
Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia: Present Practices and Future Directions

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Abstract: Over the past several centuries worldwide, in most cases, only children of the nobilities were sent to schools with the intention of sharpening their abilities and preparing them for future leadership. But in the modern era, education is formally recognized as a human right for every individual, irrespective of the individual's ability, disability, age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other forms of differences. As a modern phenomenon, early childhood education is practiced in Ethiopia. With the opportunities and challenges, the practice of early childhood education continues to grow in coverage and participation. The current Ethiopian government, with the support of UNICEF, has drafted strategic operational plan and guidelines for early childhood care and education, and national policy framework for early childhood care and education. Access to early childhood education is growing over the years. Currently, government, private owners, NGOs, communities, and religious organizations are running 'O' class, child to child and kindergarten programs and playing their part in educating children. Major challenges of the Ethiopian ECE are environment and physical space, curriculum content and pedagogy, early childhood educators and caregivers, partnership with families and communities and access to young children with special needs. In order to improve the practices, the future preschools of Ethiopia should work towards having (1) philosophies and goals, (2) high quality physical environments, (3) developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculum, (4) attention to basic and special needs, (5) respect for families and communities, (6) professionally prepared teachers and staff, and (7) rigorous program evaluation.

Key words: early childhood education (ECE); kindergarten, 'O' class; child-to-child; quality of ECE

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Introduction

Over the past several centuries worldwide, in most cases, only children of the nobilities were sent to schools with the intention of sharpening their abilities and preparing them for future leadership. The experience in Ethiopia was that sons of the affluent went to church schools while the large majority of peasant children did not go as their parents needed them to help in the farm (Girma, 1967). But in the modern era, education has been formally recognized as a human right for every individual, irrespective of the individual's ability, disability, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and other forms of differences. Every child has the right to education and education as a human right has been getting the attention it merits since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (UNCRC, 1989). The declaration of Education for All (EFA) and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) strengthened education of young children as a right and as a means of development (UNESCO, 1990; 2000).

Educating children is understood these days as a human right and a wise investment too (ILO, 2012). It is now widely accepted that early childhood education (ECE) contributes a lot to the holistic development of children and its importance has been convincingly proved. For example, children with low socioeconomic status (SES) but having attended preschools benefited from long- and short-term effects of early childhood education (e.g., Caughy, DiPietro and Strobino, 1994). Early childhood education, then, appears to be important for children of Africa as they are, by and large, at economic disadvantages, and for poverty has been a challenge for them (Pence, Evans, and Garcia, 2008), and the Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of absolute child poverty in the world. They, therefore, deserve intense interventions in the form ECE (Garcia, Virata and Dunkelberg, 2008)

Objectives and Methods

Objectives

The objectives of this review based study are threefold: 1) It is quite obvious that there is scant literature in the area of early childhood education in the Ethiopian context. This review would then add to the existing literature. 2) It would inform what has been done so far in ECE and highlighted the programs and challenges of ECE. 3) After having addressed the present practice, it suggests a framework as future directions about what should be done to have quality ECE practice.

Methods

To achieve the objectives, the review was framed into present practices and future directions. In the present practices, opportunities, challenges and programs are addressed. In the future directions, a framework for quality ECE is suggested. The framework is discussed in line with (1) philosophies and goals, (2) high quality physical environments, (3) developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculum, (4) attention to basic and special needs, (5) respect for families and communities, (6) professionally prepared teachers and staff, and (7) rigorous program evaluation. They are found to be salient and used as indicators of program quality in the early childhood education (Jalongo, Fennimore, Pattinaik, Laverick, Brewster and Mutuku, 2004).

Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia: Present Practices

The review of present practices of early childhood education in Ethiopia focuses on access, the practices (input, processes outcome), achievements, opportunities and challenges since 1991 to the present. This period is marked by the formulation of education and training policy in 1994.

Policy, Program and Strategic Opportunities

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) stated that all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land (Article 9 (4)). In order to address the right to education, the FDRE has developed an Education and Training Policy in 1991 (FDRE, 1994) which stated the nature of education and training in Ethiopia. The Government continued its effort to educate children by committing itself to the international and national declarations, policies, legislations and strategies. The Education for All, (UNESCO, 1990; 2000), the United Nation's Millennium declaration on Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2000) and the Ethiopian Government Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs I, II, III, IV, V) are worth mentioning.

