of ECE practices is dependent on the

presence of a good enabling environment including adequate infrastructures, materials and positive interactions. However, Sub-Saharan Africa is not often within suitable premises for ECE characterized by a lack of basic learning resources such as books, toys and other relevant materials. As some research findings identified, ECCE in Ethiopia has also a lot of impediments which are 'found in unsafe places, lack spaces for play and learning, lack of developmentally appropriate facilities, and materials like books, toys, and other relevant supplies (Tsegai, 2015).' Lack of play-oriented pedagogy, placing children in a very structured program with much emphasis on literacy than skills associated with social and emotional development, teacher-centered types of practices and formal instructional learning are some of the gaps observed among preschools (Kassahun, 2013).

Besides, a study conducted by Tirussew et al. (2009) on preschools of Ethiopia identified many problems including teacher-centered hierarchical interaction, lack of child sized toilets convenient for use, inadequate spaces for children to play, lack of neat and appropriate playgrounds and materials, lack of areas for children to take nap, lack of children story books, lack of different play materials such as manipulatives, the mere emphasis on academics than play oriented approach, overcrowded classrooms that restrict children to play, explore and discover, too many stimuli which either distract or confuse children, lack of ventilation in classrooms, and a move from masculinized teaching of traditional schools to the feminization of ECE teaching.

UNESCO-IICBA (2010) also strengthens that most Ethiopian preschools are characterized by a lack of trained human power, unattractive salary making teachers' turnover and child-teacher ratio high, unsafe and inadequate spaces for play and learning, focus on chalk and talk type of learning, lack of potable water and children's books, toys and other relevant educational materials (in some preschools). Lack of understanding from the part of parents about the major purpose of the preschool and limited or absence of parental involvement in early childhood education programs are other problems.

Moreover, both Tirussew et al. (2009) and UNESCO-IICBA (2010) showed that lack of commitment from the part of the government in allocating budget, provisions of materials and textbooks, little professional and technical support and supervision, lack of qualified experts in the sub-sector, absence of a well-established and mandated body to ensure the quality and standard of the educational activities are problems that affects the implementation of preschool programs.

Having this whole lot of literature, the issues of ECCE in Ethiopia have been devoid of public and governmental awareness. Kassahun (2013), Tirussew et al. (2009), and Tsegai (2015) commonly agreed that the field of ECCE is one of the most marginalized and neglected areas in the education sector of Ethiopia, especially in the past.

However, in recent years, the government of Ethiopia seems to be aware about the importance of ECCE and tries to acknowledge the problem. Hence, ECCE has become one of the top policy priorities, which is considered as a strategy to improve education quality (MoE, 2010; Tassew, 2011; Tsegai, 2015).

Therefore, the major triggering points for the author were twofold: in the first place, early childhood is very critical to establish a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development that needs close investigation. Secondly, ECCE in Ethiopia has 'long history but little progress' (Tirussew et al., 2009, p.209) due to less attention was given to the sector in the past decades. The field is found at the infancy stage and yet little is known due to the dearth of rigorous research in the area. Thus, conducting a study on this basic issue is

vital to the development of the field. Cognizant of these rationales, the present study was centered on examining the current conditions of preschools in Addis Ababa, Yeka sub-city. Hence, efforts are made to address the following research objectives.

- Explore preschools' setting in terms of availability and accessibility of resources and educational practices.
- Examine the integration of indigenous knowledge into the preschool programs.
- Investigate parental involvement in their children's preschool education.
- Identify the major challenges in the implementation of preschool programs.

II. Methods

Design: To address the aforementioned objectives, the study followed a qualitative approach, particularly employed phenomenological research design. This approach is descriptive and found to be helpful to collect and analyze data about the practices and experiences of preschool teachers and parents.

Study Site and Target Profile: The study was conducted in four government-owned preschools found in four Wordas (districts) including (Woreda 3, Woreda 4, Woreda 10 and Woreda 11) of Yeka sub-city, Addis Ababa. Each district has only one government owned preschool attached to primary schools. These preschools teach children in three levels including nursery, lower kindergarten (LKG), and upper kindergarten (UKG). The reason behind selecting these preschools as a research site was due to the researcher's close acquaintance of the gaps during practical attachment. There were 20 classrooms reserved for a total of 831 children enrolled in three levels of the KG, out of which 176 were enrolled in preschool one (PS1), 98 in preschool two (PS2), 282 in preschool three (PS3) and 275 in preschool four (PS4). Teachers were 34 in number that almost all of them are females and certified in the field of ECCE by taking one year of training.

Participants: The target population of the research consisted of teachers and children found in the target preschools. A sample size of eight female teacher participants was selected through purposive sampling technique for the interview purpose. Four of them were coordinators and the rest four were classroom teachers. The study considered teachers who have a minimum of one year of teaching experience in the preschools. The observation was also made on eight classrooms during teaching-learning processes. In addition, the whole preschool teachers and children observed during their outdoor activities.

Instruments: To collect relevant data about the problem under investigation, the researcher utilized two self-developed data collection tools: interview guide and observation checklist. A two section semi-structured interview guide was employed in the study. The first section was intended to gather data about the preschool profile and the participants' demographic characteristics, whereas the second section contains questions pertinent to the basic issues of the study including use of indigenous resources, parental involvement, and major challenges in preschool child care and education experiences.

Moreover, observation was conducted both in and out of the classrooms in order to gain insight on different indoor and outdoor facilities and materials, and the pattern of children-teacher interactions. The researcher prepared an observation note recording sheet including two columns; where the first column contains indicators for areas of observa-

tion whereas the second column was kept free to take field notes. Both data collection tools were prepared in consulting and reviewing international and national literature. Before the instruments were used in the main investigation, two doctoral students of developmental psychology were reviewing the tools to ensure the relevance of the items in the tools. Moreover, in order to check the easy understandability of interview questions, pilot test was conducted on two teachers working in other preschools.

