

# Assessment of the Status of O-Class in Four Regional States of Ethiopia

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## Executive summary

*Quality early years' education and care have historically been linked to a number of positive developmental, educational, and health outcomes both in the short as well as long terms. These contributions were increasingly appreciated among the various stakeholders in the last couple of years eventually shaping not only academic discourse but also development agenda, educational policy, and legislative frameworks even in countries to which early childhood education and care were considered a "luxury" and were "safely" avoided. In a similar vein, early childhood education and care happened to get a renewed interest in Ethiopia after long years of silence. The internal educational dynamics coupled with international child rights movement, that resided in inventing the CRC document as well as many other declarations like 'educational for all', seemed to fuel formulation of an ECCE Policy in the Ethiopian soil. This legislative policy framework was considered as a breakthrough to stirring up ECCE implementation with a renewed momentum and commitment from the government and other actors. In fact, different modalities were strategized in this policy document to expanding the nearly insignificant 2.9% access as well as nurturing the quality aspect. As promised in the policy framework to continuously look for and institute other feasible modalities as well, the Federal Ministry of Education was able to introduce O-Class as an alternative mode of delivery for the greater majority of marginalized urban poor as well as rural children. O-Class is basically a nine months school readiness program attached to government primary schools for children aged 5 to 6 years. Although there are some preliminary evidences and data about it, the program has never been rigorously and comprehensively assessed and, hence, our knowledge is limited.*

*This project aimed at assessing the status of O-Class (profiling, identifying gaps and opportunities, and suggesting interventions) in four regional states of Ethiopia (Amhara, Beneshangul-Gumuz, SNNP, and Tigray Regional States). Three woredas and nine schools were selected as a sample from each region based on location of woredas (central, midway, and remote areas) and ranks of schools (high or first rank, average or second rank, and low or third rank). Accordingly, a total of 12 (4 regions X 3 locations) woredas and 36 schools in these three woredas (1 school from each of the three ranks X 3 woredas X 4 regions) were selected. Data sources were interview with woreda education office heads (12 interviewees) and O-Class facilitators (36 interviewees), FGD with parents of O-Class children (36 FGDs), and anecdotal observation of the outdoor and indoor facilities, activities and interactions of each of the 36 schools (36 observation sessions). Data analysis involved a continuous data reduction process through extraction of codes, categories and bigger themes.*

*The overall data thematizing and analysis yielded that O-Class in the study sites was found to retain some strengths, opportunities, and contributions. But as a new program, it was found to have many problems that require immediate interventions. These problems relate to the very purpose of O-Class; identity concerns; infrastructural, resource and budgetary constraints; centration of orientation mainly to the upper group of ECCE children; professionalism somehow compromised, and problem of partnership. In order to overcome these problems, it was recommended to take important measures including establishment of O-Class as a program, service, or system; upgrading the professional competence of actors involved in the program delivery; carrying out some construction and maintenance to make services more accessible to children; preparing aids and resources including arrangement of some feeding program; building partnership among stakeholders; and, finally, establishing at least one demonstration O-Class in each woreda.*

# 1 Introduction

Giant development theories of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, lots of other miniature theorizing in recent years, empirical investigations in the field and practical interventions have all consistently documented that early childhood experiences are critical for rapid brain, cognitive and language development. The human brain develops most markedly in the first five years of life as almost 85 percent of the “sculpting” of the human brain’s neurological architecture happens between birth and age 5 (Heckman, 2011 in Blondin, 2011); suggesting the need for its proper nurturance to ensure a healthy start in cognitive and language acquisitions. Early years’ experiences are at the same time foundational for building ability to learn and relate to others, acquire general well-being and emotional health, build internal model of representation of the self, and achieve resilience particularly among high-risk groups (cited in Belay & Hawaz, 2015). The interactions established with caregivers in the first five years of life are found to affect interpersonal skills and emotional health in the later years (Citizens’ Committee for Children, 2004). Even the foundation of physical health has been shown to be significantly shaped during the first three years. For example, while exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) was found to significantly compromise health outcomes in adulthood, the prognosis of recovery from ACES is, at the same time, linked directly to the level of exposure to ACES; the more the exposure, the worse the prognosis of a child’s health (Heckman, 2011 in Blondin, 2011).

The popular longitudinal research conducted over the past 40 years, known as the High Scope Percy Preschool Study, has also shown that the impacts of early experiences would have far reaching long-term consequences in the life of individuals. It was found that high-quality early learning programs have, on the one hand, increased school readiness, reading and math skills, high school graduation and college enrollment, family wages, and community engagement, and, on the other hand, reduced rates of incarceration, dependency on others later in adulthood. In doing so, investing in early learning, therefore, yields substantial return on investment (in Blondin, 2011); close the income gap, reduce health disparities, and save money in lower health and social costs (Heckman, 2011 in Blondin, 2011).

There has also been a corresponding appreciation of the role of early care in the development of children among international agencies and conventions. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) stipulates that every child has the right to care and education. The world conference on “Education for All” (EFA) has also underscored the fundamental role Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) assumes in the survival and development of children. The 1999 UNICEF World Summit has even stipulated that a society that pays no attention to the early period of childcare and education fails to recognize the high social return or cost in the future (cited in Belay & Hawaz, 2015).

In response to the requirements stated under the Education For All declaration which, as one of its goals, requires countries to expand Early Childhood Care and Education, Ethiopia has shown commitment by signing such conventions and took some initiatives to addressing the needs especially of the most disadvantaged children. One of these provisions that was introduced into the national ECCE scheme recently, as per the Policy provision for inclusion of other low cost

modalities in order to improve the alarmingly lower rate of access to ECCE programs in the country (MoH, MoWCYA, MoH, 2010), was the launching of what is commonly known as the O-Class program in the year 2003 E.C. (EMIS, 2011/12).

This is a one academic year nine months program based in government primary schools for children aged 5-6 years, immediately preceding the first year of primary school (cited in Britto et al., 2012). This program has existed in different countries, forms and approaches, durations, and purposes: e.g. school attached preschool in Ethiopia in the 1980s (AAEOPU, 1978 E.C), Zero-Grade of the current Ethiopian type in Zambia (Mhangami, 2009), an intensive two-month compensatory intervention program in Cambodia (Nonoyama-Tarumi and Bredenberg 2009), school-based early childhood programs in Canada (Zigler and Finn-Stevenson, 2007), school-based preparatory program in Australia (Thorpe et al. 2004). Furthermore, Australian schools have also introduced reception classes based in schools to support transition (e.g. kindergarten, transition, pre-primary), transition curricula (e.g. Early Years Curriculum Guidelines) and specialized programs for groups whose progress has been an ongoing concern (e.g. McCrea et al., 2000).

Experiences with these programs have shown that they are helpful in preparing children for formal school in many ways but contributions were not uniform across the board, that they still had limitations of one kind and another and hence need to be critically examined, improved, and integrated with in the school system (Thorpe et al., 2004; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Mhangami, 2009; Nonoyama-Tarumi and Bredenberg 2009; Al-Hassan and Lansford, 2009).

In fact, O-Class is indeed a low-cost, culture-sensitive and seemingly innovative a nine month school readiness program improving gross enrollment from about 2.9 % nearly two decades ago (EMIS, 2000) to about 26.1% (with 12, 639 facilitators and 3,688 centers) in more recent years (EMIS, 2014). Some preliminary assessments in Ethiopia has underscored that O-Class has a high prospect of scalability and feasibility in the Ethiopian soil (Belay & Belay, 2016; Britto et al., 2012). However, the program was found incarcerated with lots of implementation problems that would cloud on these possibilities. Hence, there is a need for more comprehensive assessment of the current status of O-Class in Ethiopia to envision strategies for improving future practices that ensure not only access but also quality O-Class provision in the time ahead.