The international declarations and frameworks clearly support the importance of early childhood education and encourage investment in children, [*one of the six goals established in The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All was expanding early childhood care and education*]. In the Education and Training Policy document, early childhood education was addressed in the Educational Structure 3.2.1 as *...kindergarten will focus on all rounded development of the child in preparation for formal schooling...p.14* (FDRE, 1994).

Since 2010, ECE has been getting due attention and some changes have been observed. To mention some, ESDP IV has given emphasis to ECE (Tsegai, 2015). The Ethiopian government, with the support of UNICEF, has drafted strategic operational plan and guidelines for early childhood care and education (ECCE) (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010a), and national policy framework for early childhood care and education (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010b) to inform the implementation of ECCE. More importantly, ECCE has become one of the priority areas in

education in ESDP V (MoE, 2016). The policy and strategy changes lead to considerable access to ECE at the national level.

'O' class, Child to child and Kindergarten Programs

Government, private owners, NGOs, communities, and faith-based organizations have been running 'O' class, child-to-child and Kindergarten programs and playing their part in educating children (MoE, 2016). However, the enrollment of young children in early childhood education is still negligible compared to the number of children eligible for it in Ethiopia even after the introduction of O-class and child-to-child programs.

The 'O' class and child-to-child programs are introduced to fill the access gaps in areas where kindergartens are not available mainly in rural areas. But the most benefiting approach could be the kindergarten program. As it is admitted in ESDP V (ESDP V, 2015), children who had three years of kindergarten experience were better prepared to start regular school than children who had received one year of O-class or Child-to-Child programs. A concern stated in ESDP V on the pattern of ECCE expansion is alarming that children from all walks of life will not benefit equally on the three approaches stated above. A vivid explanation in it reads as:

...If expansion of pre-primary education continues to follow the same pattern across regions and kindergartens remain accessible almost exclusively to those in urban areas, it may only increase educational advantages for children from urban areas whose families are able to send them to kindergarten (ESDP V, 2015, p.14).

'O' Class Program

'O' class is a one year program in the Ethiopian early childhood education system which is annexed to primary schools where children enrolled at age 6 and stay for a year till they join primary schools (MoE, 2015). O-Classes serve as a reception year prior to Grade 1 (ESDP V, 2015). Through this program and efforts made, it was possible to enroll close to 2 million (25%) children in 2013/14 academic year nationwide. "O" class and child-to-child modalities (MoE, 2016). This effort helped to accomplish the ECE coverage above what was planned in the ESDP IV plan which was 20% in total (ESDP V, 2015; Tsegai, 2015).

Child to Child Program

In an effort to send as many children to preschools as possible, the government of Ethiopia has also introduced a child-to-child program where older children in grades five and six support younger ones in their neighborhood. It is also part of the early childhood education system by which older brothers or sisters (younger facilitators of grade 5/6 students) play with their younger siblings and neighborhood children. The play becomes learning in this program to count or to differentiate colors and identify letters (MoE, 2016).

Through this program and efforts made, it was possible to enroll over half a million (7%) children in 2013/14 academic year nationwide. This program does not require employed teachers and school and classroom facilities.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten is a program for 4 to 6 year olds. Kindergarten is mainly a three-year program at nursery, lower kindergarten and upper kindergarten at ages 3-4, 4-5 and 5-6 years. This program has its own curriculum, trained teachers, administrative staff, and school compounds. Most of the kindergarten schools are operated by non-governmental organizations such as communities, private institutions, and religious organizations (MoE, 2016). Kindergarten is an urban

phenomenon. In this program, the national coverage is not more than 7% of the eligible age bracket (MoE, 2016). Kindergarten program is not only inaccessible to children from low socioeconomic status but has its own limitations. Only few parents can afford the tuition fees for their children to attend kindergartens (Hoot et al., 2004). These kindergartens appear not only to suffer from access and coverage but also from poor quality which in turn is the result of poor preparation of personnel, inadequate provision of proper facilities and materials, absence of proper and adequate government involvement and generally lack of professionalism (Tirussew et al., 2009; Hoot et al., 2004). In some quality indicators, the Ethiopian early childhood education seemed far behind and unthinkable, for example, the teacher to student ratio is on average 1:112 and the preschool to teacher ratio is 1:3 (Tirussew et al., 2009).