Data Collection Procedures: After securing consent from the participants, appointments for interviews were arranged. As per the appointment, interviews with preschool teachers and coordinators were conducted in face-to-face interactions. The interviews were audio-visually recorded and each interview record was saved by a file name of the respective research sites. The non-participant observation was made in eight classrooms; two in each preschool to collect data about the teaching-learning processes and the status of learning and playing materials and facilities. In addition, observations were made on environments of the preschool compounds including the availability and accessibility of facilities (like playgrounds, sanitation, sleeping and meal rooms), playing and learning materials, and child-teachers interactions. All the observations were supported by photos and videos.

Data Analyses: The information obtained from two data sets were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis in an integrative manner. First, all the audio-visual recordings were listened to and observed over and over again. Then, in order to present the information systematically, the researcher prepared sixteen similar sheets of papers (eight for the interviews and the other eight for the observations) having two columns each: the left column contains areas of concern for interview and observation whereas the right column has open spaces for transcriptions. This is a kind of matrix display format that enabled the researcher to easily organize the data and identify patterns and regularities. Next, detailed transcriptions of the individual interviews and observations were done on the respective sheets. After that, all the initial transcriptions were re-examined and reviewed to gain a general sense of the data followed by re-organizing related segments of data into themes through coding and sorting systems against the research objectives. Subsequently, irrelevant comments, words and phrases were removed and the specific themes were coded by highlighting with different colored pens. The data were then analyzed in a way that they could give a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation.

III. Results

Facilities, Materials and Teaching-learning Practices in the Preschools

According to the observation made, the floors of all preschool classrooms are cemented but not covered with mats. There are many similar teacher made and computer printed pictures, posters, charts, and so on crowdedly posted on the wall which focuses on giving information much on letters and numbers and some on environmental science (animals, vegetables and fruits) which were not referred to during teaching practices.

In PS3 the classroom spaces are very narrow; children and materials sit in congested manner. The narrowness of the classrooms limited the movement of teachers to easily supervise children's activities and children to do different class activities actively and freely. The classrooms lack enough windows so that they are easily suffocated especially at mid-day. These problems are severe in PS3. For instance, the area of PS3 classrooms is around a 4x4 meter, containing 45 to 50 children in one class in which children cannot

stretch their legs and hands properly.

Shelves for putting teaching materials and children's bags are almost absent in PS3 and PS4. Most teaching materials and children's bags were laid on the floor, some were placed on the narrow tables, and some other materials were stored inappropriately in the cartoons. So, there are many broken and twisted materials that are covered with dust.

Chairs and tables in all preschools are children sized except UKG for in PS3. Yet, many children especially in PS3 have not benched. Except for PS2, three of the sample preschools have not separate eating rooms for children. The classrooms serve these purposes. Excluding PS1, there is one furnished separate sleeping room in each preschool primarily reserved for nursery children though it is not well ventilated and enough for all children. During an observation, one of the coordinators said: "Do not enter the sleeping room since there is bad smell." LKG and UKG children sleep in face-to-face arrangement on the table for an average of one hour.

Both the interview and observation data sources indicated that almost all of the teaching materials available in the classrooms are prepared by teachers from locally available and renewable resources. These materials are predominantly used to teach English and Amharic alphabets and numbers. It was observed that there was a lack of materials in different variety and type with regard to block design, puzzles, etc. which are important to teach creativity, thinking, and problem solving. Similarly, one of the interview participants indicated that "Children do not have the opportunity to design different pictures due to lack of puzzles and blocks. The available small numbers of such materials are locked in the store since they are not enough for children."

Locally written child supportive books are very small in number, old in editions and not purposely prepared for kindergarten children. Rather there are a number of foreign origin irrelevant books in the classrooms of three preschools. But, PS2 has a relatively large number of Amharic version books. There are no texts and teachers' guide books designed to help the implementation of the curriculum; the only available material is the syllabus. However, it was good to see one sign language teacher and one sign language guide book to teach children with hearing problems in PS4.

The interview and observation results have shown that the classroom activities of children dominantly focus on learning counting and letter identifications (numeracy and literacy) disregarding learning through play. Teachers were observed to use songs and riddles in order to bridge one session with the other though the content of riddles and songs were limited in type and variety and carry similar messages to teach children about letters and numbers.

Regarding the emphasis on language and mathematics, one of the participant teachers stated, "Though the syllabus is developed on the five core areas addressing children's development in physical, social, language, math dimensions, and introducing them go their environment, we give much attention to teaching them about letters and numbers." Two of the participants from PS3 and PS1 provided similar ideas of such practices. In the first place, they believed that children are able to learn and know about the other domains by themselves. In addition, there is pressure from the higher officials to focus on teaching Amharic, English and Math, thinking that this makes children ready for primary schools. The PS1 participant explained that; "the syllabus also guides us to make children able to read, write and construct sentences before joining grade one." It was also observed that UKG children learn basic mathematics operations including addition, subtraction and multiplication even using double numbers. "If this is not achieved our children will not be

accepted by primary schools” (stated by three participants).

It was also observed that children did not have much opportunity to draw different pictures rather few teachers sometimes gave them the opportunity to write numbers. One interviewee of PS3 also stated that “there are almost no indoor drawings and play activities, rather we most commonly focus on telling stories and riddles, and teaching letters and numbers. This is due to narrow classrooms and lack of materials.” Another participant from PS1 also revealed that “due to lack of time children get the opportunity to draw for one session per week.”