The objective of this assessment is then that of profiling O-Classes in four regional states of Ethiopia, identifying gaps and opportunities, and suggesting short- term interventions including the training of the O-Class facilitators.

In more specific terms, this profiling attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Who are the O-Class children (age, gender, family background, children with special needs)?
2. What is the O-Class facilitators' profile (qualification, training, work experience, current work load and the materials they use in the O-Class)?
3. What available indoor and outdoor physical facilities (playground, play facilities, toilets, potable water, accessibility /child friendly, etc.) are there?

4. What is the physical condition in the classroom (learning materials, teaching aids, seating arrangements, learning corners, types of chairs and desks, lighting system and ventilation, health kits, etc)?
5. What is the nature of interaction in the classroom (child to child interaction, facilitator -child interaction: Quality of interaction)?
6. What is the typical day of the child in O-Class? (daily child activities, indoor, outdoor activities including rest time)?
7. How are parents involved in the O-Class programs (extent of contacting the school, follow up of their children's progress, interest and commitment in terms of support and attendance of the O-Class program, distance from school, etc) ?
8. What are the professional, administrative and financial supports to run O-Classes (type of professional, administrative and financial support from cluster schools, woreda education offices, schools, and the communities)?
9. What should be done to improve the quality of O-Class programs?

## **2 Methods**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this rapid assessment is to explore the situation of O-Class implementation and, hence, qualitative research design is best situated to enabling our attempt to find out the conditions on the ground. The study was limited to only thirty six O-Classes in four regional states because time and financial constraints.

### **Study Sites**

Four Regional states were purposefully selected as study sites:

- Amhara Regional State
- Tigray Regional State
- SNNP Regional State
- Benshangul-Gumuz Regional State

### **Sample**

Data were collected from three woredas in each of the regions, a total of 12 woredas. Head of education offices in these woredas were considered for an interview. Again, nine government primary schools having O-Classes were sampled from each Woreda; with a total of 36 schools.

In each school, four data sources were included in the research: School principals (interview), facilitators (interview), parents of O-Class children (FGD), and observation of the O-Class.

The **criteria** used for selecting of the woredas were based on location: one Woreda was selected from central location, another one from midway, and the third one from the remotest locations. Accordingly, the following woredas were selected from each region:

- Amhara Region (nine sample schools, three from each): Bahir Dar City, Debre Tabor Town, and Addis Zemen Woreda.
- Benshangul Gumuz Region (nine sample schools, three from each): Assossa City, Metekel Zone, Dibate Woreda.
- SNNP Region (nine sample schools, three from each): Hawassa city, Wolaita Zone-wolayita Sodo Woreda, and Bolos Sosri Woreda.
- Tigray Region (nine sample schools, three from each): Mekelle city, Debub Misrak (Enderta) Zone, Adigudem Woreda.

From each woreda, three schools were selected based on quality rankings of the schools already made by education offices prior to this assessment as an official requirement by the Ministry of Education. That is, education offices are expected to rank the schools in their respective woredas in terms of quality indicators. Three levels of designation have been made so far, i.e. level one (high quality), level two (moderate quality), and level three (low quality). The levels refer to whether the schools meet the input, process, and outcome-based standards set by the Ministry of Education. Level three is a school that is graded as below standard; level two refers to a school that has partly met the standard, while level one refers to a school that has fully met the stated standard.

The **selection** of the three schools based on assigned ranks was made in consultation with the woreda education heads. When ranks were not assigned in the concerned woredas, subjective judgment of the officers was to be used. For example, the Woreda Officer in Mekelle informed the data collector that they did not have an O-Class under level one. So they had to use their own observations and subjective judgments to select one. Please refer to Table 1 for information about the actual woredas and schools selected for the assessment.

Table 1: Sample woredas and schools selected for assessment

Regions	Location of woredas	Name of woreda selected	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3
Amhara	Central (C)	Bahir Dar	Yekatit 23	BewuketFana	Addis Amba
	Midway (M)	Debreabor	Dagmawi Tewodros	Tabor	EnatituMriam
	Remote (R)	Addis Zemen	Alabo	Addis Zemen	Angot No.2
Beneshangul	Central (C)	Assossa	Selam Bir	Assosa	Dare Selam
	Midway (M)	Metekel	Mandura	Gilgel Belis	Tuni
	Remote (R)	Dibate	Dibate	Par	Zigih
SNNP*	Central (C)	Hawasssa	Edget Beandnet	Hidassie	Tabor
	Midway (M)	Wolayita Sodo	Bekelo Segno	Gurmo Wede	Kenefa
	Remote (R)	Boloso Sosri	Woyedo	Dolla	Doge Woyedo
Tigray	Central (C)	Mekelle	Ethio-China	Gerebtsedo	Ayder
	Midway (M)	Enderta	Millinium	Selam	Kisanate
	Remote (R)	Adigudem	Arena	Hiwane	Hawatsu

\*SNNP = Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples

## Instruments

The instruments of data collection were *Interview*, *FGD*, and *Observation*. Interview was specifically designed to generate data from woreda education office heads (3 per region), school principals (9 per region), and O-Class facilitators (9 per region); a total of 21 interviewees. The interview items attempted to explore O-Class implementation experiences at woreda (6 items for heads), school (8 items for school principals), and classroom levels (26 items for facilitators). The interviews were conducted in Amharic (SNNP, Amhara, and Beneshangul-Gumuz) and Tigrigna (Tigray). While the interview with woreda heads and school principals took an average of half an hour that of facilitators nearly took an hour. Responses were recorded through voice recorder with the consent of the interviewees.

FGD was conducted with parents of children in O-Classes. The facilitators and school principals helped in identifying parents to be involved as discussants. Attempts were made to contact those parents whose house is just within the walking distance from the school. The FGD focused on exploring parental involvement in the O-Class. Some translation was used in some of the FGDs in the Benshangul-Gumuz Regional State. In the rest, the language of the FGD was the language used for interviewing. There was one FGD in each school; hence a total of 36 FGDs. The discussion, too, was recorded with the permission of participants.

School anecdotal observation was made to check out outdoor and indoor facilities and materials, physical conditions, and classroom interactions. Again, still and video cameras were used to record experiences with the permission of school principals and facilitators.

Finally, attempts were made to have informal interviews and consultation of office reports in some of the regions (e.g. SNNP) so as to have a general feel of the regional experiences.



## **Data recording and management**

- Basically, data were recorded using voice recorder (provided by InEHD and using smart phones),
- At the same time, notes were taken as a backup for the recorded responses
- Observation was made to record general anecdotal descriptions of the classroom and outside classroom set up.
- Photos and short videos were also captured in each school

## **Procedures**

- Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) were contacted for permission and facilitation of the data collection process
- Permissions were then secured to collect data
- Using these REB clearance, permission was also subsequently secured from Woreda and Sample schools
- Sample schools were in fact identified with the help of woreda education heads, and
- Interview and communication begun with introduction and orientation about purpose of the study, and securing consent of respondents for participation and recording and ended with appreciation and thanking the participants.