Access to Early Childhood Education

The access to ECE was negligible compared to the number of children eligible for the service. Before the introduction of 'O' class and child-to-child programs, the participation of children in preschools was less than half a million (see Table 1). The policy shift in 2010 significantly boosted access to ECE. After having put these programs in place, the practice of early childhood education in Ethiopia continues to grow in coverage and participation. Millions of children under age 7 go to preschools. For example, the gross enrollment rate (GER) of children to preschools has increased significantly from 382,741(5.2%) in 2010/11 academic year to 2,958,803 (39%) in 2013/14 academic year within five years (MoE, 2016). This significant increment in GER is due to the introduction of "O" class and child-to-child programs. Besides introducing these programs, the government is involved in developing curriculum, training teachers and providing supervisory support (MoE, 2016). Out of the 39% participation, the share of kindergarten, 'O' class and child-to-child programs for the 2013/14 academic year was 7, 25 and 7 per cent, respectively. Below is a table that summarizes the

enrolment before and after the beginning of 'O' class and child-to-child programs.

Table 1: Summary of ECE enrollment from 2003-2007 EC

| | 2003EC (2009/10) | 2004 EC (2010/11) | 2005EC(2 011/12) | 2006EC (2012/13) | 2007EC (2013/14) | AAGR* |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Programs | | | | | | |
| Kindergarten | - | 397,861 | 478,534 | 486,393 | 522,106 | 7.03 |
| "O" Class | - | 1,031,151 | 1,242,108 | 1,578,494 | 1,916,823 | 16.77 |
| Child to Child | - | 193,750 | 291,831 | 433,473 | 519,874 | 27.99 |
| Total | 382,741 | 1,622,762 | 2,012,473 | 2,498,360 | 2,958,803 | 50.54 |
| Teachers | | | | | | |
| Kindergarten | 13,963 | 12,480 | 12,639 | 15,137 | 19,706 | 7.13 |
| Schools | | | | | | |
| Kindergarten | 3,418 | 3,580 | 3,688 | 4,560 | 4,117 | 3.79 |
| Gross Enrolment Ratios | | | | | | |
| ECE | - | 21.60% | 26.10% | 33.7% | 39.0% | 15.92 |
| Kindergarten | 5.30% | 5.30% | 6.20% | 6.60% | 7.00% | 5.72 |
| "O" Class | - | 13.70% | 16.10% | 21.60% | 25.00% | 16.23 |
| Child to Child | - | 2.60% | 3.80% | 5.80% | 7.00% | 28.09 |

*Annual average growth rate

Source: MoE, 2016, Education Statistics Annual Abstract

As can be seen from Table 1, access to ECE has significantly increases since the year 2010. GER of 'O' class and child to child programs showed significant increment over the four years while kindergarten showed a slight change. Given kindergarten participation is of more beneficial for children, the low GER in kindergarten remained to be a concern. Number of children in kindergartens, number of kindergarten teachers and number of kindergartens have not increased proportionally to 'O' class and child-to-child. Access is still a challenge to early childhood education as millions are still out of this program.

Major Challenges of Ethiopia's ECE

It is possible to present numerous challenges of the Ethiopian early childhood education system from access to equity to quality and more. However, this review is deliberately made to be specific, and quality problem is addressed as major challenge. This problem can be conceptualized as a quality problem in environment and physical space, curriculum content and pedagogy, early childhood educators and caregivers, partnership with families and communities and access to young children with special needs (ACEI, 2011).

Environment and physical space - The quality of preschools in Ethiopia is low (Tirussew et al. 2009). As Ethiopia is a developing country and preschool education is an expensive investment, preschools might not afford to provide quality preschool education. Parents who are sending their children to preschools in Ethiopia are poor, in most cases, and the quality of the preschools are more likely to be of low quality. As to Taylor (2009) low income families tend to have low quality preschools to send their children. The quality of preschools in terms of environment, physical space and whether the environment is developmentally stimulating is low. For example, most of the preschools in Addis Ababa are functioning in rented compounds where the indoor and outdoor spaces are not adequate for children for exploration, play and practicing life skills (Fantahun, 2013). Materials which promote problem-solving activities, critical thinking, and creativity are scarce in most preschools. Hoot et al. (2006) explained the nature of the classrooms as *...overcrowded classrooms with a student-teacher ratio of 1:30 or greater*. Tirussew et al. (2009) also indicated that preschools lack child-sized toilets, appropriate and neat playground materials, and overcrowded classrooms.

Curriculum Content and Pedagogy - Efforts are made by the government to develop ECE curriculum in order to meet the children's holistic developmental needs and consider cultural contexts (MoE, 2009, Amharic version). However, the implementation of this curriculum in governmental as well as private preschools remains a concern. Several factors impede the implementation of the

government curriculum/syllabus. Some of these obstacles include availability of foreign curriculum, teachers' competence to translate the syllabus into practice, and parents' choice. The most common problem is that parents demand ECE teachers and kindergarten owners to teach their children to read and write and speak English language (Fantahun, 2013). As a result, addressing the developmental needs of preschool children and the transmission of nation's culture, values and norms through the curriculum is questionable (Kassahun, 2013). The implementation of the existing preschool curriculum is overshadowed by the imported curricula from around the world and the pressures of parents on preschools as they need their children read, write and do some arithmetic and above all speak foreign languages mainly English.