The observation result showed that in all preschools there were somehow child-centered approaches of teaching. Children got the opportunity to select songs, sing together, count and write alphabet letters and numbers. Many of the observed practitioners praise and motivate children when they respond correctly and behave properly. The teacher tries to address the needs of two deaf female children (in PS4). Teachers use Amharic songs to bridge one form of practice to another. Most teachers also teach the letters and numbers with a good analogy by associating them with real-life situations. However, some age-inappropriate practices were seen, for instance, LKG children are urged to identify numbers both in letters and words, which is difficult for children to tell in words (in PS4 and PS2). It was also observed that English songs are used at the nursery level (in PS4) and most children are idle to follow the teacher.

One focus area of the observation was the outdoor environment of the preschools. The playground of PS3 is very narrow which is not comparable to the number of children with full of dangerous dust and exposed to direct sunlight, whereas PS4 has a wider playground covered with grass and trees that provide shades for children during sunny days, but it was not leveled and has stones in it. PS2 has a relatively enough outdoor playfield but it is not leveled and suited for children’s play. PS1 has also leveled enough outdoor play space with a tree that provides shades for children.

Preschools have some outdoor playing materials used for rotating, balancing, slanting, climbing and hanging erected on their playgrounds. These materials are limited in variety and type which are not also proportional to the number of children. Of these playing materials, some are broken and out of function in these preschools. Hence, a child who wants to play with one of these materials has to wait for several minutes to get the chance to play with one of these materials. However, these problems are not observed in PS2.

There are no coordinators’ and staff’s offices (in PS1), the available offices in the rest of the preschools are very narrow and not well furnished for taking rests and doing their tasks. Rather, teachers are doing lesson plans and eating their lunch on benches in the classrooms. Regarding sanitary facilities, all preschools have water and toilet services, but it lacks enough close supervision during children use. Yet children are not supported by the guardians and teachers to use them.

Children’s outdoor play activities are not well supervised and facilitated by teachers and guardians. Most teachers and guardians are not engaged in children play, rather they stand idle or sit together while children play by themselves. It was observed that children play with dusts, fall down, fight each other and some isolated during outdoor play periods. However, it was observed that very few teachers and guardians tried to give little support to children at play.

According to the observation, many teachers and guardians use psychological punishments (shouting, and warning with pointing fingers) and corporal punishments (slapping and hitting with sticks) when children misbehave. It was also observed that many guardians and some teachers in these preschools carry sticks for these purposes in facilitating different activities of children such as hand washing, eating and sleeping. The content of some songs used in teaching also conveyed punishment oriented messages. In strengthening this observation, one of the interviewee teachers from PS3 stated that “we have no intimate relationship with children, we have a student-teacher relationship like in the upper grades.”

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge in Preschool Program

During an interview with teachers, the researcher posed the question; where do you get teaching aids, stories, riddles, and playing materials,.? All of the respondents asserted that almost all of the teaching aids are prepared by teachers of the preschools using locally available materials in the surroundings including papers, plastics, cartoons, stones, sand, wood, etc. This was also confirmed by the observation that the available materials were prepared based on the local context into consideration though they are not stored in proper ways due to lack of extra rooms and shelves. However, some of the participants from the three preschools disclosed that the preschools got some foreign origin materials and books from support organizations. It has also been observed that there were many books written English and very few in Amharic in the classrooms of the preschools. But in PS2 there is a relatively more Amharic written books though they are not sufficient to use.

When the researcher raised the question; ‘there is more foreign origin English books than Amharic versions, what do you do with them?’ One of the interviewees from PS4 remarked that “we know that children cannot read English, but we give them to see different colorful pictures.” Another teacher from SP3 said; “we give these books as a reward to the children when they perform better.” The three teachers further explained that they have no access to text books, teachers’ guide and supportive indigenous books written on riddles, songs, poems, stories, etc. Rather they teach children about these issues from what they knew and heard about. Interview of two participants and the observation result also indicated that some of the available story books are not colorful/attractive, recent and age appropriate. It was also assured through observation that the only material easily available to teachers in these preschools is the syllabus of the ECCE program. “In order to narrow these gaps my previous colleague and me in collaboration with one professional instructor wrote Amharic version books and publish with the help of support organizations” (stated by PS1 coordinator).

There was another question requesting participants to explain the integration of indigenous issues (like local stories, games, songs, music, dance, proverbs, poems, locally produced playing materials, etc.) in to the preschool program. One of the participants from PS3 stated that “though we tried to prepare many teaching materials from locally available sources and get some story books from the primary school library, we faced problems in making them indigenized especially in the areas of stories, dance, music, songs and games.” Similarly, another participant from the same preschool admitted that “the level of integrating indigenous issues such as proverbs, music, games, poems, and the like is very low.” In strengthening this, one of the interviewees from PS4 said: “children watch foreign origin films and play the piano once a week based on the lesson plan.” On the other hand participants of PS1 and PS2 pointed out that there are no local musical instruments used to teach local music and dance, hence the practice is very rare and occasional.

The other question forwarded to the participants was related to the incorporation of important local societal issues including cooperation, helping, sharing, and the like in the preschool program and teaching practices. Most of the participants indicated that there is an effort to teach children about important local societal values through different means. For instance, the coordinator of PS4 pointed out that:

Teaching children about these issues is included in the syllabus, so teachers plan and teach accordingly. Therefore, teachers try to give the opportunity for children to learn about indigenous societal values through role play and drama.' In support of this, one of PS2 participant indicated that 'we teach children such important societal values by giving chance for children to role play as teachers, families, health service providers, etc.' 'But such practices are not at the expected level' (said by another participant of PS2).

The participant in PS4 revealed that:

we attempted to teach such issues by making children to play together with the same material by sharing, collaborating and helping each other.' In addition, at this time we teach children to love, share, and helping each other. Moreover, we select children who do home works to bring the other children's bags from the collection during meal times; thus children learn respect, obeying rules, and collaboration beyond encouraging their good habit of doing homework. But it is not at the expected level.