## **Organization of data collection**

The research team is composed of researchers, supervisors, and enumerators. The researchers are Prof. Tirussew Teferra (Principal researcher) and Dr. Belay Hagos (Associate researcher). They held the responsibility of training supervisors and data collectors as well as overseeing the entire research process. One supervisor and three data collectors (one for each wored) were assigned in each region. The responsibilities of these supervisors and data collectors are as here under:

### **Supervisors carried out the following responsibilities:**

- Coordinated and supported the activities of the data collectors
- Communicated the status of data collection on daily basis with InEHD (e.g., reported if Team was OK, money was OK, and mission was OK in text messages),
- Collected all data from the data collectors in soft and hard copies
- Translated the transcribed data into English version – Verbatim
- Synthesized and analyzed data gathered in local language in English
- Produced regional situational assessment reports on O-Class in English language
- Submitted the report along with all complete raw data in good order to InEHD,

### **Data collectors assumed the following responsibilities:**

- Interviewed and facilitated FGDs,
- Recorded data/ responses using voice recorder (at the same time taking notes on paper),
- Transcribed the recorded responses verbatim,
- Documented observation as per the observation guide,
- Took pictures, and
- Captured short videos clips

## **Data analysis**

Data analysis involved transcription of voice recordings, linking all the responses to items used for response generation, coding and categorization of these responses, and generating bigger and common themes. Regional and school differences were not significant and hence attempts were made to pool the data together. For interested readers details of the responses are thematically presented in the end notes. The analysis and discussion focused mainly on common themes under nine issues: children's and facilitators' profiles, materials and physical conditions, nature of interaction in the classroom, child's typical day, parental involvement, support to O-Class, quality, opportunities and challenges, and conclusions and recommendations.

## **3 Results and Discussions**

### **3.1 Children's Profile**

Early childhood education in the regions is delivered in three modalities (O-Class, preschool, and child-to-child). This combined use of modalities seems to have significantly improved the early childhood education access in the last few years. Data secured for SNNP<sup>1</sup>, for example, shows an improvement from 39.39% in 2006 E.C to 65% this year (2008 E.C). As in previous years, the major contribution for early childhood education access goes to the O-Class (e.g. 87.7% in SSP, 81.5% in Tigray); which in SNNP was found to be conducted not only in the regular government primary schools but more innovatively through such non-formal Community-Based Organizations as churches, mosques, kebeles and farmers' training centers. In fact, these non-formal centers contributed nearly half of the proportion of the O-Class. It can be noted that while 97% of the government primary schools in SNNP and almost all the schools (100 %) in the sampled woredas have already initiated O-Class, there are, however, about 35 % of children still looking for access. Hence, these CBOs can even assume an increasingly important role in O-Class provision in the time ahead.

The profile of O-Class children can be understood by looking into the following data secured from children in the study areas.

#### **Age**

The age of the children varies widely from school to school with the majority being within the age range of 5 to 6 years in all the four regions. In Benishangul-Gumuz, for example, the average age of O-Class children was 6 years in the nine visited schools. However, according to the information obtained from O-Class facilitators, there were students younger and older than 6. It was also noted in one school visited in Tigray, called Kisanet, that there are 33 four-year old children (20 females and 13 males). A facilitator from Mandura primary school said that there are 3 and 4 years old children attending O-Class. Another facilitator from Selam-Ber School said, *"As dictated by the rules and regulations of our school, we do not normally accept children*

*younger or older than six years for O-Class. However, we sometimes give in to parents' insistence and accept some younger (five and half years old) and seven years old children for O-Class".* On the contrary, the O- class facilitator in Addis Amba Primary School at Bahir Dar reported that although parents have brought their children with age four, the school has refused to accept the children because of lack of classrooms. On the other hand, children with ages greater than six were observed in the classroom. It appears that these children could have some kind of learning difficulties. For example, it was reported by the O- Class facilitator in Bewuket Fana primary school (Amhara region) that children whose ages exceed 6 years were found in the class; these children were brought to the O-Class because they could not benefit from the formal primary education.

This means then that there are in the same O-Classroom children with different age categories. It can be technically possible to manage such diversities in one classroom. However, there are lots of concerns to voice regarding this issue in the Ethiopian reality. First and foremost, the professional competence of facilitators mayn't be to such a level that would allow discharging this seemingly complex responsibility. For example, the O-Class facilitator from Yekatit 23 Primary School stressed that it is a problem to teach and guide all children with different age levels and children with different years of O-Class experiences. This has brought negative implications to the program because facilitators are expected to treat all of them in the same classrooms. Furthermore, the length or duration of children's stay in the O- class before their transition to the formal education varies depending on their ages. Those who joined at their four years may stay three years in the same O-Class while those who join at the age of 6 years stay in the O-Class for about a year. Yet, there is no special program for children who stay for more than one year in the O-Class. Pushing these young children to primary school after a yea of stay in the O-Class at the age of 5 would not be fair again.

## **Gender**

There appears to be a comparable trend in gender proportion only in the Amhara region. The same comparability trend seems apparent in Tigray like Amhara; but the proportion for females in the study area of Tigray (n=784) appears to show that females are lesser (45%). In fact, the proportions in Benishangul (46.5%) and SNNP (47.96%) appear even much lesser for females. This data implies at least three issues. First, the gender imbalance starts very early in the education life span. Second, despite the tremendous achievements in closing the gender gap, the problem still persists and, therefore, needs an intervention of its own kind. Third, intervention to reverse gender inequality needs to start as early age as possible.

## **Children with special needs**

National figures show that the participation rate of children with special needs is generally insignificant. For example, the first nine months performance report for the SNNP region shows that the proportion of children with special needs nearly counts less than a percent (i.e. .54%). In fact, these children were not also identified during observations as well as interviews with facilitators<sup>2</sup>. Exceptions to these experiences could be one child found in SNNP, five in Amhara, and two in Tigray. We would take two important remarks from these data. The first remark is that scores of children with special needs are left behind the O-Class. Second, even those who

come to the O-Class may not be visible unless their impairments are sensory or motor and, hence, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

### **Absenteeism and dropout**

Data were collected from O-Class facilitators, FGD participants, and school principals regarding absenteeism and dropout. In terms of absenteeism, the data collected from the school principals and O-Class facilitators indicate that nearly in all schools there were some children who do not come to the O- Classes regularly.

Although absenteeism was almost similar in most of the O-Classes, the rates of dropout cases vary considerably from school to school. A total of 79 children out of 658 (12%) in six schools were found dropping out in the Amhara region, the proportion in SNNP is nearly a comparable number (n=88) or proportion (.43%) in the study areas. The figures suggest that absenteeism and dropout are not serious problems.

Results of the interview with both the school principals and facilitators still indicate that absenteeism and dropout are not serious problems in the study areas. In fact, such factors as age and health problems, weather, holidays, professional concerns, change of residences, sickness and contagious disease, and hunger were found to make children vulnerable to absenteeism and dropout<sup>3</sup>. It was surprising to note that unlike many previous researches that have commonly shown child labor as a major cause of school absenteeism even the early years in Ethiopia, we have not come across this problem as a cause in our present case.

Absenteeism and dropout in O-Class are minimal despite the above threats mainly because there are good school practices of closely following up the children when they show trends of absenteeism and try to get them back to school, *“if one student is absent for continuous days, there is a committee that tries to understand the problem and then support the child. So, we don’t have dropout because we fix problems through this committee (School principal, Hidase), “we work closely with the community to identify the children with problems, help them out and, therefore, children do not dropout”* (Prinicpal, Kenefa). This follow up of children by the school and the community seems so important that it may even fill gaps that may be created because of lack of parental follow up and support of the children. For example, according to a school principal in SNNNP, *“the area around the school is concentrated with commercial sex workers, HIV positive individuals and a lot of night clubs. The parents of many children are alcoholics and they chew chat. So with this problem, there is absenteeism of children as most of their parents are HIV negative. We even have 12 children who are HIV positive of whom 4 have already started taking medicine. So we try to maintain children in school so that they would continue. Basically, there is no drop out because we treat them”*.

