

Developmental Appropriateness and Cultural Relevance of Early Childhood Care and Education Program in Ethiopia: Reflection on Current Practices

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Abstract: *Research into the development of young children, and the process by which it is configured in early childhood care and education programs has transformed our knowledge and understanding of the importance of developmental and cultural appropriateness of services over recent years. This theoretical and experiential learning has helped to devise new policy initiatives and evaluate whether or not programs are age appropriate and responsive to individual child differences to effect holistic development. The landscape of this change ranges all the way from international child rights conventions and declarations to policy formulations in individual countries and further goes down to micro developmental niches promoting children's developmental milestones. The purpose of this theoretical and empirical review was to reflect on the current practices of programs in delivering combination of age appropriate practices and freely chosen individual child initiated activities in preschool centers. It starts with a brief review of Early Childhood Care and Education landscape in the Ethiopian context with regard to features of access, quality, efficiency and policy initiatives since 1900 with the opening of the first kindergarten center in the country. The paper argues that over those years the sector has been crawling and at times deadly stagnating without making meaningful move despite recent policy developments ushering a glimmering opportunity for young children. The theoretical reflection begins with the conceptualization of developmentally and culturally appropriate early childhood development substantiated by empirical evidences documented from researches conducted locally and internationally. It goes on arguing that early childhood care and education teaching has dramatically changed as a result of new entitlements ascribed to teachers and discusses to what extent lack of to-the-standard professional development program impacted care givers pedagogical skill and the implementation of the developmental curriculum. The paper further attempted to reflect on the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum in enhancing children's free exploration of their environment and their contribution in constructing meanings and understandings via well planned adult-initiated activities. Implications for program improvement in the lime light of developmental sciences and child rights conventions are stated.*

Key words: *Developmental appropriateness, cultural appropriateness, holistic development, freely chosen activities, adult-initiated activities*

List of Acronyms: - **ECCE:** Early Childhood Care and Education, **ECD:** Early Childhood Development, **EFA:** Education for All, **GER:** Gross Enrollment Ratio, **MDG:** Millennium Development Goal, **OUA:** Organization of African Unity, **SSA:** Sub-Saharan African, **UNCRC:** United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, **UNESCO:** United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization, **UNICEF:** United Nation International Children's Education Fund

List of Abbreviations: - **CAP:** Culturally Appropriate Practice, **CTE:** College of Teacher Education, **DAP:** Developmentally Appropriate Practice, **EMIS:** Education Management Information System, **HIV/AIDS:** Human Immune Virus/ Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, **MANOVA:** Multi Variate Analysis of Variance, **MoE:** Ministry of Education, **MoH:** Ministry of Health, **MoWA:** Ministry of Women's Affairs, **NAEYC:** National Association for the Education of Young Children

An Overview of the Current Status of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ethiopia

In strict sense public interest in modern early childhood care and education started as early as 1900 with the opening of the first kindergarten center in Dire Dawa (Demeke, 2003). Since then, there is a lapse of over one hundred years. Over those years the sector has been crawling and at times deadly stagnating without making meaningful move in terms of access and quality compared to other levels of the educational system. As Pence and Nsameng (2008) commented, Early Childhood Development (ECD) was paid low recognition compared to its 'older siblings': primary, secondary and tertiary education. Aido (2008, p.38) also stated that "sectorial priorities and activities override ECD needs.". This disproportionate and skewed attention to the primary and secondary education was also commented by UNESCO report labeling Ethiopia as "the only young lives country with no official program targeting children under the age of 3 years" (Woodhead, 2005, p.14). One could possibly argue that the sector has been cornered, marginalized and children in this age group have been denied of their child rights for decades.

Kindergarten program is a preprimary education program that caters service to children four to six years old. According to Education Statistics Annual Abstract (MoE, EMIS 2009/2010), the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for the nation was only 4.3%. The efforts to expanding access in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) have been impressive for the last couple of years. This resulted in increasing Gross Enrollment Rate from what was only 1.8 % in 1999 to 39% (boys 40% and 38% girls) in 2015. Over the last sixteen years (1999-2015), ECCE enrollment has had an increasing trend. Overall, it has increased by 37.2 percentage points representing annual average growth rate of 9.79 percent (MoE, EMIS, 2016). Whether or not these droplets of changes trickling for the last so many decades can be taken as marvelous achievement is a theoretical and practical dilemma. Although much has been done

to expand access, there are children in the cohort group that still lacked the opportunity to get the service.

Empirical studies and baseline surveys conducted by academic institutions and philanthropic organizations (UNICEF, 2006), for example, advocated the importance of need-based child care services as part and parcel of the overall child rights. Very recently regions have started to run preschool classes (commonly called O-class) within the primary school premises with the intent of mitigating the problem of access. It is true that the current mainstreaming of ECCE into the first cycle of primary education is reported to effect increased enrollment. The contribution of O-class to the overall enrollment of preprimary for example, for the period 2011/12 to 2015/16 is about Sixty Five percent. In terms of access this approach has drawn thousands of preschool children from low income families to these centers. This government-initiated preprimary education program, though, its purpose and implementation strategies are not well articulated and explicitly outlined, it is supposed to implicate multiple positive effects for Ethiopian children. Apart from paving the way for smooth transition to the formal education by bridging the gap between children that had access to the service and the ones that are denied of this opportunity, it is expected to increase school success by reducing the high dropout rate and the diminishing efficiency observed in the first cycle of the primary education. Absence of clear guideline on how to make this program developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant, however, is the other side of the coin. The primary schools that operate under serious budget and logistic constraints are expected to host these centers. Whether or not this resource sharing scheme would yield better result in preparing out of preschool children for the formal school system is open to empirical research.

A fast growing increment in preschool enrollment domestically and the upsurge for enforcing child rights conventions globally can be attributed to

changes in population structure in the age group, and to some extent related to family variables such as income, educational and employment status of parents especially mothers. Increase in mother's involvement into the work force especially in the urban areas created the urge for center-based care and education services. The changing public attitude towards the importance of early years of life is also one possible push factor for parents to send their young children to kindergarten centers as viable option. Ethiopian families these days seem to invest on their children unlike the previous times in which children's fate was left to luck and the deity.