On the other hand, one of the participants commented surprisingly: "preschool children are below the age of seven, so how can we teach about cooperation, helping, sharing and related issues?"

Parental Involvement in Preschool Education

Questions addressing parental involvement in their children's preschool education were raised to the participants during interview. In this regard, almost all of the participants indicated that the involvement of parents is very minimal. The majority of the parents do not know the status (needs, achievements, gaps, etc.) of their children in the preschools. Almost all of the participants explained that low level of parental education and awareness, and being busy at work are the common reasons for parents' limited involvement in their children's education. For instance, one of the interviewees said;

The participation of parents in their children's learning both in the home and preschool is very low. Most of the parents do not give attention to their children learning. Because they are less educated though there are some educated parents who participate in their children's learning. I can say that a maximum of 15% of parents may involve in their children's education. These parents' participation is also more or less limited to school based activities like planting trees, attending meetings, and contributing money to level the outdoor playground of children. Now, the participation of these parents is almost absent due to the disagreement with the school administration since the money they contributed previously was not used for the intended purpose.

One coordinator participant also gives a reason in a similar way; “most parents who send their children to preschool are non-educated and have low awareness about the importance of their involvement. Even, when teachers send messages through communication books, many parents don’t reply and attribute this to their illiteracy and busyness.”

The third participant (coordinator) further stated; “parental involvement in children’s education is invisible and not at the expected level since most of the parents have low income who strives for fulfilling children’s basic needs than giving time to follow up their children’s learning.”

The researcher raised specific questions regarding how parents meet and make follow up of their children’s learning. Participants from all preschools revealed that they have general meetings with parents three times per year (at the beginning, mid and end of the year) to discuss agendas focusing on children’s learning, disciplining, and preschool development. The coordinators showed that teachers may call parents to meet occasionally when problems or gaps are observed in their children, some may come and consult the teachers. One of the coordinators stated that “When parents are called to come to the preschool to discuss problems observed on their children, they report their problems instead of the children’s learning needs and gaps.”

Most of the interview participants agreed that many of the parents are not eager to consult preschool teachers in order to make follow ups and know their children’s overall achievements and gaps. In line with this, one of the participant teachers from PS4 reported that: Most parents are daily laborers and have low income, hence, they are primarily engaged in activities to secure their basic needs. So, it is difficult for me to say that they give due attention to their children’s education though there are some parents who occasionally ask teachers about the status of their children.

Similarly, PS4 coordinator explained that “many parents do not know the preschool: what is available and what is not. They assume that preschools have everything and they do not understand the shortages. When there are gaps, parents become aggressive and initiate conflicts with us.” Both participants of PS1 indicated that parents consider teaching children as a sole responsibility of teachers. “But without parents’ involvement, teachers’ effort to teach children is like clamping with one hand” (stated by the PS1 coordinator).

Three of the participants from PS1 and PS2 also indicated that when they give homework to children, many parent do not see, follow up and support their children to do it. When they are called to consult teachers for discussion, they are not volunteered to come. On the other hand, some parents do their children’s homework or make other students to do it for them.

Except PS2, all participants from three preschools revealed that sending messages to parents through communication books is the most common way to communicate the status of their children and make parents involve in their children’s learning. One of them explained; “Some parents try to respond accordingly. Conversely, some other parents do not send their feedback timely and they attribute this to shortage of time to give feedback since they return home from work late in the night.”

Two questions were presented to the participants in order to pin point some of the activities and the mechanisms to invite parents to engage in their children’s education. Concerning this issue, one participant teacher from PS4 said that:

The parents' association established this year together with us started to work on fundraising activities by finding funding organizations in order to support children who are not able to bring food and those who have no shoes and uniforms. In addition, some of the parents are responsive and participate in preschool compound cleaning and beautifying. But involvement in children's academics is minimal. They are not very much close to teachers to know gaps and help their children. This is due to illiteracy and low level of awareness.

Moreover, PS4 coordinator pointed out that:

We invite parents to participate in preschool activities like campus beautification including cleaning, planting trees and flowers. When parents are called for such activities, most parents do not show up (around one-fourth of them participate in such activities). We do not pressurize them to come, because most of the parents lead a hand-to-mouth life. Surprisingly, there are some parents who think that the preschool gives support to their children in providing food. Hence, parents are not close to teachers and don't follow up their children's needs, gaps, and achievements in the preschool.

One final question was raised to the participants about the importance of involving parents in their children preschool learning. There was no doubt, all of the participants about the advantage of parental involvement in children education. The interviewee teacher from PS3 indicated that "parental involvement is helpful to bridge the home and preschool contexts so that we can easily communicate about the problems, gaps and achievements of children and together we can devise mechanisms on how to support children in their overall development."

Likewise, the coordinator of PS4 showed that parental involvement in their children's learning is helpful for teachers, parents and children. She further explained that 'teachers may not succeed in changing children without parental involvement. When parents are actively involved, they can understand every problem of the preschool and their children there by collaborating with us to narrow the gaps, disciplining and scaffolding children.'

Similarly, one teacher from PS4 also added;

If parents are involved in children's education, we can shape children's behavior and equip them with the necessary knowledge in appropriate ways. Teachers try to shape children within the five working days, but children may come with new behavior learned inappropriately in the weekend. But, if parents involve and collaborate with us, we can mold children significantly. This is beneficial to children to be successful and ready for primary school in all domains of development. Since, early years in life are the foundation ages, teachers and parents should collaborate each other to equip children with the basic knowledge and skills that further make them important citizens for their country at large.

Another teacher indicated that parental engagement in children's learning has multiple advantages. She identified four basic benefits:

1) It opens the opportunity for parents to know the status of facilities and materials so that they can contribute for the preschool with no pressure from teachers and administrators. 2) It is beneficial for parents to be aware of the

problems observed on their children and their responsibilities on how to care and support them. 3) It is helpful for teachers to have a clear understanding of the status of children and they can provide appropriate services accordingly. 4) It is valuable to make parents and teachers on the same page about the overall developmental achievements and gaps of the children both at home and preschool so that we can raise the children in constructive ways.