According to the information gained from the school principals in Beneshangul, they take attendance and make follow up like regular students of grade one except Tuni School where attendance has never been taken every day. Absenteeism is common practice in some schools. Children do not attend school consistently. All children do not come to school every day. A facilitator from Mandura School said *“...children do not come to school if we teach them every*

day. *If I keep them in class every day, they will be absent the next days. However, the school principal always orders me to teach them in class the whole day. He is not trained about O-Classes. That's why he says 'teach them in class!' he doesn't like to see the kids playing outside. I do what he orders me to do, because I fear him. Then many children will be absent the next day. That should not be the way. O-Class children are happy when they spend short time in class and then go out to play. They come the next day looking forward to the playing sessions...*" In all the schools except Assosa primary school, there is no dropout. If there appears an absence and dropout, facilitators contact parents of the children through home to home visits and consult them. If there is a means to get back the dropouts, there is a committee which helps with solving such problems too. As a school principal from Assosa primary school says: "... *I believe that the current causes of absence and dropouts are distance from residence to school, shortage of food service at the school, lack of attractive things at the school and lack of awareness at home...*" Furthermore, facilitators and parents stressed that the interest of children to attend schools has increased drastically since the installation of playing materials in some schools like Par, Mandura and Tuni primary schools. One parent from Mandura said, "...*ever since toys and games such as the swing and see-saw are installed in the school, my daughter nags us to take her back to the school. Her love for education has increased...*" In addition, the Woreda Education Office head said that the attendance of O-Class children is remarkable at schools which provide feeding (meal) services.

The role facilitator's play in fighting against children's absenteeism is indeed fascinating. Facilitators take note of tendencies of dropout, follow up the children to home to fix problems and get them back to school as much as possible, "*When children miss classes, I go home and talk to parents why the child is not coming* (Facilitator, Dola Mulu; Facilitator, Kenefa), "...*If their house is far, I write a letter to parents to make them come*" (Facilitator, Kenefa). Facilitators' efforts are still extended to providing support to children in the event that the children are to drop out because of some material problems, "*sometimes, children to be absent when they feel hungry. There is a small cafeteria around that sells bread with tea. I try to buy them tea with bread and next time they will continue to come when hungry the same service*" (Facilitator, Gurmo Weyede).

## **Family Background**

In the visited O-Classes, children's family background is more or less similar across regions; most children come from low-income and families who don't even read and write. The fact these children were unable to pay for kindergarten does entail, to a certain extent that they might be from families with limited means. This has been confirmed in the focus group discussions as some parents clearly stated about their inability to support the O-Classes with required materials. In fact, economic reasons were also found to be threats for O-Class attendance. However, in some schools, such as, for example, Assosa primary school and Dare-Selam primary school, there are some parents who are relatively better economically and educationally.

## 3.2 Facilitators' Profile

### Sex and age

All the O- Class facilitators were females and their ages ranged from 20 – 59 years. In Tigray, there were 17 O-Class facilitators in the nine schools and all are females. In some cases, there was only one facilitator while in others up to four facilitators were in attendance in the same section or whenever there is outdoor activity. The trend is towards feminizing O-Class teaching which would perpetuate the traditional gender division and at the same time excludes paternal care from O-Class.

### Qualification and training

All of the facilitators have completed secondary education (10<sup>th</sup> grade in the new or 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the old system) without further education or with diploma, certificate level training or training that ranges from two to three days orientation to tailor-made short-term training given for three consecutive summers. The highest level of academic qualification is diploma and the majority of the facilitators are certificate holders. However, one school which is ranked as level 1 (Tuni primary school, Benishangul-Gumuz) has O-Class without a regular facilitator.

More important is the extent to which they have been exposed to relevant training in some kind of early childhood education. Asked if they have attended some kind of professional training in early childhood education, only one facilitator responded negatively in SNNP. Rest of them indicated to have secured either a pre-service certificate or some kind of 'matenakeria' or in-service training at stretch or interposed over a period of years that took over 3 years in summer program, *"I have been trained over three summers in Adwa Facilitators' College on how to approach children'. Indeed, nobody is sure about the quality of the training as well as their impact or benefits!"* According to a school principal, *"The major problem is a skill gap in the facilitators. It was mentioned that most of the trainings were not organized in an institution that is established by the government for this purpose"* (School Principal, Doge Woyebo, SNNP). Of course, some facilitators have also mentioned that the training they received was not appropriate or enough to teach the children. According to a facilitator in Tigray, *"Yes, we have been trained on how to handle little children ...but it would mean a lot for the kids if we still receive appropriate training"*. In fact, according to some school principals, the training which had been given to the O-Class facilitators was not sufficient. This means, they needed continuous training to assure a quality O-Class teaching-learning process. Furthermore, a facilitator from Selam-Ber primary school, Assosa city, visited a private school in the city for 15 days and she took some experience on how to manage O-Class students. After that, she tried to apply that lesson on her school's O-Class students. She said to the research team: *"...Though I wanted to share the experience I gained from the private school in my school, I could not find a favorable atmosphere to apply it here; we still have challenges and shortcomings within the school..."*

Of course, most of the facilitators observed reported that they have received short-term trainings. Although not much is known about the content of the training they attended, the descriptions some of them gave regarding how they intervene when students disturb is a bit worrying. Some of these facilitators answered that they ask the kids who disturb to come to the front to read a letter. Others mentioned things like diverting their attention, asking the kids to sing a song or to

tell stories. Still others said giving some break as a way of solving the problem. Furthermore, asked to describe whether the O-Classes have problems, most of the facilitators mentioned the lack of chairs, tables, audiovisual aids, and stationery materials... None of them cited lack of such materials as blocks, puzzles, shapes, colors, etc. which may significantly contribute to the cognitive and social development of the children.

### **Work experience**

Their background is quite heterogeneous in terms of work experience. Some had no work experience at all; others served as primary school facilitator, volunteer, librarian, facilitator of adult education and one facilitator was a military background followed with no training of any kind. For example, in Tigray, some of the facilitators have been working as primary school facilitators and have started to work as O-Class facilitators after they were being trained specifically for this level. Others have just started after completing 10<sup>th</sup> grade and trained to become O-Class facilitators. The duration of service of facilitators in the study areas ranged from 2 to 12 years with an average of 5.11 years in SNNP and from a beginner to 39 years of experiences in Amhara. Almost all facilitators in Benshangul have two or less years of experience in O-Class teaching. And it is obvious that this should have its own effect on the teaching learning process. For example, the school principals of Mandura School said *“teaching O-Classes needed experienced facilitators. O-Class Children need older and more experienced facilitators who could understand the pupils’ behaviors. However, our school has no experienced O-Class facilitators.* School principals from Assosa, Selam-Ber and Zigih primary schools have shared ideas similar to the one stated by the school principals of Mandura primary school.

### **Recruitment and assignment**

According to the data obtained from the O-Class facilitators, Woreda education office representatives and school principals, most of them were recruited and selected by the education offices. Applicants who took some relevant training, applied for vacancy, competed with others and won the position. Others started as volunteer (as in facilitator in Angot No.2 School) and then got position latter on. There were also others who were referred by education office, nominated and assigned by the kebele because of shortage of people who can take the responsibility. The O- Class facilitators in Bewuket Fana, Enatitu Mariam schools of the Amhara region and others were selected by schools on competitive bases.