A land mark that can be considered as a promising breakthrough and opened a glimmering opportunity for Ethiopian children is the endorsement of the National Policy Framework and Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (MoE, MoH, &MoWA, 2010). After its long incubation period as commented by Boakye (2008), the policy document might be considered as a triggering factor for ECCE to take-off. It has also created a sense of professionalism among the academia and practitioners working in the area.

The development of ECCE policy documents cannot be taken as a miraculous event in the history of ECCE in Ethiopia. Rather it is a natural outcome of socio-historical events that took place domestically and globally. A number of push and pull factors prompted the development of the policy documents. The 1998 conference by African Ministers of Education (UNESCO, 1998), the steady and unprecedented support and advocacy for the well-being of children by international development partners such as the UNICEF and the World Bank created sense of urgency in Ethiopia to launch sector wide ECD policy that involved main stream ministries. The crisis Ethiopian education system is facing in terms of efficiency especially at primary level, the situation of orphans and vulnerable children for instance due to HIV/AIDS, and recurring drought in the country sensitized the government and the

society at large to promote the wellbeing of children and enforce child rights in light of MDG and EFA goals are all push factors that contributed to the inception and endorsement of the policy framework.

If the 1998 conference by African Ministers of Education is taken as an important historical event, the Ethiopian government responded to the development of a policy framework after a lapse of about ten years. Many African countries however, developed and adopted ECD policy long ago. Moreover, aggressive course of actions have not been taken so far to put into action the National Policy Framework. Yet, one could possibly argue that the endorsement of the policy framework is a take-off point from which ECD might awaken from its long hibernation period.

The synergy among the three ministries Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoE, MoH, &MoWA) is especially a corner stone that would enable to undertake systematic and holistic interventions. Such holistic approach would shift the status of early childhood care and education "from survival to development, from need to rights, and from sector-based thinking to cross-sectional." (Boakye, 2008, p.175)

Before the onset of this policy framework structural and process oriented issues pertinent to ECCE have been swinging from one ministry to another or from one department to the other within the Ministry of Education. Historically, these sector ministries have been acting as "territorial ministries" as noted by (Boakye, 2008) than acting synergistically for the well being of Ethiopian children. For the last two decades, the ECCE program has been rambling in pursuit of sound early childhood philosophy, policy framework, and organizational structure and implementation guidelines. What is new about this policy framework is that it clearly stipulates vision-mission statements, guiding principles of the policy framework, goals and strategic objectives

as well as the structural framework for its implementation.

There existed a problem of conceptualizing the proto types of early childhood care and education services and the modalities adopted in the various centers. Nurseries, kindergartens, preschool education and very recently O-class programs are nomenclatures associated with early childhood care and education programs delivering service to children three to six. One possible explanation for this bizarre idea could be lack of comprehensive policy framework and operational guideline that could be used as a frame of reference for distinguishing the type of programs they are instituted for and the age groups they are meant to serve.

Variations are not only in nomenclature. Public reaction to each of these institutional types vary from perceiving the different programs as centers providing custodial and protective services to the belief that these centers are places with enriched learning and stimulating environment for cognitive and social development of children. The National Policy framework for Early childhood Care and Education document stipulates the four basic pillars of ECD service delivery comprising: parental education, health and early stimulation program (prenatal to 3+years) preschools: community based kindergartens (4-6+years), and community-based Non-formal school readiness programs.

The modalities of early childhood development services also vary considerably. They range from the long standing traditional Church and Koranic education institutions to modern preschool programs crafted along the Euro-American types. They vary considerably in terms of philosophy, structure as well as process variables. Whether these centers operating at federal and regional levels are crafted along Rousseau's laissez-faire approach, Froebel's notion of supervised play or Montessori's modality of environmental exploration is not clearly understood and properly documented.

The overall objective of preschool education is to make children ready for the formal school system. When children join the formal school curriculum they are expected to demonstrate age appropriate developmental milestones. However, due to wide variations in age and preschool environment, there is marked difference among grade one students in terms of their cognitive development and social adjustments. Lack of standardization is an impediment to the provision of developmentally appropriate quality early childhood education. Hence, this critical reflection attempts to explore the developmental appropriateness and cultural relevance of early childhood care and programs in terms of teachers' profile, care giver-child interaction, children's involvement in the discourse and appropriateness of the overall environment in nurturing children's developmental milestones articulated in the national policy framework and ECCE curriculum. It attempts to review programs in the limelight of their cultural relevance backed by empirical evidences documented from developmental sciences, empirical researches conducted domestically and elsewhere in other settings. The paper makes use of secondary sources of data secured from official government documents including policies, and MoE statistical abstracts and reports as well as personal reflections to analyze features of ECCE program.

Conceptualizing developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant ECCE program in the Ethiopian context

Decades of research in early childhood care and education and international-regional child rights conventions and declarations are triggering factors that gave rise to the development of the concept of developmental appropriateness of Early Childhood Care and Education programs. Historically, issues such as access, equity and efficiency seemed to be areas of research, policy and practice but these days the issue of program quality conceptualized from the perspective of program appropriateness seems to get better attention. Early Childhood Care and Education

program in Ethiopia seems to be notably characterized by indicators such as access and equity; whereas quality, relevance and efficiency as secondary issues. Currently a new pillar “unity with diversity” as part and parcel of its cultural appropriateness is being promoted that gave it a unique flavor in the Ethiopian context.

The concept of developmental appropriateness is an umbrella construct which places these indicators on a plane view without ignoring their peculiar feature. In view of these new trends, the concept seems to get acceptance among stakeholders and has become an area of early childhood care and education practice and research. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1987), in a position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age eight defined the concept as having two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. An age appropriate program is meant to meeting the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of children through the provision of appropriate materials and equipment by teachers. An age appropriate curriculum enables ECCE teachers to plan and implement activities as per developmental levels of children. In addition to age appropriateness, tapping the unique potentialities of each child and to unfold development in multifaceted ways is a feature of developmentally appropriate curriculum.