Major Challenges in the Implementation of Preschool Programs

Challenges Related to Teaching Facilities and Materials: All of the interviewees indicated that though teachers try to narrow down the problems by preparing teaching materials from locally available sources, there are still shortages of facilities (classrooms, separate sleeping and eating rooms, rest/staff offices, tables, chairs and shelves) and teaching, learning and playing inputs and/or materials such as books, blocks, and puzzles. One of the participants said; “despite the fact that we tried to prepare teaching materials by ourselves, they are not be enough to teach children in a way that addresses all domains of development.”

Uncomfortably of outdoor play grounds in three preschools was another major challenge as was mentioned by most participants of the study. The playground in PS4 has stones and it is not leveled; the playground in SP is narrow and has dusts whereas the playfield in PS2 is not leveled and covered with sandy soils. Participants of these preschools revealed that the playgrounds are uncomfortable and hazardous for children.

Parent Related Challenges: Almost all of the interview participants indicated that there is a very low level of parental involvement in their children’s preschool education. Many of the participants pointed out that parents strive for fulfilling basic needs of their children than giving due attention to their learning. So, parents follow up and support for their children’s care and learning is very minimal. That is, parents are not close enough to teachers and don’t follow up their children’s achievements, problems, and requirements.

Two participants of PS4 and PS2 complained that failure to bring and take children to the preschool on time is another challenge. The PS4 respondent further said that “there are many parents who bring their children to the preschool compound too early in the morning before the entrance time. There are also parents who do not take their children on time in the afternoon.”

As three participant teachers from PS1, PS2 and PS4 revealed parental conflicts and familial poverty are additional challenges. The PS4 participant stated that:

Some children come to the preschool being psychologically disturbed due to their parental conflict. In addition, some children come with no food for their breakfast and lunch due to poverty of their families. There are also families who are not able to fulfill preschool learning requirements like stationeries for their children.

Administration Related Challenges: The majority of the interview participants specified that the absence of preschools’ decentralized administration and budget system created problems to fulfill the necessary facilities and materials though they tried to practice with what already exists. The preschools do not have their own separate administra-

tion; rather, they are under the administration of the primary schools that inhibit to fulfill the necessary requirements for the preschools.

Three of the participant teachers from PS1, PS2 and PS3 pointed out that both the administrators and supervisors do not have enough knowledge about the preschool activities. One of these participants stated that:

They intervene inappropriately on teachers' professional practices of the teaching-learning process and exert their pressure on teachers and make them to perform their obligations without convincing them to do so.' For instance, for these authorized individuals play is not considered as a means for teaching children. When we play with children they consider us as not working. Work for them is teaching language and math, that is why we focus on teaching children about letters and numbers.

She further justified that “supervisors compare us with the private preschools though the two are different settings where the private preschools use their own curriculum. Surprisingly, the supervisors consider private preschool children as high achievers since they speak better English than our children.” Low level of supervision and appropriate professional support from the higher officials is also a problem as mentioned by many participants of the study. “We are supervised like primary schools and not by professionals” (stated by one participant).

Most revealed that the turnover of teachers is another big challenge for preschools. These participants indicated that experienced teachers resign frequently when they upgrade their qualification to a diploma level. Thus, the preschools are obliged to recruit beginner teachers. “This is a challenge since new comers are beginners for everything in the preschool” (stated by one teacher). Three of the coordinators indicated that the government gives less attention to preschool teachers though there is much devotion, effort, and fatigue of preschool teachers in caring and teaching children than primary school teachers. According to two preschool coordinators, this is manifested by three years minimum requirement for salary increment; and no consideration of preschool experiences when teachers are upgraded to primary schools.

Some of the participants also revealed that gaps in the syllabus are also another challenge. In line with this one of the participants stated that:

We know that preschool children learn simple contents through play to stimulate and prepare them for primary school. But the syllabus guides us to teach children to be able to read, write, make simple sentences, and know basic mathematical skills before they join the primary school. Hence, we teach them above their ability even contents that are not given at grade one. When children join grade one they similar content as UKG.

It was also observed that UKG children learn basic mathematics including addition, subtraction and multiplication even using double numbers. “If this is not achieved our children will not be accepted by primary schools” (stated by three participants).

Shortage of human resources especially guardians and cleaners makes teachers overloaded by multiple works including cleaning, feeding, and support children in sleeping besides teaching children which restricts teachers to get rest.

IV. Discussion

Facilities, Materials and Teaching-learning Practices in the Preschools: The first objective of the research was looking at the preschools' setting in terms of availability and accessibility of resources and provisions (teaching-learning practices). In this regard, scientific evidences has shown that good quality of preschool education includes adequate infrastructures (ILO, 2012) as well as sufficient and safe physical spaces equipped with aesthetically varied play materials (Sparling et al., 2007; Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2002).

However, the current research finding uncovered that the classrooms of the preschools (especially in PS3) are narrow and accommodate children beyond their capacity, not well ventilated, unpainted walls with crowdedly posted similar charts and pictures, and without enough tables and shelves. It is highly probable that this nature of the classrooms affect child-teacher interactions in caring and teaching of children in the preschools. For instance, the narrowness of the classrooms and containing many children beyond its capacity was restricting the movement of teachers to properly supervise children's class activities. This also possibly limits developmentally appropriate practices that are required in the preschool program.