Although developmentally appropriate curriculum and teaching strategy are determinant factors for quality preschool program, the curriculum that is being implemented and the teaching strategy practiced in Ethiopia are far from the developmental status of children. Both the curriculum and the method could be considered as developmentally inappropriate. For example, if all children are expected to perform the same tasks and achieve the same narrowly defined, easily measured skills through highly structured and teacher-directed lessons, this is an inappropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1996). Academic oriented content and rote memory and drill are prevalent in almost all preschools as a method of teaching children. In line with this, Tirussew et al. (2009) observed that in preschools, much attention was placed on academics. According to Tirussewet al. (2009) teachers might possess little understanding of pedagogical principles in relation to teaching very young children and only some preschools prepared local materials as resources for teaching and learning.

Another challenge for most preschools in relation to curriculum was parents' unrealistic needs. Parents need their children speak English and preschools try to meet parents' needs by teaching children English at the expense of other learning experiences. Parents compare one preschool with the other preschool as per the children's ability to speak English. This parental interest seems to influence the curriculum contents of most preschools and the quality itself (Fantahun, 2013).

ECE educators and caregivers - ECE teachers are not only limited in number but it seems that anybody could teach young children. It is often complained about the shortage of teachers, particularly qualified preschool teachers (Hoot et al., 2006). Most of the preschool teachers are untrained or have very limited trainings (Tsegai, 2015). It is not uncommon to see graduates of unrelated areas such as agriculture so long as they speak English while teaching young children in kindergartens. It is also confirmed in Kassahun's (2013) study that the majority of ECE teachers have irrelevant or only slightly relevant qualification. In O- classes, for example, primary school teachers use available periods to provide instruction (ESDP V, 2015). Most ECE teachers are not qualified at worst and have a short-term training at best.

Partnership with Families and Communities - Preschool-community collaboration is low because parents have limited capacity and time to participate substantially in their children's education. In almost all the preschools, preschool program policies are not clearly communicated, if at all they exist. Program policies do not clearly stipulate what is expected of the families and communities in the education of preschool children. Guidelines are not, in most preschools, established as to how parents could participate and could be involved in the preschool program. Community participation is not clearly understood in preschools and most of them have no such practice of working with communities (Fantahun, 2013).

Collaboration for program planning, management and evaluation is not established between preschools, and families and community representatives in almost all preschools. It is, however, clearly stated in the Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (MoE, MoH and MoWA, and 2010b) that parents and the community play an important role in a child's life.

Children with Special Needs - The integration of children with and without disabilities is relatively new to early childhood education (Allen and Cowdery, 2011). However, these days, there is a need for children with special needs to be part of the preschool education system as the right for education. If children with special needs are part of the education system, they may then receive quality services from the preschools they are attending. In general, children with special needs have no equal access in preschools (Fantahun, 2013).

Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia: Future Directions

The future of ECE in Ethiopia should be envisioned through philosophy, goals and objectives and quality of preschools. Preschools should have their own philosophy and goals while educating the young children and they should keep an eye on the quality of preschools in order to meet the goals. As a result, the future of ECE in Ethiopian is suggested in line with the above mentioned themes.

Goals and Objectives of Early Childhood Education

Our present experience of early childhood education and care should help us design the future of this area. Questions such as why do parents send their young children to preschools in general, what do children benefit from experiencing preschool education, what is expected from the government and of other stakeholders, and what is the philosophy behind the education of young children should be taken into account.

Parents see their future in their children and children are also the future of their nation. As children are the future of their nation, ECE in Ethiopia should have a proper future for several reasons. The society is changing and children benefit a lot from ECE experience. Melhuish and Petrogiannis (2006) and Boocock (1995) argued that sending children to early childhood education centers is linked to maternal employment, reduced family size and absence of extended family support. These international phenomena create a demand on parents to look for outdoor service and parents send their children for they have no one to look after their children, they argued. Others argue that early childhood education has crucial importance for a developing child and it should be provided to advance development of 'normal' children or mitigate developmental problems of children at risk (e.g., Barnett, 2008).