The universalization of development has been a point of argument and scholarly discussion among researchers in the developmental science and program practitioners because of its insensitivity to multiple social and cultural contexts under which children grow and change (Woodhead, 2006). The conception that development is governed by universal biological laws irrespective of cultural diversity homogenizes children and disregards individual differences. It debilitates or ignores social roles played by children and the socialization process that varies from one culture

to the other. For countries such as Ethiopia with multi-cultural heritages, assuming development as progressing in a predetermined way does not give much sense. The very idea of developmental appropriateness of ECCE program is worthy in its responsiveness to age and individual child variability within the broader cultural context. In spite of that a developmentally appropriate curriculum is supposed to be rich and diverse in its coverage to address children’s interest coming from diverse family backgrounds. The diversity and flexibility of the developmentally appropriate curriculum provides immense opportunity for children, care givers and the overall environment to interact in multiple and reciprocating ways.

A new alternative acronym CAP, “Contextually Appropriate Practice” has come to the arena as anti-theses to the earlier conceptualization of developmentally appropriate practice. According to Woodhead (2006), the alternative acronym underlines the importance of tuning aspects of ECCE policies, services, curricula and practices in light of circumstances and children’s lives, the material and cultural resources available to socialize children and parental and community expectations for young children. Recent theories of child development are in line with this new paradigm shift from DAP to CAP. Accordingly, the new conceptualization CAP has three key themes that have important bearings for ECCE policy: (i) diversities in early childhood; (ii) development is a social and cultural process; (iii) early childhood is socially constructed (Woodhead , 2006)

The new paradigm of the sociology of childhood aligns itself with the constructivist perspective. This approach takes into account the child’s “world of diversity” (Pence & Nesmenang, 2008), instead of looking at the child as a biological entity whose development is constructed in isolation detached from the systems within which the child is growing. The new paradigm recognizes childhood as a social construction whose environment is constructed for and by children, within an actively negotiated

set of social relations. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2005) noted the importance of examining social processes taking place in the child's everyday life.

The social constructivist theory of Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner's systems theory and the notion of developmental niche are increasingly getting appreciation in their rigorousness and plausibility to interpret child development in the realm of the physical and social settings within which children develop; the culturally regulated customs and child-rearing practices; and the beliefs of parents teachers and others responsible for their care and development. Rogoff's cross-cultural work that introduced the concept of guided participation and appropriation has strong implication for making early childhood care and education developmentally appropriate. It was indicated that guided participation' and appropriation of children is a natural, social, and cultural and indeed that may lead to cognitive and social skill development and heavily relies on the developmental path ways children are inducted into communities of learners (Rogoff,1990; 2003). In light of the aforementioned discussion, children's engagement in a variety of tasks under different settings and more over their relationship with adults are developmentally appropriate ways by which they acquire competences in early childhood care and education centers. According to Wood head (2006), development is about the acquisition of cognitive tools and cultural competencies which are themselves products of human civilization.

Not only are the social constructivist developmental theories but the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2006) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (OAU, 1990) too contended the combined role of the biological and social processes in shaping child development. In the African context the acculturation of the child which Pence and Nsamenang (2008) termed as "indigenous pedagogy" is based not on instruction but participatory self-education. This can be achieved

through guided participation by care givers and peers. In this view, children contribute to the construction of their cognition in a given developmental niches through their own expectations and through their interaction with their caregivers. Nsamenang and LO-UH.J.H.(2010, p.393)) advised not to be desperate in "destroying too abruptly the traditional background of the African child which is still the best guarantee of the child's welfare and education".

The concept of developmentally appropriate early childhood care and education gets meaning in the Ethiopian culture in its consistency with the view that children have socially constructed potentials that can be demonstrated in self-generated activities and learning. According to Cushner(1990, cited in Gardner, & Kosmitzki, 2008,P.67) "The responsibility for learning falls mainly on the learner, making it rather personal."

As a conclusion for the aforementioned discussion, the reason for highlighting the basic tenets embedded in the theoretical framework of developmentally and culturally appropriate care and education program is to sensitize practitioners on the complexity and challenges they may encounter in due course of making programs relevant and increase efficiency to optimize children's holistic development. It would enable to look into child development in a new lens and the possibility of tapping indigenous child development knowledge and contribute towards the flourishing of Ethio-Centric child development knowledge responsive to the diverse culture. The new understanding of developmentally appropriate care and education would enable us to take an eclectic approach and perspectives of child development capturing the major tenets of main stream psychology and reinterpret it in the context of multi-ethnic society. This approach would enable to address the diverse interests of Ethiopian children in conjunction with child right conventions and advocacies vowed by the government.

Are staffs well-qualified to understand the nature of children's development?

Early Childhood Care and Education teaching in the 21st century evolved as one of the professions with new responsibilities and entitlements. Legal, policy and societal expectations have made the profession more complex and sophisticated unlike the previous times in which children's care and education was exclusively left for luck and the deity or more narrowly to parents. These entitlements especially have practical implications for teachers' classroom activities and their competency to scaffold and guide children's development in general. In light of the current multi-faceted entitlements and responsibilities, early childhood educators are expected to possess child development knowledge and pedagogical skills to provide rich and developmentally appropriate care and educational experiences for all children from diverse backgrounds.

Studies have revealed that teachers' content, pedagogical, and technological knowledge is strongly related to their ability to facilitate children's learning. Research findings for example, show the relationship between student technology achievement to teachers' opportunities to develop their own computer skills (Yelland, & Kilderry, 2005). Early childhood teachers therefore, face the challenge to develop technologically rich learning environments for children to prepare them for life as adults in the era of globalization.

Developmental psychology has been the major discipline that marked not only advances in human knowledge about child development but also a dominant discourse in understanding the interplay between the child's multi-layered milieu and more specifically the importance of quality care and education. Lubeck (cited in Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2005, p.100,) stated that "child development knowledge has been so foundational to the field of early childhood care and education that erasing it would seem to leave us in a mindless limbo". This relation between

developmental psychology and the discourse of early childhood care and education has become a major interest area in academic undertakings as well as part of the child's life in institutions (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2005; Walsh, 2005). The relation between the two can be understood in the area of research and teachers preparation that can be conceived as an important indicator of the developmental appropriateness of ECCE programs. Vygotsky's theory, for example, was found to be relevant in early childhood care and education programs both in terms of teachers' practice and research. His notion of zone of proximal development, underlined the importance of tuning early childhood care and education programs to the interest and needs of individual child through careful identification of developmental missing elements. Synthesizing the works of Vygotsky's assertions, Essa (1990, p.117) stated that "in addition to providing a stimulating environment in which young children are active explorers of and participants, early educators need to promote discovery by modeling, explaining, and providing suggestions to suit each child's zone of proximal development."