In addition, large number of children per class coupled with lack of windows (especially in PS3) creates suffocations that further affect children's alertness in the classroom interactions. Teaching aids as well as playing materials are also limited in number and variety to teach children in a way that addresses their holistic development. Most of these materials are broken, twisted, and stored inappropriately on the floor and dusty cartoons due to lack of shelves. These situations of the classroom environment of the preschools seem to minimize its attractiveness for children as well as teachers.

It is also observed that there are many children particularly in PS2 with no benches and LKG and UKG children in PS3 and PS4 preschools are requested to take one hour of sleep on tables. That is, children sit on their chairs and lay their heads on the benches to take nap. From this finding, one can think of how much this is uncomfortable for children to rest properly. In principle, it is recommended that preschool children should get at least one hour daytime nap, but this becomes difficult because of the absence of furnished and relaxed rooms comfortable for children. Hence, it would be sensible to say that these children cannot get enough naps in the day time which may prohibits them from being active and happy in playing and exploring their environment during their stay in the preschool. Children's positioning during their sleep may also have long term physiological problems.

All these findings are consistent with Tirusew et al. (2009) who indicated that most of the studied preschools in Ethiopia including Addis Ababa are characterized by overcrowded classrooms with a lack of ventilation, too many stimuli which either destruct or confuse children, and lack of areas for children to get a nap. This shows that constraints observed before seven years are still prevalent problems. However, one interesting thing to note in the current research finding is that most of the available chairs and tables in all preschools are child-sized.

When it comes to materials, consistent with several previous research evidences (ILO, 2012; Tirusew et al., 2009; Tsegai, 2015; UNESCO-IICBA, 2010), the result of the current

study demonstrated that there is a shortage of story books, materials such as toys in different varieties and types especially related to block design, puzzles, drawing, sand, water etc. which are crucial to teach children creativity, thinking, and problem solving. There are also very small numbers of old and age inappropriate Amharic written reference books and one syllabus per each class. Supportive books like teachers' guide are important to assist the implementation of the syllabus are non-existent in the preschools. However, one unique finding in the present research is that one sign language guide book and one sign language teacher are available to teach children with hearing problems. This seems that some attention is given to address the needs of those children with disabilities.

According to ECEACEA (2009), MoE, MoH and MoWA (2010a) and ECDLCSA (2012), the preschool program should be designed in a way that promotes the holistic development of children. But the result of this research revealed that the available teaching materials and classroom practices of the preschools dominantly focus on teaching formal academic issues i.e. counting numbers and identifying alphabets. Consistent with this finding, past evidences showed that preschool children are placed in a well-structured formal instructional learning and due emphasis was given to teach them literacy than social-emotional skills (Kassahun, 2013). Use of riddles and songs are limited in type and variety and their contents carry similar messages (teaching children about letters and numbers). One of the interview participants indicated that though the syllabus of the preschool has been prepared to address all domains of children's development, children's learning focuses on letters and numbers due to teachers' belief that children can learn other domains by themselves and the pressure from the higher officials in thinking this practice make children better ready for formal schooling. This shows that there is a gap in awareness among preschool teachers and officials towards the holistic nature of children's readiness for primary school.

Similar to Tsegai (2015) this research revealed that play based approach to teaching and learning is less visible in the classrooms. This contradicts with what is indicated in the policy framework, in which play-oriented approach to teaching is taken as the basic means of preschool children learning.

Previous researches (Kassahun, 2013; Tirusew et al., 2009) disclosed that teacher-centered styles of teaching are the main manifestations of most Ethiopian preschools. Partly contrary to these evidences, the observation of the present research revealed that child-centered approaches to teaching are more practiced in the preschools in which children get the opportunity to actively participate in selecting songs, sing together, count and write letters and numbers. The possible explanation for this discrepancy might be due to small coverage of the study sites. It could also be attributed to teachers' training and experiences.

Three of the observed teachers verbally praise and motivate children when they respond to questions correctly and behave properly; and teach letters and numbers with good analogy through associating them with real life situations. Though this is the case, some age inappropriate practices are seen in preschool classrooms. For instance in PS2, LKG children are urged to identify numbers both in letters and words; they are difficult for children to read in words; and English songs are also used at nursery level and most children were idle because they were unable to follow the teacher.

Moreover, many of the teachers and guardians use corporal punishments (slapping and hitting with sticks) and psychological punishments (shouting, hesitation and warning with pointing fingers and using sticks) as a means to correct children when they misbehave in different activities such as in learning, hand washing, eating, and sleeping which

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Regarding the environment of the preschools' external to the classrooms, a large body of literature (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2002; MoE, MoH & MoWA, 2010a; Sparling et al., 2007) documented that preschools should have enough and safe outdoor playgrounds equipped with variety of sufficient play materials comfortable for children. Even if this should be the case, the current research pointed out that the play space of PS3 was very narrow, covered with dangerous dusts and exposed to direct sunlight, and PS4's was not leveled having many stones though the playground is relatively wider and covered with grass and trees that provide shades for children during sunny days. PS2 has relatively enough but unsuitable outdoor playfield for the children play whereas PS1 has enough and leveled outdoor play space with a tree that provides shades for children. These gaps probably expose children to different health problems.

It is good that all preschools have some outdoor playing materials erected on their playgrounds used for rotating, balancing, slanting, climbing and hanging. However, these materials are limited in variety and number (except PS2), of which some are broken and out of function so that children do not get adequate opportunity to play through these materials. Outdoor play activities of children are also less supervised and facilitated by teachers and guardians. This can be one manifestation of the less emphasis on using play as a main teaching approach in these preschools. Uncomfortability of the playgrounds may also limit teachers' engagement in facilitating children's play.

When it comes to sanitary facilities, contrary to the previous research (Tirusew et al., 2002) all preschools have water supply, child-sized chairs and cleanly kept latrine holes. But they lack close supervision of teachers and guardians in using them.