The objective of sending children to preschools should not be only because nobody is there to look after children. It should rather be for its importance for the development of children. A child who experienced early childhood education benefits from developmental outcomes compared to a child without such an experience. ECCE is a first formal schooling experience for children where they learn the foundational skills for future school success (Ray and Smith, 2010).

The answers for why parents send their children to preschools and the importance of ECE to Ethiopian children need a comprehensive study. But we can agree that the objectives of the early childhood education in Ethiopia should be directed towards the development of the whole child. To this effect, though not implemented fully, the Ethiopian government has drafted strategic operational plan and guidelines for early childhood care and education (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010a), and national policy framework for early childhood education (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010b) to inform the implementation of ECE.

The goal of the strategic operational plan is stated as *early stimulation and early start in life for all children from prenatal to the age of seven and enhance the quality, accessibility and equitable distribution of services for children through more efficient partnerships and capacity building programs, p.6*” (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010a).

The guidelines for early childhood care and education document stipulated guidelines for the four pillars: parental education, health and early stimulation, preschools, and non-formal school readiness. In this document, guidelines for preschools indicated the target population as children of ages four to six plus. The elements of the preschool are: environment and physical space, learning environment, outdoor play equipment, preschool curriculum, scheduling and structure of preschool activities, teachers and assistant teachers, teaching and learning methodology, health and nutrition, working with parents and communities, assessment, management of preschools and monitoring of program effectiveness (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010a, pp. 53-61).

Among the objectives and goals of ECCE, provision of high quality early childhood education and promotion of children’s holistic development are worth mentioning. It has been evident that disadvantaged children can even benefit more than advantaged children from the experience of preschool if the ECCE is of high quality (Boocock, 1995. Investigators (e.g., Rosenthal, 2003) have also shown the goals that are shared by different cultures and economy as (a) promoting the survival, health and overall well-being of children, and (b) socializing children into adults who adapt well to their eco-cultural situation. Nonetheless, cultural communities differ in their specific goals for the development and education of their children. These goals vary in accordance with the community’s views of the relations among people and of the skills required for adaptation to life in the community.

The vision of Ethiopian ECCE, therefore, seems to be considerate of the culture of the country along with *ensuring all children the right to a healthy start in life, nurture in a safe, caring and stimulating*

environment and develop to their fullest potential (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010a; (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010b).

What should Quality of Early Childhood Education be?

Quality in early childhood programs is a relative concept due to differences in values, philosophies, beliefs, needs and definitions. As a result, the global dimensions of quality may be reflected in very different types of practices that reflect cultural differences (Bruchial and Cryer, 2003). Therefore, quality is continually redefined as to how components of quality are operationalized (Fontaine et al., 2006).

This is due to the fact that quality of early childhood education is a multifaceted issue which cannot easily be defined and measured. Although it has attracted enormous research interest for over a decade, there is still no agreement about its definition (Rentzou and Sakellariou, 2011). Research in recent years has challenged the widely held assumptions that there exists a single universal model of high quality early childhood education. The competing argument is that the definition of “quality” is a derivative of cultural values and developmental goals of each cultural community (Rosenthal, 2003). Strengthening this argument, Moss and Dahlberg cautioned that quality is a language of evaluation that fails to recognize a multilingual world and, in so doing, denies the possibility of other languages. It is not a neutral concept devoid of values or assumptions (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008).

Studies that attempted to define quality of ECE listed out the components of a quality early childhood education and, interaction, group size, adult to child ratio and early childhood educators’ level of education as important indices of quality (Rentzou and Sakellariou, 2011).

In a bit comprehensive manner, researchers indicate components of a quality early childhood education. These are indoor and outdoor space,

curriculum and activities, teacher and child interactions, materials, equipment, nutrition and health factors, teachers and staff (Fontaine et al., 2006), adequate experience and specialized training of childcare staff, knowledgeable and skilled staff (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1985; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999; Howes et al., 2000; cited in Fontaine et al., 2006). In an attempt to define, characterize, and level the quality of early childhood education programs, developmental appropriateness appears to be competent. The popular National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) uses this notion in evaluation and accreditation of program quality in the US (Lee and Walsh, 2004). To some, coverage, efficiency, effectiveness and equity (Myers, 2006), positive climate, teacher sensitivity, behavior management, productivity, and quality of feedback are quality indicators in ECCE (LoCasale-Crouch, Konold, Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early, and Barbarin, 2007).