When an individual teacher is better prepared through pre and in-service trainings about the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of children, then that teacher will have the skill in translating the curriculum within the framework of an age- and - individual appropriate developmental path ways. A teacher who does not have the basics of the main stream developmental psychology and child pedagogy will have difficulty in planning and implementing activities that are developmentally appropriate for children coming from different socio-economic background (Miller, 1996).

Child development knowledge affords teachers the opportunity to see the uniqueness in each and every child. Although we know that children develop along predictable patterns and timetables, there is considerable variation within each individual child. Diversity among ECCE children

presupposes the implementation of the curriculum not in a fixed and rigid manner rather responding to background characteristics and learning styles of children in multiple ways. According to Miller (1996) , there is no one magic prescription that makes all things right for all teachers and all children. If that were the case, life in the classroom would be static, dull, and boring. What makes the early childhood environment an exciting and vibrant is the fact that each day is a challenge due to the very differences presented by individual children who come to classrooms with varied experiences. The ECCE curriculum can be properly tapped and enriched if teachers make use of these lived home and community experiences of children to the classroom. In order to make the curriculum responsive to individual and group interest, teachers must be keen observers of children's behavior in their classrooms and play grounds under a variety of conditions in order to learn about individual differences in children and their special ways of doing things. This diversity in the classroom calls for shaping the ECCE environment in such a way that every child gets the opportunity to progress in his/her own pace.

One of the indicators of program quality is children's closeness and relationships established with caregivers and peers in center based settings. It is through the interaction of these proximal micro-systems that the child constructs meaning from the environment and is introduced to the wider culture. This symbiotic relationship is reached when children are engaged in socially meaningful activities such as goal directed play and creative works in ECCE centers. Hence, the presence of well-qualified staff that understands the nature of children's development and who could deliver age and individual appropriate care and education for children coming from diverse backgrounds is a standard by which we ascertain that teachers have met their professional, legal and policy entitlements afforded by the society.

Teacher's pedagogical practices are developmentally and educationally appropriate if they address all categories of learning goals in a

balanced manner. Pedagogical practices are not appropriate if they over emphasize the acquisition of knowledge and the mastery of basic skills without simultaneously ensuring the development of social and emotional dispositions. Child-based pedagogical approach is one which strikes the balance between the three educational domains namely the cognitive, affective and psychomotor through developmentally and didactically appropriate care and education curriculum.

The 1974 socialist revolution in Ethiopia created unprecedented opportunity for the expansion of preschool education in Ethiopia. As early as the 1960's and 70's Primary and Preschool Teacher Training Department in MoE was responsible for the training of preschool teachers. The 1960's and 70's were golden decades for the expansion of kindergarten education in the country. The flourishing of kindergartens in grass root administrative structures and cooperatives supported by Governments in the socialist camp especially by the Democratic Republic of Germany during the military regime can be taken as a land mark in the history of preschool education in Ethiopia. Right after the overthrow of the military regime MoE was restructured and the department responsible for the training of kindergarten teachers was relinquished leaving no organ accountable in the ministry to undertake preschool teacher training.

The Education and Training Policy (FDRE,1994) document has stipulated important statements on the importance of early child hood care and education. Issues such as the relevance of delivering quality education to speed up human development, the need for an integrated research undertaking to address cross cutting educational issues, and the contribution of teachers competency at all levels of the education including kindergarten education to promote equity, quality and relevance. The document in its specific objectives section clearly puts the role of kindergarten education in making the child ready to meet the demands of formal schooling. It states "kindergarten education will focus on all round

development of the child in preparation for formal schooling” (Education and Training Policy, 1994: 14)

As a matter of fact, the private kindergarten teacher training institutions opened here and there in the capital and regional cities. Following that a centralized curriculum was put in place and regulatory mechanisms devised to monitor the exercises of these private training centers. Variations in training period and wide gaps in trainees profile at entry and exit levels enrolled in these private institutions could be attributed to inadequacies and inconsistencies of regulatory and supportive mechanism in the ministry.

Data obtained from seventy classrooms in Addis Ababa (Girma, 2014) showed that preschool teaching is not prestigious job. Care givers who joined the profession were either jobless or those who were unable to pursue to the second cycle of secondary education or failed to join the tertiary level education. Although the majority of the care givers passed through privately owned preschool teacher training programs, they had less than one year of pre-service training. Some of the younger care givers in the sampled schools had as little as three months training. About 4% of the care givers in the sampled preschool centers were bare-foot teachers without any formal training on preschool teaching. This same problem haunted many ECD programs in the African context particularly in the Sub Sahara Africa context. Ngware (2004), for example, stated that one of the main issues facing ECD teacher training is the low academic qualification of the teachers joining the training.

This similar study showed shortage and high turnover of preschool teachers that could be attributed to the discontinuity of the training and absence of policy framework that backs ECCE teacher professional development program by the ministry. The undergraduate and graduate ECCE programs launched in the College of Education and Behavioral Studies at Addis Ababa University and other higher education institutions in the country are expected to make a practical impact in

mitigating the problem of skilled manpower in the sector and would enable Ethiopian children to be guided and scaffold by trained practitioners. The launching of these programs opens a window of hope to address ECCE issues in a better way in terms of capacity-building programs and influencing policy formulations with regard to care givers training. The launching of these programs will also enable to tap the abundant and rich indigenous knowledge of child care and socialization process practiced in many parts of the nation and gear programs in a developmentally and culturally appropriate path way.