### **Work load**

All facilitators in SNNP start working at about 8:00 AM and extend engagement until one o'clock into noon or 11:00; which roughly means between 20 to 25 periods a week. In Amhara, it is from 8:00- 12:15 AM in the morning. In addition to working in O- Classes, some of them reported that they engage in other additional types of working activities including teaching adult education ( the facilitators in Enatitu Mariam and Angot No.2) and voluntary works ( the facilitator in BewuketFana).In Benishangul, all the facilitators work full- time from 8:00 Am - 5:00 PM. On the other hand, one school principal and other primary school facilitators were serving as part time O-Class facilitators at Tuni School where there was no O-Class facilitator. They have a very busy schedule with their respective duties as administrator and primary

facilitator. They teach O-Class if they have free periods; otherwise they leave the children to play on the playing grounds by themselves.

### **Interest in the work**

Data obtained from the facilitators indicate that although the salary is not attractive, all of them have interests to work as O- Class facilitators; of course with some differences in motives. Some gave intrinsic reasons, *I like to help and treat kids and I like communicating with them (Facilitator, Edget Be Andent; Facilitator, DagamawiTewodros), I want to teach (Facilitator, Tabor), like to stay with children, make them happy (facilitator, kenefa).* Younger children behave naturally and express directly what they feel; unlike older children, they do not lose hope when they fail in a task (Yekatit 23 School), inherent interest to teach, help, and shape children (facilitators in DagmawiTewodros and Alabo Schools), spending time and staying with children is entertaining and joyful (Facilitators in Tabor and Enatitu Mariam Schools).

Others gave extrinsic reasons, *I don't want to be unemployed (GurmoWeyide), I want children to grow getting good knowledge from me and then latter express indebtedness to me on becoming good citizens (Facilitator, Doge Woyebo), and I want to teach to become self- sufficient, improve my life, become civil servant (Facilitator, DolaMulu),* getting work experience will create an opportunity for future employment possibilities (the facilitator in Angot No. 2 School). The rest a mishmash orientation of both like the O- Class facilitator in Bewuket Fana School stated as *I am very much interested to work with children because I do not have any child and I cannot give birth to a child.*

### **Salary<sup>4</sup>**

The remuneration for such hard work was met with discontent. While many of the facilitators liked their job as an O-Class facilitator, almost all of them complained about their salary. The O-Class facilitator in Angot No. 2 reported that he is *not even getting any salary at all as he is working as a volunteer.* Another facilitator said, *'My salary is not enough. What is more, [they] do not equally treat us like all the other civil servants. That has to change.'* Many of them are contract workers (salaries paid by the woreda education office, school, or communities) with small salaries: *when it is compared it is too little; I am not happy with my salary (Facilitators' Interview Edget Be Andent; Hidase, Facilitator), I am not happy and I am working with a hope that one day I could grow to be permanent staff (Facilitator, Tabor), community members contribute each Birr 3.00 to pay my salary and it is too small compared to other school facilitators; I accepted it because I couldn't find another job (Facilitator, GurmoWeyede).* Another facilitator said, *"...When I compare my salary (with facilitators), I don't even call it a salary. It is like a tip given to someone to drink tea with it. I don't compare it with facilitator considering it as a salary in the first place"* (Facilitator, Doge Woyebo). The O- Class facilitator in Yekatit 23 School said *I see this work just as a volunteer work.* There are even some of the facilitators who simultaneously engage in other income generating activities to supplement their income.



### 3.3 Materials and Physical Conditions

Early childhood programs and services are basically required to retain resources and conditions that promote safety, education, and holistic development of the various domains of children. When it comes, then, to the visited O-Classes, it was observed that all of them are found in the premises of the primary schools either sharing almost all the resources of the school including facilitators or with a fenced compound of its own and separate resources, or a combination of the two-partially separated and partially combined. We can generally say that O-Classes seem to retain any one or a combination of the following features<sup>5</sup>.

The first feature belongs to O-Classes located within the compound of primary schools with shared but inadequate resources and outdoor facilities. The typifying features of such O-Classes is that they resemble the primary schools in many ways and resources deliberately put in place for O-Classes are either unavailable or inadequate. The problem here is that young children are less protected; toilets are either far or unclean, and potable water is non-existent.



**Figure 1:** At the left is an O-Class next to a primary grade class; no playground; no outdoor facilities; The second is a toilet for O-Class children in another school that is located too far. The seat is more appropriate for adults. The third one is an O-Class with only outdoor material. The fourth one is a plain playground in another O-Class.

The second group consists of O-Classes with relatively attractive, conducive and child-friendly outdoor and indoor facilities. These are usually in the central and first ranked schools. They are partly supported by NGOs, and have relatively enjoyed better provisions from education offices and schools. But, these O-Classes are of an insignificant proportion.



**Figure 2:** Playground, classroom set up, and resources in O-Classes-seem a bite better

The third group encompasses O-Classes with, in fact, separate compounds but having any one or a combination of the following features: (a) narrow outdoor space, (b) little, if any, outdoor facilities (play, learning) and services (toilets, potable water), (c) some outdoor facilities (like swinging set, balance, merry go round, see saw, slide) but all the facilities being placed very close to one another or too high to the level of children and hence making children vulnerable to accidents during play, or (d) bumpy and rough surface and therefore not convenient for children's play and interaction. Many of the O-Classes in all the four regional states belong to this third group and appear to retain a combination of these four features.



**Figure 3:** Some O-Class children playing outdoor games in a secluded area (Left). Note here that all play materials are crowded in one place and this is not safe. The ground will also be muddy when it rains. At the right are again outdoor facilities for O-Class children. Note all are crowded in one place. The slide is too high and scary.

A fourth, and perhaps, the final group of O-Classes, are the few ones with a sort of more inconvenient, poorly constructed rooms and risky environments in terms of location (e.g. the school principal, O-Class facilitators and parents alike complained that the location of Mandura Primary School is adjacent to a busy cross-country road where many cars and heavy trucks traffic the whole day and yet children are obliged to cross this road to enter the school compound), function (extremely overcrowded, i.e. about 130 children in a room), lay out, materials, or furniture (for example, the walls being made from corrugated sheets). These O-Classes need some kind of immediate intervention to reduce the vulnerability of the children (see Figure 1).



**Figure 4:** At the left is O-Classroom without chairs; children seated on a thin layer of plastic sheet. The wall is made of corrugated iron sheet and this is extremely uncomfortable in a hot area like Assosa & Bahir Dar . At the right are the O-Class children learning. No tables, the floor is uncovered and some children are with bare foot. The window is without door. Walls are plain. There is only blackboard in front of them.