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge in Preschool Program: The wealth of evidences (MoE, MoH & MoWA, 2010a; ECDLCSA, 2012; Kassahun, 2013; Klein, 1996; Memphir City Schools, 2013; Nsameng, 2010; Pence & Shafer, 2006; Soudee, 2009; Sagnia, 2004; Tirusew et al., 2009) have suggested that the program of preschools become effective if it builds on considering the local contexts. Supporting these literature, the current research revealed that most of the available teaching materials are developed from easily available local raw materials by the preschool teachers in consideration with the local context. Participants of the present study are agreed about the importance of integrating indigenous knowledge to the preschool program.

Participants maintained that teachers have tried to incorporate local societal issues such as collaboration, sharing, loving, helping one another, respecting, obeying rules, etc. in the preschool teaching practices by making children to play with the same materials, give food to those who have not, serve others in giving their bags, etc. These findings are somehow contrary to Soudee (2009), ECDLCSA (2012) and Kassahun (2013) who showed the presence of very minimal attention of local cultural values and use of indigenous knowledge in African preschools. Unlike Gesesse (2007) and Kassahun (2013) the target preschools in this study use the local language (Amharic) than English as a medium of instruction. This contradiction may be due to the nature of the preschools. Since the sample preschools are owned by the government, they obliged to implement the government curriculum.

However, the participants admitted that the integration of indigenous issues in ECCE is found to be at a lower degree particularly in the areas of traditional dance, music, songs,

riddles, poems, proverbs, stories and games. As to the finding, one of the manifestations for the low level of integration of these indigenous ingredients was the presence of many English written books used by teachers to show children pictures, which corroborates with Gesesse (2007) who reported that exposure of children to foreign origin films, and plays like piano instead of making children observe Amharic films, and play local instruments.

Parental Involvement in Children’s Preschool Education: A substantial body of research pointed out that the interconnection between the home and the school (Bronfenbrenner as cited in Cardona et al., 2012), and parental deep involvement is highly critical to promote preschool children’s success (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2002) in multiple dimensions of development including academic achievement (MoE, MoH & MoWA, 2010a; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006; Maphoso & Mahlo, 2014; Nokali et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2004), social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment (Dewar, 2011) by addressing problem behaviors (Nokali et al., 2010). Regarding this, all of the respondents of the current researches are highly recognized the multifaceted advantage of involving parents in their children preschool learning. But like the previous research (ECEACEA, 2009; Ayele & Befekadu, 2008; Tirussew et al., 2009), the present study disclosed that the involvement of parents in their children’s preschool education is very low. Interview participants indicated that majority of the parents do not come to the preschool in order to know and make follow ups about the gaps and the achievements of the preschools and their children.

Consistent with the earlier evidence (ECEACEA, 2009), this research finding pin pointed that general meetings are the common form of contact between parents and the teachers in order to discuss children’s learning, disciplining, and preschool development. In addition, participants from three preschools except PS1 indicated that sending message through communication book to parents is another regular means of providing information to the parents about the status of their children in the preschool.

Though this is the case, respondents indicated that some parents involve only in preschool based volunteer activities such as campus beautification including cleaning, planting trees and flowers, fencing the compound, and fundraising activities. This may be a biased view because all the participants are only teachers so that teachers cannot know whatever parents do in the home to assist their children’s preschool learning. So, this needs further investigation. Consistent with Ayele and Befekadu (2008), Baker (1997) and Stephinah (2014), the current research result showed that parental low level of education, less awareness about the importance of their involvement, low income and being busy in fulfilling their basic needs, and disagreement with the preschool administration are the basic factors limiting the involvement of parents in their children’s preschool education.

Major Challenges in the Implementation of Preschool Program: One of the major objectives of this study was to identify the major challenges in the practice of preschools. The findings revealed that the basic problems are related to facilities and materials, parents, and administration. Like the previous research (ILO, 2012; Tirussew et al., 2009; Tsegai, 2015; UNESCO-IICBA, 2010), the present study pointed out that shortage of basic infrastructures (lack of and narrowness of classrooms), facilities (lack of tables, chairs and shelves), and teaching, learning and playing materials such as books, toys, blocks, puzzles and other related supplies necessary to teach children about all domains of development are the main challenges of the preschools. Lack of adequate spaces, neatness, and safety problems of the playgrounds in three preschools

except PS1 are also other major barriers for the practices. With a high probability, these situations may expose children to different health problems.

Minimal parental involvement in their children's preschool education is identified as another problem facing these preschools. In strengthening this, UNESCO-IICBA (2010) indicated that limited or absence of parental participation among Ethiopian ECE programs was identified as one of the challenges in the implementation. In addition, as identified by some participants of the present study parents failed to bring and take children on time (bringing early and taking late), parental conflicts that make children psychologically disturbed and familial poverty to fulfill their children's food and preschool requirements are additional problems impeding the practices in these preschools.

In line with the pieces of evidence (Tirussew et al., 2009; UNESCO-IICBA, 2010) and somehow contrary to suggestions of the policy framework (MoE, MoH & MoWA, 2010a), the current research also disclosed that the absence of preschools' decentralized budget system and administration, low level of professional supervision and support, inappropriate interventions of supervisors on teachers' professional practices of teaching-learning process, contradiction of what is written in the syllabus with the practice, and shortage of enough human resources are also identified as major problems affecting the implementation of preschool programs.

Experienced teachers' turnover was another challenge cited by the participants of the research. This is due to the less attention of the government and the administrators towards the preschools and its teachers since participants indicated that first attention is given to the primary school than the preschool. This contradicts the logic and reality that the opposite should be true. Hence, it is highly probable that this minimizes the work motivation of the teachers.