A survey on Quality of Early childhood Care and Education in Ethiopia (Teka, Daniel, Daniel, Girma & Yekoye, 2015), that covered five regions, two city governments and seventy two preschool centers representing private, government and faith-based center types showed that teachers lacked the knowledge and skills to handle children’s behavioral problem and especially those with special needs. Although the preschools covered in the study, particularly the private ones reported that they employ teachers with special training on preschools teaching, the quality of the training and performance of the teachers appeared inadequate. The problem is more serious at government owned preschools. Teachers that are assigned to work at the newly established O-classes functioning in the premises of primary schools have been trained as primary school teachers not as preschool teachers. This new assignment of primary school teachers assumes primary school pedagogy and the training they got from College of Teacher Education (CTE) are equally applicable to teach in the preschool program. The horizontal shift from the primary school teaching status to preschool teaching and the down-push formal school pedagogy is one possible contributing factor for low quality of care giving and education in these centers. This argument is consistent with Nyamweya, and Mwaura (1996) assertion about the situation prevailed in Kenya. They stated:

Because primary school teacher training does not include training in early childhood education and the primary school curriculum is not harmonized with that of ECDE, there is a disconnection between primary schooling and ECDE. Many of the observed preprimary classrooms do not make use of child-centered and activity-oriented learning environment (p.234).

A developmentally appropriate ECCE program calls for configuring the physical environment to be age appropriate. An age appropriate environment takes into account the shaping of the physical environment for effective interaction between care givers and children as well as among children. Classroom observations in the private kindergartens and government supported preschool centers((Girma,2014) showed that the type and quality of interaction between care givers and children was constricted to the development of numeric and literacy abilities with little or no attention to other aspects of development such as prosocial behavior and communication skills. Extreme adherence to the cognitive outcomes at the expense of other developmental domains can be attributed to care givers lack of adequate training and knowledge on the importance of holistic approach to early child hood care and education program.

To what extent programs deliver combination of freely chosen child-initiated activities and well planned adult-initiated activities?

Early Childhood Care and Education curriculum is a policy document meant to achieve the development of pre-literacy and numeracy skills and emotional development through well planned adult initiated activities and play. The path ways for realizing the preschool curriculum objectives can be enriched through indoor and outdoor activities by which children and care givers involve in a meaningful interaction. The emphasis the curriculum ascribes to play- dominated activity does not necessarily mean that the ECCE

curriculum is being implemented haphazardly in a vacuum without explicit achievable objectives.

Developmental theories and United Nation's child rights convention strongly articulate the importance of responding to children's choices and care givers' scaffolding role in the implementation of the curriculum in developmentally and culturally appropriate way. Piaget's constructivist theory (Miller, 1996) emphasizes the importance of environmental exploration for children to construct cognitive schemas. Young children in the early childhood years, who are in the preoperational period according to Piaget's stages of development, learn through reciprocities with their social milieu and physical environment. It is through self-initiated interaction with the environment that their imagination and thinking develops. Early Childhood Care and Education programs need to provide ample and diverse opportunities for children to share their lived experiences to peers and care givers in a meaningful way.

The general comment 7 in the United Nation's child rights convention is in congruence with the importance of appreciating children's views and their entitlement to express their interests in socially acceptable way rather than ignoring and subjugating to adult interests. The general comment 7 is founded on three principles that have practical implications for delivering combinations of freely chosen child-initiated activities and well planned adult-initiated activities (Woodhead,2006).These are:

- a) the child's right to be consulted in matters that affect them should be implemented from the earliest stage in ways appropriate to the child's capacities, best interests, and rights to protection from harmful experiences;
- b) the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child's daily life at home, within early childhood health, care and education facilities, in legal

proceedings, and in the development of policies and services; and

- c) that all appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that all those with responsibilities towards young children listen to their views and respect their dignity.

A research by Huffman, and Speer (2000) showed when activities are child initiated, and children are engaged in problem-solving and inquiry-oriented learning, their academic skills excelled compared to children cared and educated through didactic instruction such as teacher directed planned tasks focusing on acquiring and practicing of academic skills. Recent evidences indicate that ECEC curricula tuned according to the principles of developmentally appropriate care and education involving play and cooperative learning is important for the development of cognitive and social development augmented through peer interaction and guided participation. In order to smooth the transition from home environment to the preschool environment and subsequently to the formal school system, the developmentally appropriate curriculum is more promising compared to the didactic curriculum. The developmental curriculum bridges the gap between the home environment and the preschool environment by approximating the two micro-systems in terms of time and space. Rather than making the change between the home and the ECCE environment abrupt, it is a gradual process that prepares children to cope up with new demands in a new setting.

In quite many instances however, the problem is striking the balance between freely chosen child-initiated activities and adult initiated activities. In the distribution of center based activities the lion's share usually goes to the care givers. Children's role is minimal or in some cases nil. This tendency emanated from the traditional belief that young children do not have their own identity and they lack the capacity to understand and communicate with others and always their preferences and

choices are subordinate to adults in the family and the society at large.

Another explanation for limited opportunity for children's to make choices arises from the notion that young children in a cohort group have similar interests despite their varied backgrounds. The common adage "children are always children" regardless of the environment they grow is a preconceived sentimentality that is implicated in our day-to-day interactions with children. Early childhood care and education teachers cannot be immune from this traditional belief. The tendency for teachers to interpret and define the ECCE curriculum narrowly entails superimposing of their interests at the expense of children's interests. Miller, (1996) described the situation as "force feeding curriculum" which of course does not serve much purpose.

One way towards delivering the ECCE curriculum by combining freely chosen child-initiated activities and well planned adult initiated activities is through play. A number of writers ascertained that play is uncontested means by which care givers can make the ECCE curriculum developmentally and culturally appropriate. Play is the royal road for young children to learn, grow, and develop. Play affords children opportunities to explore, discover, exercise varying roles, relate to others, and become creative. Play should be child initiated, child directed, and teacher supported. Play is developmental and is not only an integral component of a developmentally appropriate curriculum and practice but also provides a lee way for its implementation (Miler, 1996). Hence, teachers need to be convinced that play is essential to the healthy and all round development of all children. Free and guided play in center-based setting is a pedagogical avenue for combining freely chosen child-initiated activities and well planned adult- initiated activities.

An alternative path way for practicing child driven developmentally appropriate ECCE curriculum is accessing children to outdoor experiences. The ECCE curriculum can be enriched by allowing

children to spend a substantial amount of the daily schedule out of the classroom. Confining children for the entire morning or afternoon within the four walls is not only monotonous but also deprives them from developing optimally.