As regards to indoor materials<sup>6</sup>, while blackboard and chalk are commonly available in all the classrooms (mostly alone and sometimes along with others resources), learning corners and health kits, on the contrary, are entirely unavailable in any of the O-Classes in the strictest sense. Although there are few O-Classrooms that are relatively better staffed with resources, many classrooms are, however, generally deprived of the basic resources that promote young children's independent and collaborative learning. Even the drawings and pictures of children, if at all available, are rarely seen in the walls of the room as they all are naked and no one can even tell if the residents of the classrooms are young children except, in some cases, for the miniatures chairs. There are classrooms that couldn't even have chairs (young children seated on the floor); not to talk of other enriching, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate classroom resources. Some of the meager classroom resources seem only to support reading and numeracy skills and a huge portion of the developmental domains (cognitive, emotional, social, and motor) do not seem to be attended to. Children's art is particularly useful not only in promoting imagination and creativity in young children, but also in serving as an important platform for integrating development of all other domains. Yet, field experiences (observation of classrooms and interview with facilitators) show that children in many of the O-Classes are not exposed to these artistic experiences. What is worrisome is not actually that the aids and resources that promote the holistic development of children are absent. It is rather that even their absence has not been felt by the participants; suggesting that there could be a problem in the professional competence of the facilitators. For example, asked about problems and challenges very few participants specifically articulated about these kinds of resources. References were simply made about lack of aids, play materials etc. in its entirety. This concern over the professional competence of facilitators is evident in some classrooms where there are extremely useful resources (secured through donation) but simply packed aside and not used possibly failing to appreciate their roles and how to use them. The final interesting observation is that some apparently less relevant, unused, and yet more expensive resources were observed in few classrooms-e.g. TV sets, computers.

In as much as putting child-friendly indoor and outdoor facilities is an inalienable component of quality early childhood education, so is the case of physical and environmental conditions ensuring health, safety, movement, interaction, and curiosity among young children. As regards these physical conditions<sup>7</sup>, then, few visited classrooms were found less friendly to children (suffocated, unsafe, inconvenient for interaction, and not triggering curiosity), in as much as there were few other ones that are clean, ventilated, and convenient classrooms. Windows are without doors to ventilating the rooms, floors are somehow carpeted, mattresses are put at the corner for children to rest on, and there is enough space for children to make movements and maintain smooth interaction. There are, on the other hand, others with a host of challenging physical conditions: dusty, rough, and naked floor; overcrowded and stuffy room; unattractive and naked wall; benches and tables laid in rows; a room without chair (see Fig.1).

### **3.4 Nature of Interaction in the Classroom**

Research evidences have consistently documented that one of the best indicator of good early childhood care and education programs is the quality of child to facilitator and child to child interactions. With respect to this interaction patterns<sup>8</sup>, it was observed that all the facilitators

name children by name, greet the children before proceeding to anything else and the children, too, respond but by standing from their seats. Large class size, lack of child-engaging resources, and row-based seating arrangements seem to limit child-centered interaction and set out facilitator-centered O-Classes. Interaction was mainly dominated by facilitator-directed instruction instead of child selected activities. Two-way communication between the facilitator and the children doesn't occur in the strict sense except for questioning-answering; children rarely initiate talk with the facilitator as in, for example, asking questions. That means, facilitators do not seem to listen to the children and follow their lead! They listen to themselves only. This would mean that use of the word 'facilitator' may not even be appropriate.

Child-to-child interactions don't basically occur unless during play. In fact, some facilitators have indicated that they deliberately nurture this child-to-child interaction mainly through group work but this is only possible in few O-Classes because of problems in seating arrangements and class size. Facilitators stand near the board, maintained limited physical contact, and give opportunity to answer questions only to those raising hands. Despite the nature of classrooms, children in all the classes seem to be actively involved in their learning and are, in fact, happier.

Although physical punishment was rarely used and many facilitators report to use encouragingly more preventive as well as positive disciplining measures, some of the disciplining techniques don't seem appropriate; e.g. attention diversion (than confronting the problem), challenging with difficult questions when children misbehave, and, in fact, expression of anger and aggression though in few cases. Problems in managing children's behavior were apparent in many ways. For example, some children were aggressive and fighting each other, disturbing and misbehaving particularly if the facilitators left them by themselves even for a while, they start to closing doors, standing on chairs and shouting; suggesting that facilitators' techniques tend to induce external rather than internal locus of control.



**Figure 5: O-Classes depicting indoor activities: overcrowded classrooms some even without chairs, students seem to be actively engaged in responding to the teacher seated in a row on benches.**

### **3.5 Child's Typical Day**

In many cases, schools begin between 8:00 to 9:00 AM and finish around noon. In some regions (e.g. Tigray), classes extend in to the afternoon hours. In fact, many parents in SNNP suggested for possibly extension of school time into the afternoon because the schedule was felt to be extremely short. This could also be out of a desire to concentrate on one's jobs by getting the children stay in the school under the care of facilitators. Or it could be out of a desire to have children learn more by seeing them the kind of things they have learned in the alleged shorter schedule.

Children, who are relatively older and whose homes are close to the school go to and come from school by themselves. In most cases, the schools are physically near and it does not take much time to reach to the schools. Parents accompany the children when the children are much younger particularly when the road is congested with vehicles in which case mothers, fathers, and other adults in the neighborhood alternate escorting children to reduce the risk of accidents.

Days of the children<sup>9</sup> or school time, activities, and duration are not uniform; but greatly differ from school to school. In some O-Classes, children's daily activities (both indoor and outdoor) were posted on the wall of the classrooms. In other O-Classes it appears that facilitators do not have already structured lists of activities to be performed within certain time intervals. In any case, items commonly mentioned in defining the child's typical day include rehearsing alphabets to reading and writing or language education (Amharic and English), environmental science, math, storytelling and singing songs all taught mainly through local languages, and such outdoor activities as sport and playing games that are, however, less guided and supervised by facilitators. Learning letters and numbers, identifying letters and numbers, playing, ordering letters and numbers were the most frequently mentioned activities of children in most of the O-Classes. Indoor games rarely occur because of lack of materials as well as the over crowdedness of the rooms. Arts and drawing that promote children's imagination are not included in any one of the lists given. Break time is the better time for child-to-child interaction and play either in the outdoor yard or on the way to home. Out of school time, children keep cattle, fetch water, collect firewood, take care of younger siblings; work other assignments. There is no nap time during classes mainly because the time of stay is shorter; of course there is a half hour break where children move out for an outdoor play.

### **3.6 Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement<sup>10</sup> and partnership with school provides an important support to the schools that can't otherwise be secured; parents, too, benefit from this partnership like the children and the school. The extent of this parental involvement was examined in this survey, too. Accordingly, parents indicated that they visit the school when invited; usually for annual or biannual parent meetings. Some parents report to school and check how children learn particularly when the school is near to their home. Other participants have also indicated making follow up of how children are taught and learn, their plays, how they interact with one another, talked to facilitators. In fact, in some schools and regions, parents and school blamed one another; schools saying parents are uncooperative and parents saying they are not invited.

Parents also provide different kinds of support to the school: pay for the salary of the facilitators, involve in supporting the facilitator (as in, for example, filling in gaps when absent), contribute financial support to stuffing school resources, participate in constructing rooms, fences, toilets for the O-Class, prepare child- sized stools, walling the rooms with a mix of mud and ጥጥር (chid) or any other invited school development work.

Parental follow-up of children's progress in academic and developmental terms (such as tutoring, storytelling, playing, singing songs with them) was not expressed. It was merely limited to physical and material care and they left the responsibility of education to schools and facilitators. This could mainly be because parents may not know the importance of putting time aside for their children to play and interact with them. They may lack the competence as they are from lower educational back ground.

In fact, in as much as parents contribute to the school, the schools were supposed to use the relationship to establishing better partnership that would also help using the relationship as an opportunity to build parenting skills, fighting harmful practices, and transmitting good cultural practices.

### **3.7 Support to O-Class**

Woreda education offices, school principals, O- Class facilitators and parents have reported that support to O- classes have been provided by various stakeholders. The major support secured included provision of books, training opportunity to facilitators, technical support and provision of materials and facilities. In fact, these supports have been described inadequate and the need for further concerted effort was suggested.