By considering the differences in the definition, components and elements of quality of early childhood education, Jalongo et al, (2004) discuss dimensions of quality which are recommended by a group of experienced professionals with diverse international background for Association for Childhood Education International (ACIE). These dimensions are assumed to be used worldwide regardless of the differences among nations in economy, culture, politics, work force, technology to mention some. The attributes of high quality early childhood education program worldwide are (1) Philosophies and goals, (2) High quality physical environments, (3) Developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculum, (4) Attention to basic and special needs, (5) Respect for families and communities, (6) Professionally prepared teachers and staff, and (7) Rigorous program evaluation. They are found to be salient and are used as indicators of program quality in the early childhood education (Jalongo et al., 2004).

The future of preschools Ethiopia should work to have (1) Philosophies and goals, (2) High quality physical environments, (3) Developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculum, (4) Attention to

basic and special needs, (5) Respect for families and communities, (6) Professionally prepared teachers and staff, and (7) Rigorous program evaluation. These are found to be salient and used as indicators of program quality in the early childhood education (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Philosophies and Goals in ECE Program

The ECCE program should have its philosophy that dictates the goals to be achieved and services to be provided. Every program that serves preschool children should have a clearly articulated philosophy and goals that value children, families, cultures, and communities. This philosophy should be communicated to the public, reflected in daily practice, and revised periodically to reflect advances in understanding about how young children grow and learn. Each nation is required to design a policy framework that will address the provision of a variety of culturally responsive and demonstrably effective programs that meet the needs of all children and families (Jalongo et al., 2004). In line with this suggestion, Ethiopia is determined to formulate a policy framework that tries to consider families and children in the parental education, health and stimulation of children, very young children, education of kindergartners and non-formal school readiness ((MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010b). But this policy has to be put in place.

A quality early childhood program begins with an underlying theory or statement of fundamental beliefs—beliefs about why it exists, what it will accomplish, and how it will serve all the children and their families involved in the program. The philosophy establishes a framework for program decisions and provides direction for goal-setting and program implementation, the foundation upon which all activities are based.

In order for children to move smoothly from home to preschool and through the early elementary grades, there must be similarities in goals, philosophy and expectations, for children, families, and staff. Any special needs of children should also be provided within the early childhood setting to reduce the fragmentation of services and to

facilitate inclusion. Preschool education can be based on different pedagogical approaches and educational philosophies.

High Quality Physical Environments

Jalongo and her colleagues suggested what the quality of a preschool environment should look like. They advised that the physical environment of the preschool setting should be arranged in a way to address the safety, physical well-being, intellectual stimulation, and social support for children. Materials should also be closely related to the desired outcomes of quality preschool education that realizes the full development of children. The quality of space and materials will be dictated by cultural, geographic, and economic realities. Environments for young children should always reflect concern for all aspects of child development: physical, intellectual, social and emotional.

Space and materials for preschoolers should enhance sociability, support a sense of emotional safety, and respect for the familial and cultural experiences of the child. It is imperative that the transition from home to school should not be so drastic as to cause psychological and emotional stress by imposing rigid schedules, long periods of sedentary activity, confined spaces, unsafe equipment or intense academic pressures on young children. (Jalongo et al., 2004)

The ECCE environment is a whole formed by physical, psychological and social elements. Environments for young children need to be physically safe, socially enhancing, emotionally nurturing, and intellectually stimulating. It includes built facilities, immediate neighborhood, and psychological and social settings functionally linked to different situations as well as various material and equipment. In planning the ECCE environment, both functional and aesthetic aspects should be taken in to account. A high quality environment encourages children to play, explore, move, act and express themselves in many different ways (Stakes, 2004). A good learning environment guides children's curiosity, interest and learning motivation and promote their

activity and self-direction. It provides children with opportunities for play, other activities, **peace, quite, language** (NBE, 2000).

Planning of spaces can be used as a means to promote interactions in peer groups of different kinds and sizes and between children and educators. A well-designed ECCE environment promotes activities in small groups where everyone has an opportunity to take part in discussion and interactions (Stakes, 2004). Quality physical environment promotes positive relationships among all children and adults. It encourages each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and fosters each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member. Warm, sensitive, and responsive relationships help children feel secure. The safe and secure environments built by positive relationships help children thrive physically, benefit from learning experiences, and cooperate and get along with others (NAEYC, 2009).

Developmentally Appropriate and Effective Pedagogy and Curriculum

A quality preschool education program implements a curriculum that is consistent with its goals for children and promotes learning and development in each of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive. A well-planned written curriculum provides a guide for teachers and administrators. It helps them work together and balance different activities and approaches to maximize children's learning and development. The curriculum includes goals for the content that children are learning, planned activities linked to these goals, daily schedules and routines, and materials to be used (NAEYC, 2009).