A survey conducted in seventy preschool centers in Addis Ababa (Girma,2014) showed that activities performed during devotion time were episodes by which the curriculum can be linked to outdoor activities. During devotion time, for example, children echoed like wild or domestic animals. At times they flipped their hands mimicking flying birds. This kind of pretension was not only physical movement but also a mental activity. Such activities were developmental path ways by which the preschool teachers could make a link between the curriculum and children's lived experiences. The dance and movements were primarily meant to fulfill certain goals set in the curriculum materials. Physical movements that start with warm up exercises and progressively mounting into the development of complex cognitive abilities and social skills such as awareness about body organs, counting and rhythm, language and emotional expression during devotion time are avenues by which children can interact with their environment in an entertaining and imaginative way. As noted by Lorenzo-Lasa, Ideishi and Ideishi (2007), preschool movement and dance brings a multi-layered experience to children of all abilities and can also reinforce math and logic concepts through rhythm and patterns of beat and tempo.

Verbal communication was seen to be the overwhelming discourse in the interaction process in many of the centers observed. It is true that children can learn through observation and modeling of care givers. But such kind of learning by no means guarantees children's learning. The chalk-talk method does not give equal opportunity for the child in the same way as the discovery oriented, hands-on method. According to Miller (1996,p.18)) "What a child does, a child learns. The more often a child engages in an experience, the more the learning is cemented. This is one

reason why children love to repeat the same activity."

A number of early childhood care and education centers here in the capital and the regions especially in the urban areas, for example, claim that their programs are crafted along the Montessori approach. Though this approach emphasizes the development of academic concepts, practical life skills, development of the senses, and character (Walsh,& Petty,2007),it is not clear to what extent the physical environment and processes in these centers are contributing to these aspects of development in a natural and orderly manner. The Montessori approach presets the availability of sand trays, chalkboards, and language cards to enhance imagination which many centers in the Ethiopian context are lacking (with the exception of few private ECCE centers). Ministry of Education has set standards for preschool centers in terms of size of the compound and classrooms, facilities, offices, toilets, dining rooms, and first aid kits. However, according to UNESCO Cluster office Addis Ababa (2006) report, none of the preschools visited by the office met the standard set by the Ministry of Education. The newly developed curriculum (MoE, 2002), is a means towards standardization of programs. However, exaggerated differences in structural and process aspects in the centers could result in significant variations among children in terms of immediate learning experiences and lasting cognitive and social outcomes as they progress to the formal schooling.

Many of the care givers in the Ethiopian context assume that knowledge is something that is poured into the child's mind. Many of the care givers assume that knowledge is not something that is constructed by the child or something the child has to construct for her or himself. Many of the observed classrooms either lacked interactive materials or they didn't make use of the existing materials effectively and efficiently. Except sliders, Merry Go Round, and Swinging, other equipments that enhance gross motor development

are either not in place or developmentally inappropriate. Games and puzzles that trigger children's thinking and fine motor activities were not found as part and parcel of the preschool environment. This situation indeed seemed to limit the scope and quality of child initiated activities and made the process to take place in monotonous and repetitive pattern.

Age-appropriate equipments provide children with opportunities to safely practice gross motor skills without putting them at risk for unnecessary injury. Climbing equipments up to 60" high, Merry go-rounds, Slides, Swings, Ramps, Spiral slides up to 360° are recommended equipments for preschool children from 2 to five years. Protective surfacing is required around a fall zone area and under gross motor climbing, sliding, or swinging equipment to prevent injury from falls. The surfaces under and around play equipments should be soft enough to cushion falls, which are the most frequent causes of injuries on playgrounds. It is true that many kindergartens and few newly operating O-class preschool centers have Merry go-rounds, Slides, Swings, Ramps, Spiral slides. However, standards are not set when planting these equipments before they give service to the children. One could easily observe that the surfaces under these equipments are over-used and it is not uncommon to see children bruised. Mere presence of these equipments does not necessarily mean that they are age appropriate. Like any other standard control measures, regional and Woreda educational bureau experts and supervisors in discharge of maintaining quality in ECCE program need to develop age appropriate guidelines for playground equipments and their installations.

A typical classroom in the observed ECCE centers was characterized by highly structured and didactically segmented smaller units of activities. Daily and weekly plans showed that the care giver child interactions were taking place along these didactic elements planned early at the beginning of the week or semester. Scheduling the flow of daily, weekly, monthly activities is merely taken as good

sign of practice. It always served the care givers as hard and fast guideline to exercise the ECCE curriculum. However, what matters is the quality of the activity and the extent to which children's interests are served as a result of the plan. Rigidly sticking to the schedules does not pay much to promote quality care giver child interactions for positive experiences of children. Miller (1996) stated that:

In a developmentally appropriate environment, children learn science, social studies, language arts, and math through reading books and listening to stories, engaging in sensory experiences, participating in cooking experiences, being involved with art activities, taking part in dramatic play, using manipulative, taking field trips, building, creating, and sharing all of these experiences with their peers and the adults in their classrooms (p.14)

Lack of standardization is a bottleneck for making the curriculum developmentally and culturally appropriate and relevant. Wide variations among urban, rural, government, private center types in the development and implementation of the curriculum, more over inaccessibility to indoor and outdoor facilities and resources resulted in wide variation among preschool children in their readiness to meet the demands of the formal school curriculum. The survey on quality of early childhood care and education (Teka, et.al.,2016) showed that there is lack of standardization in the preparation of ECCE curriculum. The majority of center heads involved in this survey (45.8%) indicated that the greater portion of curriculum preparation was carried out by either the regional educational bureaus or the schools themselves and 25% of the respondents described that the Ministry of Education prepares the curricula. On the other hand, 8% of center heads stated that curriculum preparation is the duty of school directors. Very few center heads (4.2%) had the view that the preschool centers prepare the curricula for themselves. Standardization in curriculum does

not necessarily mean the use of one and same centralized curriculum across all centers and regions regardless of cultural diversity. In multi lingual society like Ethiopia where there is rich and diverse cultural heritage, the “one jacket suits all” is not only inappropriate but also deprives children from enjoying their rights and privileges embedded in their respective cultures. Regional and center type disparities in terms of facilities, resources, learning and stimulating materials is however, a stumbling block for making the curriculum culturally relevant and misdirects the very objective of preschool program in preparing children for the formal school system.