Regional education offices were found to provide support by planning, directing, strategizing, preparation of guiding standards and empowering O-Classes at a regional level. The woreda education offices also expressed that they provide different kinds of budgetary, technical, and administrative support to O-Class. They are supporting O-Class in planning, supervising (in all schools), developing guideline, providing educational and playing materials, offering short- term trainings, employing O- Class facilitators, allowing schools to use their internal revenues to strengthen the O-Classes etc. They support the schools in providing facilitators who specifically have the training to teach in O-Class. Schools in themselves provide different kinds of support to the O-Class: shares their limited budget by allocating the classrooms, facilitators, resources and materials. As it is known, none of the visited O-Classes have specific financial budget from the government. Therefore, schools tend to use money from the school grant budget to fulfill some requirements for O-Classes.

The communities and parents are still important sources of support to the O-Class. They have been extending their support to the program in many ways like finically and assisting in labor. NGOs have also been involved in supporting O-Class. In Tigray, two schools described that they received financial support from donors to furnish the O-Classes (Millennium and Hiwane). In Beneshangul, Mandura School has received teaching aids such as alphabets and learning cards from NGO named ANFAE. In fact, NGO support in Amhara is indeed exemplary and needs to

be explored for possibilities of further use by others. The data show that an organization named Link Ethiopia has provided 60,000 birr to build new rooms to Yekatit 23 School. This school has also 10 milk cows donated from an organization so that they can provide milk for the children; in fact, this has been exemplary to sustainable support surprisingly addressing the neglected aspect of care (nutrition) though the cost required to feed the cows could be a concern (i.e. about Birr 17 thousands were required a month). Addis Zemen School has obtained educational material supports from Professional Alliance for Development and support to construct classrooms and playing materials from World Vision. Save the Children has provided mattress to Angot No.2 O-class children through the Woreda Education Office. Amhara Development Association has given playing materials to O- Class children in Bahir Dar and Debretabor Woreda Schools.

Finally, the support of some facilitators needs mentioning<sup>11</sup> as it transcends from the academic realms to a number of strikingly non-academic support that may even need to take priority: exempt fees for children unable to make payments and also help such children with material (school, physical, and cloth) needs so that they may not dropout from class.

### **3.8 Quality, Challenges and opportunities**

#### **Quality issues**

Asked about the quality of the O-Classes, one of the Woreda Education Heads in Tigray, said *'Quality of the O-Classes is not up to the expectation. This is mainly due to the fact that the facilitators' approach is not appropriate to the age level.'* Another Woreda Education Head states that the problem is that O-Class facilitators do not follow the syllabus and are inclined to lecture instead of designing play focused activities. In the same way, head of the Teaching-Learning and Assessment section of the SNNP Regional State Education Office expressed that the O-Classes in the region generally have quality concerns as it mainly lacks materials for indoor and outdoor games and trained facilitators. On the other hand, although the Head of the Hawassa woreda education office explains that 32 schools out of 41 schools in the woreda are in good standard, many of the O-Classes suffer a number of constraints (financial, material, human) that seriously affect quality.

Woreda education office heads all agree that O-Class is a foundation for quality education. Attempts were made to continuously evaluate primary school (grades 1-4) reading performance every month. "When we compare performances of children with different background, we see students with O- Class experience having better reading skills than other students. So if this has continuity, we can solve educational quality in the school system" (*Hawassa Woreda Education Office, Head*). "When we see it from the woreda level, there is a huge difference in the quality of children's learning between those who attend O-Class with very firmly organized and conducted programs and those with children making inadequate participation" (*WolayitaSodo Education Office, Head*). Indeed, O-Class positively impacts children's learning very much. We have seen that the O-Class children are better when compared to second graders (*Boloso Sori Woreda, Education Office, Head*).

We have better schools for O- Class in this region at Hawassa City and also outside the city. First, there are O-Classes with main and assistant facilitators, who are well trained and

experienced in teaching children and setting arrangement according to the standard. In addition, the region has a positive experience in terms of providing children with playing toys and securing a special place for O- Class children to play. Even there are schools that help students who have financial difficulties with breakfast so that they can continue. We had an experience sharing practice in which better schools share experiences with other schools. So, previously we had only 1 or 2 who meet the ECCE standard but now we have 32 out of 41 O-Class schools fully functional fulfilling the standard (*Hawassa Woreda Education Office, Head*). We have trained facilitators ourselves, enabled them prepare their own lesson plans, and assigned school principals to follow them up in addition to their regular duties. We have also tried to make O-Classes to get budgetary support to make the classrooms convenient for teaching-learning so that when children come to the school they feel as if they are at home with parents. We have tried to furnish classrooms with child-sized chairs in two schools and also helped others to make improvements somehow. In addition, attempts were made to cover the floors with canvas and mattress so that children would rest on them when tired, fencing the O-Class and make them separate compounds, establish tap water, separate toilets were practice introduced in some schools (*Wolayita Sodo Education Office, Head*).

Parents have also invariably described during FGDs the contributions of their children's participation in O-Class academically, emotionally, and socially: *"my child doesn't let go of a paper and pen. She describes what she has learned and she has a lot of interest" ... Mine is also the same... My child gets a lot of knowledge from the school"* (*Parents, Edgetbeandenet*). Apart from the educational change there are behavioral changes like respecting elders, washing before eating, remove their shoe before entering their house like they do in the school, repeat what they have been learning in the school, read and write, tell us that they have home works and ask for assistance, what they have shown especially their English is great (*Parents, Hidasse*). A lot of changes observed .. In my case when my child gets up from sleep and she asks for water to wash her face and she tells us to arrange her books. She reads ABCD. So it is very good, and nothing is different from private. In sanitation it is a good progress. We are very satisfied thanks to God (*FGD, Tabor*). Now has interest for learning, tries to share with us what is learned, writes, improved sibling relationship, change in keeping hygiene (*Parents, Woyebo Mulu*). Children seemed to get good education here because they follow our commands, lesser conflicts with siblings and friends, support me with work with their own initiative, started counting, studying alphabets at home, learned about doing activities with assigned time (*Parents, DolaMulu*). Some concomitant benefits were also reported, *"children are now safer by staying away from dangerous places and spending time uselessly. There is big water around. There is also a road on which vehicles and motor bike come and go; count alphabets, read, join other kids in 1 to 5 grouping, sing songs"* (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*).

### **Challenges in conducting O-Class**

Education office heads, school principals, facilitators, and parents were asked to describe the problems experienced in relation to O-Class in their areas. Different problems were mentioned pertaining to financial and resource constraints, professional and technical competency, and administrative concerns.