The curriculum in a quality early childhood program is thoughtfully planned based on an evidence-based framework consistent with the goals of the program and with standards established by the program's governing body and any applicable legislative requirements. It is consistent with and supports reasonable expectations for young

children's development and learning and is culturally and linguistically responsive (MSBE, 2005).

Developmental appropriateness is a widely used indicator of quality in education arrangements for young children, drawing attention to the ways their play and learning is promoted, and the approach to teaching adopted by caregivers. Some features of this definition of developmental appropriateness are: (a) practices based on universal, predictable sequences of growth, and change, (b) teachers' response to the age of the child and individuality in terms of growth pattern, personality, learning style and family background, (c) children learn best through play that is self-initiated, self-directed and self-chosen, (d) teacher's role is to provide a rich variety of activities and materials, support the children's play, and talk with children about their play (Woodhead, 1998).

A preschool program should not pressure children to perform tasks beyond their understanding in order to please adults and prepare them for competitive, task driven culture that awaits them. It is imperative that the learning experiences offered to children respect their natural, playful style of learning rather than impose rigid and tedious approaches to mastering academic skills (Jalongo et al., 2004). The primary focus of the curriculum is to emphasize the importance of developing the whole child, in four learning domains, including social-emotional, physical, creative expression/aesthetic, and cognitive development that includes language and literacy development, and mathematical and scientific thinking. Opportunities for art, music/movement, science, math, block play, social studies, sand, water, dramatic play and outdoor play are provided daily. The curriculum should be designed to connect with and support developmentally appropriate expectations for children's development and learning in the years beyond the preschool program (MSBE, 2005).

Learning in preschool education involves an active and goal oriented process, which is based on previous knowledge structure and often involves problem solving. Knowledge cannot be directly transferred to children through teaching, but children themselves will generate new ideas on the basis of previously adopted ideas and new information. Teachers support learning and guide children to become conscious of their own learning and perceive that they can themselves influence their own success in learning. Teaching in preschool should be based on playful activities stemming from children's individual development level, which also promotes children's linguistic development and their potential to learn new things (NBE, 2001).

Attention to Basic and Special Needs

The younger the child is the more s/he needs to be cared for by adults (Stakes, 2004). The needs of children should be met as much as possible. The basic needs of children for food, health care and clothing, to mention some, are to be met and parents and preschools should address these needs. Children with identified special needs should also be part of the preschool program for it has an advantage of including children with special needs to their non-special needs peers which in turn help to socialize (Jalongo et al., 2004). Special support in preschool education is needed by children, whose conditions for development; growth and learning have been affected by illness, disability or reduced functional ability. Special support includes the necessary measures related to early detection, prevention and rehabilitation (NBE, 2001).

Respect for Families and Communities

Children throughout the world are deeply affected by problems such as poverty, lack of social or political regard for their well-being and the inability of the families to cope with increasing social and economic

demands. Preschool programs need to be aware of the realities faced by parents and families who are working long hours and struggling to meet the basic needs of their children (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Educators (teachers) have a key role in sharing the day-to-day education and care of the young child with the parents. The partnership requires mutual, continuous and committed interaction in all matters concerning the child. ECE partnership is built on the child's needs, the realization of the child's best interests and rights being the guiding principle in all ECEC activities (Stakes, 2004). ECE partnership combines the knowledge and experiences of parents and ECE staff, both of which are important influences in the child's life. Some parents have mistaken beliefs that a difficult and academic-oriented curriculum is good for very young children and to promote the sharing of responsibilities for children's development and learning (Chan and Chan, 2003).

Staff and administration understand the family's role as the first and most important teachers, and honor the right and responsibility of each family to be active partners in their child's education (MSBE, 2005). Parents or other guardians should have the primary educational responsibility for their children. Creating trusting relationship between preschool staff and parents has important role for children's satisfaction, growth and learning (NBE, 2001).

With parents' involvement and participation in children's learning at home and at school, there is likely to be better understanding of the programs being offered by the kindergarten and their rationale (Chan and Chan, 2003).

Professionally Prepared Teachers and Staff

A central resource for ECCE is competent staff (Stakes, 2004). The core competence area for preschool teaching include the history/philosophy of early childhood education; child growth, development

and learning; health, safety and nutrition; home/school/community relationships; curriculum development and implementation; appropriate assessment practices and program management, professionalism and skills of collaboration. Well-trained care givers understand children's needs and concerns (Jalongo *et al.*, 2004). Educators need to be committed, sensitive and able to react to the child's feelings and needs. Educators encourage children to act independently so the children feel good about being able to do things while also receiving support when they need it (Stakes, 2004).