Do children have the opportunity to construct meanings and understandings with adults?

One of the dimensions of early childhood professional practice articulated by NAYEC about the developmental appropriateness of programs is creating a caring community of learners. This dimension is mainly about maintaining positive relationship between children and care givers, among children themselves, and children and the early childhood physical environment in a reciprocating and multiple developmental pathways. From the socio-cultural developmental perspective, development is not external to the child rather takes place as a function of negotiated relationship between partners taking part in the process. When children interact with adults and get the opportunity to play together, work on projects involving child-to-child small groups, learning is enhanced. Interacting with other children in small groups provides a context for children to develop pro-social behavior and communication skills, enables children to construct meaning and make sense out of this interaction on win-win basis.

Children respond positively to care givers for the simple reason that they spend more time in centers and through time have built trust relationship with each other. When care givers are sincere and show interest in children’s activities they seek support and are encouraged to share their views and preferences in a socially

acceptable manner. The constructivist caregiver is one who tunes activities as per children’s reactions and ideas rather than trying to impose his/her own predetermined goals. It is the quality of the relationship created by the sensitive care giver that provides the framework for assistance and encouragement and promotes development (Carl, 2005). Unlike the traditional thought that debilitates children’s active role in constructing their environment, the new sociological approach conceives childhood not only as biological progression but also a developmental stage that is in a constant evolvement as a result of negotiated relationship with adults.

Research findings documented in the literature of early childhood development have shown the importance of building mutually satisfying relationship between children and adults. This has been attested by early and modern theories of child development. The idea of “affect attunement” coined by Stern (1985) to describe the ability of both partners in bringing feelings, images and memories to their mind, the concept of “emotional availability” developed by Emde (1980), to predict the behavior of one another and a means to monitor one’s behavior all illustrate the instrumental role of reciprocity for optimal emotional development (Osofsky, & Thompson, 2009). Hence, the presence of a consistent care giver that reads the emotional cues and work towards meeting these needs is not only the most determinant factor in the child’s development but also a protective element against risk factors.

Vygotsky(1978) contends that the gap between what a child can do alone and what he/she can do with someone’s help (Zone of Proximal Development) is reduced when children develop their competencies through interactions with others. Accordingly, social interaction, especially dialogue between children and adults is the mechanism through which specific cultural values, customs, and beliefs are transmitted to the child. Children’s direct experience in the centers and their interactions with care givers:

described as “the engine of development” by (Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 1998 cited in Howes, & Smith, 1995) was found to be important quality correlate of developmental outcomes. Classroom interactions between children and care givers in a state of positive social and emotional atmosphere promote early literacy and language development. Effective interaction built around instructional content areas was found to be predictor of children’s general knowledge and academic skills (Howes, & Smith, 1995). Classrooms and play grounds in early childhood care and education centers are developmental niches in which preschool children’s developmental outcomes are configured through the process of child-care giver-setting triad interactions. Analogous to the child’s home environment, ECCE classrooms are “the most proximal settings nested within child care centers for predicting quality of child care services” (Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Debby, 1997, p.303)).

The child’s behavioral tendencies to use the preschool care giver as a social reference builds not only mutual emotional bond but also encourages optimal environmental exploration for cognitive and social development. Important factors that mediate care giver-child interaction include behavioral repertoires of both the child and the caregiver and the quality of bi-directional flow of information governed by the give-and-take principle. In summarizing research findings, Kelly, and Barnard (2000) reported that care giver characteristics such as looking at, smiling at, vocalizing to, and physical proximity are adult behavioral repertoires that enhance cognitive and social development and environmental exploration.

The responsibility of the care giver is not limited to creating conditions for optimal implementation of the ECCE curriculum. It goes beyond practicing the didactic curriculum and accommodating learning experiences from the wider culture. The very idea of developmentally and culturally appropriate ECCE program is taking note of the

developmental principles advocated by mainstream developmental sciences and allowing children to take initiatives in activities channeled through different kinds of play and collaborative work in small groups. This being the rule early childhood care and education programs still suffer from over emphasis to the development of literacy and numeric abilities, teacher centered approach more or less similar to that of the formal school system in form and content. According to Marcon (2002), in many countries, pressure by policy makers to produce immediate results in easy measurable domains as literacy and mathematics forced preschool teachers to emphasize the didactic approach curriculum and undermine the developmental approach curriculum which of course has a lasting effect on children’s development.

A survey in the seventy two classrooms at Addis Ababa showed that almost little less than half of the classrooms observed were found to fall below the mean quality interaction value as measured by the Care giver Child Interaction Scale. Results from quantitative data analysis have shown that quality of care giver child interaction has been found significantly affected by the interaction of class size and care givers teaching experience. Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) results showed that 16 % of the generalized variance in the dependent measures of care giver child interaction was accounted for by the interaction effect of class size and care givers’ teaching experience (Girma, 2014). The study further indicated that much emphasis was given to the development of numeric and literacy with little or no attention paid to other aspects of development such as prosocial behavior and communication skill. Classroom sessions were didactically structured in a rigid and fixed manner like that of the formal school system limiting the quality and scope of interaction.

Data gathered from classroom observations also showed that care givers use a number of strategies to appreciate individual performances. It was observed that care givers used different strategies

ranging from the use of verbal appraisal to material rewards in recognition of children's unique potentialities. In some of the observed classrooms children's art works and best practices were posted on the wall so that other children and parents could see and appreciate achievements. However, care giver-individual child interactions were found to be minimal. Gross interactions appeared to overwhelm the overall process in the observed classrooms. Non-responsive behavior to the child's cues, inadequate one-to-one, eye-to-eye interactions, and above all inadequate individual support to the needing ones seemed to dominate the interactions. Appreciating the child's uniqueness means to get into the child's inner world and tune the interaction in a way that his/her interests are addressed to enhance development in multiple ways. The traditional one way teacher child interaction predominantly observed in the primary schools was unwittingly pushed down and exercised in the ECCE centers. Care givers commonly opted to put all children in one melting pot and attempted to exercise ECCE in more or less similar fashion as practiced in the primary level classrooms.