Gaps in the policy and syllabus are also an extra challenge. The policy framework considers preschool children at the level of pre-writing and pre-reading period (MoE, MoH & MoWA, 2010a). But teachers the target preschools in this study teach the children how to read, write, make sentences, and know basic mathematics (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) before their graduation from preschool and join grade one since the syllabus guides them to do it. This shows that there seems to be a contradiction between the policy framework and the syllabus which creates confusion on practitioners. Presenting this kind of content for children may also make them confused and dislike their early preschool experiences.

V. Conclusions

It is evident from this study that the situations of the classrooms and playgrounds in the target preschools are less comfortable and appealing since they are not designed in a way that could easily promote child care, learning and play activities.

Children of the preschools are being placed in a very structured form of formal teaching with a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy provided through inclination to a child-centered approach of teaching. It is also highly apparent that most of the available teaching and learning materials are designed to teach children numbers and letters. However, less attention given to motor and socio-emotional dimensions and play-oriented approach to learning is devalued. The variety and type of indoor and outdoor materials are also not sufficient enough to aid all domains of children's development. This implies that

the practices and resources of the preschools fail to address the holistic nature of children development. With regard to the climate of classroom interaction, there is an attempt to use good analogy of teaching, motivating children to strengthen proper behavior and enable children to actively involve in their learning. But teachers frequently use physical and psychological punishment as a major means to correct the misbehavior of children in the preschools.

It can be drawn from the study that there is a promising beginning of integrating indigenous knowledge in the preschool programs. Teachers have shown their effort and commitment to prepare many of the teaching, learning and play materials from locally available resources and use these materials in the day-to-day preschool practices. Yet, there is still the influence of foreign books, films, musical instruments, and the level of incorporating traditional local games, dances, music, songs, proverbs, poems, stories and valuable societal values into the preschools is not at the expected level.

It is understood from the findings of the study that parental involvement in their children's preschool education is minimal. Some parental involvements are mostly dominated by teacher initiated involvement and are restricted to preschool based activities organized once or twice a year which is secondary to the learning arena of children than direct child based academic assistances and follow up of the overall developmental status of their children. Parents and teachers have limited face-to-face communications in which the common means of contact between them is information provisions through communication books and general meetings held quarterly in the year. In such instances, the response of the parents is also very limited. Low level of awareness, illiteracy and poverty are the major reasons for the weak involvement of parents in their children's preschool learning.

Lack of basic facilities and materials helpful to teach children that contribute for their holistic development especially in the areas of socio-emotional, motor, creativity, thinking and problem solving skills, uncomfortable playgrounds, minimal level of parental involvement, familial poverty to fulfill their children's basic needs and preschool requirements; parental conflict creating psychological disturbance on children; failure to respect children's entrance and exist time, lack of decentralized administration and budget systems, lack of professional supervision and support, inappropriate interventions of the administrators and supervisors; and turnover of experienced teachers, gaps in the syllabus and shortage of human resources are found to be the major challenges for the effective implementation of the ECCE programs which compromises its quality.

Generally, the good practices of the preschools include trying to prepare local learning materials, inclination to focus on child-centered approach of teaching, making the available chairs and tables child-sized, assignment of a sign language teacher for deaf children, writing and publishing context sensitive books, etc. On the other hand, places for children's sleeping and playing appear to be not well organized and seriously considered.

IV. Recommendations

By virtue of recognizing the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been forwarded.

- In the first place, the effort and commitment of teachers to prepare indigenous teaching, learning and play materials from easily available local resources should be appreciated. This practice should be supported by further professional training and experience sharing which is helpful for producing and integrating more materials fairly promote all domains of children development. The sub-city education office is also responsible to fulfill the necessary resources to develop these materials alongside providing learning materials for the practice.
- Teachers should further strengthen child-centered approach of teaching for giving a reasonable balance among the practices that contribute for all domains (physical, cognitive and socio-emotional) of development using play oriented learning as a main mode of teaching. Hence, teachers should give the opportunity for children to engage in different form of play and be very close to supervise and facilitate children's indoor and outdoor play activities. The preschool is also responsible to mobilize the community in order to make the available outdoor playgrounds safe and comfortable for children to play. Teachers should establish and maintain high quality interactions with children characterized by emotionally sensitive, supportive, stimulating and scaffolding learning conditions; and use alternative ways of negative punishments as means to correct the misbehavior of children than positive punishments.
- Preschool administrators, coordinators and teachers should work together and design appropriate systems on how to easily incorporate traditional local games, dances, music, songs, proverbs, poems, and stories and societal values into the preschool's programs. In this regard, the sub-city education office is also responsible to help the practitioners by organizing trainings and discussion forums. Professionals should also engage in writing different indigenous books helpful to aid the implementation of the preschool programs.
- Children's care and education is a shared venture. Hence, parents and teachers need to work cooperatively for the better achievement of children. So, it is recommended that teachers should enhance the awareness of parents about the importance of their involvement in preschool- and home-based children's learning activities through different means including taking part in different events (during children registration, welcoming day, holidays, parent days, children's graduations), regular meetings, volunteering activities, training and discussion programs. Establishing and strengthening parent-teacher associations to activate the participation of parents and mediating between parents and teachers seems to be vital too.
- Ministry of education should set clear standards expected at the preschool level with regard to child-class and child-teacher ratios, facilities and materials. The ministry should also establish a decentralized administration and allocate separate budget for the preschools, and set systems for preschool teachers' professional development/salary increment in order to retain them in the preschools. The woreda education office is also responsible to make close supervision and provide professional support by assigning individuals who have enough training and better level of awareness about preschool activities.

- The nature of this study was qualitative in that interview and observation instruments were used to collect data from four preschools by consulting a small number of teachers. This may not give an accurate picture of the issue under investigation. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the other sites. Thus, it is recommended that future studies in similar issues should consider more preschools, large number of participants inclusive of teachers, parents, children, and officials, and collecting data using a number of instruments for triangulation and thereby increasing the reliability and accuracy of the data.

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