Early childhood programs are staffed by individuals with differing levels of education and experience as required by the program's administering agency. All instructional staff, support staff, and non-paid personnel (e.g., parents, volunteers) should have training, experience, and access to staff development activities commensurate with their responsibilities. Additionally, strong and knowledgeable administrative leadership is a key component of an effective early childhood program (MSBE, 2005).

A high-quality workforce is critical for the provision of high-quality early childhood education. To achieve a high-quality workforce and to empower early childhood practitioners, the professional qualification requirements must be raised to be in part with those expected of primary teachers. Salaries should be commensurate with qualifications to encourage upgrading of professional qualifications and to increase the attractiveness of the profession to potential recruits (Chan and Chan, 2003).

Warm personal relationships provide a basis for learning. The educators' commitment to the education and learning situation manifests itself as sensitivity to children's feelings and emotional well-being. The educators listen to children, give them opportunities to make initiatives, decide on their activities, explore, draw conclusions and express their thoughts (Stakes, 2004).

Rigorous program evaluation

Quality preschool programs are administered, supervised, and monitored by educational leaders who are fully cognizant of child development and who are advocates for excellence in curriculum and pedagogy. Assessment of preschool program should be comprehensive, ongoing, and longitudinal. Meaningful assessment of preschool programs takes a value added perspective by examining the genuine contributions made, both at the program-wide level and at the level of each particular child and family. High quality assessment practices are integrated into the basic program design based on direct observation and samples of children's work and respectful of the whole child (physical, social, intellectual, emotional) (Jalongo et al., 2004).

Evaluation of early childhood programs should be based on in depth understanding of dynamic program processes and diverse stakeholders' perspectives on program quality. Evaluation should challenge and expand the dominant perspectives on early childhood program quality. Early childhood program evaluation has primarily addressed questions of outcomes attained and standards complied with. Much evaluation of early childhood programs has been devoted to measuring outcomes, especially cognitive outcomes, of participating children and families (Lee and Walsh, 2005).

Certain ways of program evaluation, notably measuring outcomes or monitoring program compliance with given standards, are expected and encouraged, if not demanded. Contemporary program evaluation has reverted to heavily emphasizing program outcomes and "scientific" rigor in its evaluation methods. The field of program evaluation has long been methodology oriented. Scientific evaluation appears to be viewed by some as being able to provide clear answers to whether programs work and are worthy of public investment (Lee and Walsh, 2004). Given the complexity factors, most programs require assistance from outside organizations in order to develop and implement credible program evaluation and continuous quality improvement systems.

Infrastructure is needed to coordinate evaluation activities for various types of programs, provide training on program evaluation methods, and support individual programs in developing continuous quality improvement systems (Azzi-Lessing, 2009).

Regarding the assessment of young children, tests and examinations should have no place in kindergartens. If indications of children's developmental progress in various domains have to be obtained, this should be achieved through the use of criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced assessment. Variations in rate of development and individual differences in abilities tend to be huge during early childhood years and comparison with peers does not yield meaningful information (Chan and Chan, 2003). Assessment of a child's progress in development against developmental milestones is more useful.

Conclusion and Implications

It is obvious that the present ECE suffers from lack of quality. There is still fertile ground to expand ECE and improve quality in the future. Lessons should be learned from the present experience while planning the future ECE. Ratification of UN and UNICEF declarations and development of national Education and Training Policy along with the Education Sector Development Strategies (ESDPs) and ECE policy frameworks, guidelines and strategic operational planes make the present situation conducive to improve the quality of ECE in the future. While reforming the ECCE in Ethiopia, attention should be given to (1) Philosophies and goals, (2) High quality physical environments, (3) Developmentally appropriate and effective pedagogy and curriculum, (4) Attention to basic and special needs, (5) Respect for families and communities, (6) Professionally prepared teachers and staff, and (7) Rigorous program evaluation.

One of the objectives of this work is to suggest a framework that could help to have quality ECE in the already put in place programs. Therefore, the Ministry of Education, regional, zonal and *woreda*

education offices could use this quality framework for accreditation, supervision and inspection of preschools to be opened and already existing ones. Each preschool (governmental, private, NGOs, religious organizations and others which run ECE) would be evaluated against the suggested preschool quality framework in order for the children to benefit from the attendance.

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