According to Pence and Nesamenang (2008), the major impediment to early child development in Africa is failure to blend the cultural heritages into the existing service systems. Like other societies, Ethiopian families have their own way of inculcating values, beliefs and behaviors in the minds of the children. This indigenous pattern of childcare has its own organizational coherence that is usefully oriented toward purposes different from those of foreign origin (Pence, & Nesamrnan, 2008:21). In the Ethiopian context, however, parents seem to grade the standard of ECCE centers in terms of the emphasis they give to English language skill at the expense of all other competencies. Competency is ascribed to children's ability to converse in English. Richness in English language vocabulary and spelling are seen as marks of competency in learning. Little or no attempt has been observed to indigenize the preschool curriculum. De-emphasizing the traditional values and exclusive adherence to the

“western imposed ontology and alien epistemology” (Misra & Gergen, 1993) might instill not only knowledge dependency but in the long run threaten Ethiopian children's identity. Pence and Nesamrnan (2008), advised the necessity of making indigenous approaches compatible into the modern situation in terms of child stimulation and play materials, songs, lullabies, and poems that are too often ignored or obscured in the effort to respond to donor-identified needs.

Classroom observations demonstrated that care givers tended to expect children to be highly loyal and obedient regardless of time and space. In many instances the interactions were bracketed by ‘do’s and don’ts’. Care givers’ behavior such as placing high value on obedience, for example, saying ‘don’t talk’, ‘cross your hands on your chest’, ‘Hands on chest’ and the ‘don’t move’ orders could all be considered as incompetency in scheduling of activities and lack of knowledge about the meaning of developmentally appropriate care giver child interaction. Unfortunately many of the care givers assumed quieter classes and quieter children as promising markers of discipline and desirable behavior. As commented by Miller (1996), care givers assume that good care giving is making the classroom quiet and enforce children to be confined to their seats. Care givers seem appreciating those children showing docile behavior.

Positive interaction is not limited to emotional attachment. It is not limited to showing feeling of warmth, sincerity, enjoyment and patience to children. Positive interaction engulfs care givers behavior such as provision of choices, facilitate opportunities for self-development, encouraging children to exhibit prosocial behavior, and provide the opportunity to work in small groups. Miller (1996) characterizes the preschool teachers’ personal and professional qualities in the following paragraph.

The early childhood educator is the key to integrated curriculum because of his

or her role as an observer, facilitator, organizer, and innovator. Since this person is the one to develop, implement, and evaluate what occurs in his or her own classroom, this educator is in the right place at the right time in order to see what is and what is not working. Success in the classroom according to this approach is measured by observing the following in the children: involvement, productivity, enthusiasm, self-esteem, social skills, literacy development, both oral and written communication skills, problem-solving skills, and independence in a social and learner sense (p.84)

Conclusion

A review of the current Status of Early Childhood Care and Education in Ethiopia shows that the sector has been crawling and at times moving at a very slow rate without making meaningful difference in terms of access and quality and enabling the age group beneficiaries of child rights. This can be evidenced from the fact that ECCE was paid low recognition compared to its older siblings; primary, secondary and tertiary education for the last decades. A land mark that can be considered as a promising breakthrough and opened a glimmering opportunity for Ethiopian children is the endorsement of the National Policy Framework and Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education

Acceptance of the view that children's behavior, thinking, social relationships and adaptation, are cultural as much as biological has profound implications on staff competency to understand the nature of children's development. When an individual teacher is better prepared through pre and in service trainings about the physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive development of children, then that teacher will have the skill in

translating the curriculum within the framework of an age-and -individual appropriate developmental path ways. A teacher who does not have command of the main stream psychological knowledge and pedagogical skill will have difficulty in planning and implementing activities that are developmentally appropriate for children coming from different socio-economic background. This being the rule, empirical findings from classroom observations showed that variations in training period, wide gaps in trainees profile at entry and exit levels and more over the fact that preschool teaching is not prestigious job in view of the 21st entitlements are found to factors that contributed for low quality care giving in preschool centers in the Ethiopian context. Over emphasis to the cognitive outcomes at the expense of other developmental domains by preschool teachers can be attributed to lack of adequate training and knowledge in making programs developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant.

This paper highlighted that in quite many instances there appeared the problem of striking the balance between freely chosen child-initiated activities and adult-initiated activities. Verbal communication and the chalk-talk method were considered as overwhelming discourses in the interaction process. A typical ECCE classroom in the Ethiopian context is characterized by highly structured and didactically segmented smaller units of activities. Many of the care givers in the Ethiopian context assume that knowledge is something that is taken for granted by children. Many of the care givers assumed that knowledge is not something that is constructed by the child or something the child has to construct for her or himself.

Although a number of early childhood care and education centers in the capital and the regions claim that their programs are crafted along the Montessori approach, evidences showed that the physical environment and processes in these centers do not lend themselves to the development of academic concepts, practical life skills, development of the senses, and character. Many of

the classrooms either lacked interactive materials or they didn't make use of the existing materials effectively and efficiently. Except sliders, Merry Go Round, and Swingings, that enhance gross motor activities, equipments that enhance fine motor development are missing or are not to the standard.

The traditional one way teacher-student interaction predominantly observed in the primary schools was unwittingly pushed down and exercised in the ECCE centers. Positive interaction is perceived by care givers in its narrow sense limited to showing feeling of warmth, and sincerity, to children. The opportunity to freely explore the environment, provision of choices for

self-development, encouraging children to exhibit prosocial behavior, and providing the opportunity to work in small groups were not well taken by care givers. This situation indeed seemed to limit the scope and quality of interaction and made the process to take place in monotonous and repetitive pattern. In general, the developmental appropriateness of preschool programs when viewed in terms of teachers competence to discharge their care giving responsibilities, on the developmental appropriateness of the curriculum in enhancing children's free exploration of their environment and children's contribution in constructing meanings via well planned adult-initiated activities seem to be inadequate in the Ethiopian context.

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