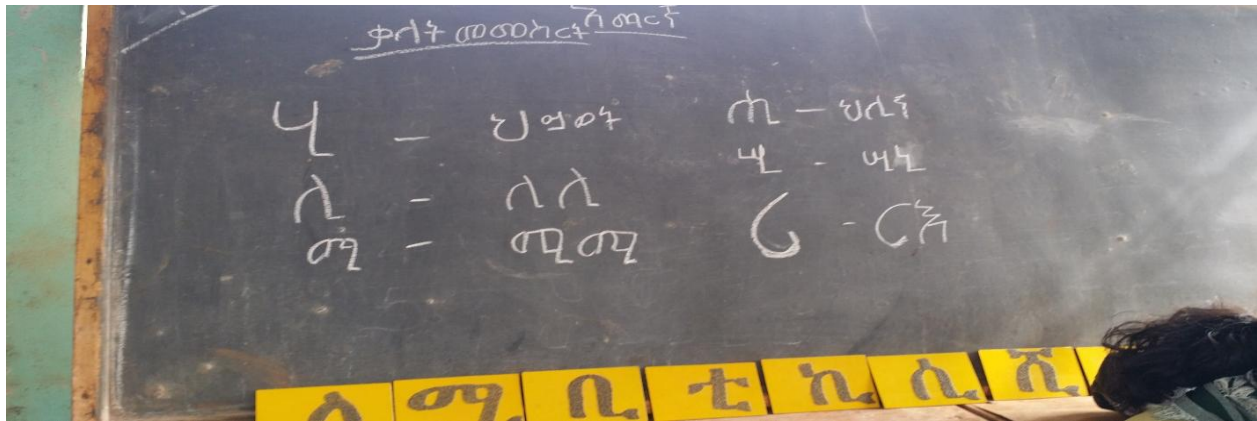


- No standard to implement the O-Class program; we are completely working by trial-and-error. We feel that we are not properly implementing the O-Class program. We don't even meet the minimum requirements (*School Principal, Tabor*). Curriculum and standard for the O-Class is needed (*Principal, DolaMulu*).
- Lack of teaching material (exercise books, story books, alphabets etc.). There is no book specifically for O-Class; the book to be used now is prepared for preschoolers of ages 4, 5 and 6. Basically the facilitator is the lead but it is better if there is a book for O-Class students like the primary school. Students should learn by doing exercises themselves (*HawassaWoreda Education Office, Head; WolyitaSodo Education Office, Head*). In Tigray, the book is not appropriate to the age group under the O-Classes. The materials they use in the schools are also different. In some schools, they use printed letters and words, with some pictures, while in others there are no printed materials except the hand-drawn pictures and labels. We have also seen an O-Class where there was no printed material at all and the children totally depend on what the facilitator writes on the board. What is more, whatever printed material is available, it is in English language. So the facilitators prepare hand-drawn representation of animals, or other everyday materials while teaching these concepts. They also prepare models of objects from locally available materials to use them in the process of helping students develop their cognition. Although their commitment to help the kids is appreciated, the fact that the drawings are a little different from what the children know or observe at home or in other printed materials may create some confusion (see photo below). Printed educational materials or other types of teaching aids in the local language would have been more useful.



**Figure 6: see the difference between what the children know and the drawing made by the facilitator**

In fact, technical problems are also evident in another classroom teaching how to construct words with the Ethiopic alphabets (see Figure 7)



**Figure 7: Facilitator teaching word construction from alphabets. Note that the facilitator used six letters to teach but s/he was correct in only one of the six.**

- A lot of facilitator-related concerns were raised: absence of regularly assigned O- Class facilitators (for example, Dagmawi Tewodros and Angot No.2 Schools), shortage of facilitators, and assistants or only main facilitators but no assistants (*School principal, Hidase*), status of facilitators as contract workers (*Wolayita Sodo Education Office, Head*), knowledge and skill gap among the facilitators or lack of skilled facilitator to teach O-Class, facilitators’ use of inappropriate approach to the age level (e.g. a Woreda Education Head in Tigray expressed that the O-Class facilitators do not follow the syllabus and are inclined to lecture instead of designing play focused activities), lack of trained and experienced facilitators for O-Class so that they can understand children at that age (*Hawassa Woreda Education Office, Head; WolyitaSodo Education Office, Head*), facilitators’ dissatisfaction with the payment, attitudinal problems among some facilitators that teaching at this level is a demotion and teaching at upper grades (7 and 8) as more satisfying (*School Principal, Tabor*).Some misbehavior of facilitators. For example, “sometimes my children notice the facilitator insulting a student”(Parents, Tabor), facilitators do not have enough knowledge in mother tongue and need to be trained; facilitators for grades 1 to 4 took such training and we have seen how it helped them, training still needed to properly used the computers, TV sets and other technology already available in the centers.
- Lack of budget, the O-Classes would not work had it not been the relentless efforts of the facilitators, and support from the community;
- Inappropriate school site, lack of adequate space for learning, interaction, dining, sporting and playing.
- Indoor and outdoor learning facilities are non-existent, inadequate or inconvenient for the children to stay longer. Lack of play materials, tap water, toilet closer to them, model classroom resources (*School principal, Gurmo Weyede*), lack of mattress for children who couldn’t seat on chair for long...(Principal, Dola Mulu);
- Shortage and overcrowded classrooms: for example, it was 1 for 85 for Yekatit 23 School,120 to 130 children in a class(*Boloso Sori Woreda, Education Office, Head*), construct

more schools within the communities (*BolosoSoriWoreda, Education Office, Head*), about 130 in one class and only with one facilitator (*Parents, DolaMulu*);

- The O-Class is not a separate compound; but combined with the formal school. In the same way, the education provision itself is like the formal school in which children come O-Class to listen what the facilitator has to say and then go. They were supposed to be taught practically through play and in a convenient condition. The toilet for the formal school is not convenient for them; the wall and floor of the classroom was supposed to be convenient (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*).The woreda education office head from Dibate woreda said O-Classes are *mostly sharing/using chairs designed for primary school students; they are also sharing toilets and water with those enrolled in the primary school*;
- When we see the class, there is nothing in the walls like ABCD or other teaching materials. This should be changed because they can learn by repeatedly watching the posters at the class. ” (*Parents, Tabor*) ;
- Child-related problems: lack of learning materials, health concerns, unmet nutritional needs;
- There are administrative gaps, lack of attention to, and support for O-Class:
  - Non-existence of responsible agents in the woreda and school who can manage/coordinate the program, organize information...(*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*) ;
  - lack of supervision and support from the sub-city education office ( Yekatit 23 School), and administrative problems because the o- classes and the primary education are far to each other in Alabo O- Class,
  - Lack of support and recognition from Woreda Education Office ( Enatitu Mariam School) ;
  - lack of attention to O-Class from schools, education offices and other supporters Lack of training in the existing leadership from top down the road to the school (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*), there is a need for a professional who is knowledgeable about and can lead this program; we all are trained for the formal program and we are managing the O-Class the way we do the formal school (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*);
  - Lack of awareness and concern among the community and parents, lower participation from parents-support and follow up is less, parents’ lack of commitment-they see the O-Class as a daycare –simply staying places, lack of follow up. Parents did not come to school and observe their children. Parents do not provide their children the necessary educational material like pencil, exercise book ( DagmawiTewodros, Tabor, EnatituMriam , Addis Zemen and Alabo Schools), parental problems to follow the children, bring them to and take them back to school, and hygienic problem of children as the place is rural (*Principal, DolaMulu*); and
  - Risky environment for children: floor is full of dust, no mats and mattresses in the room, classroom in corrugated sheets so that it becomes too hot to children, overcrowded classrooms with suffocation, abuse and harm by older children because of lack of separated compound (see Figure 4).

## Opportunities in conducting O-Class

Different opportunities are out there on the ground that would assist in the implementation of O-Class. The participants of the study, for example, reported that the availability of motivated teachers is one internal opportunity (Yekatit 23 School). In addition, the emphasis given by the government has been mentioned as an opportunity. The optimism and zeal shown by parents, the financial contributions they make to cover the salary of facilitators, their involvement in the construction of O-Classrooms fences, and chairs (see end note no.10) would suggest that parents and communities are strong and reliable sources of partnership for O-Class. In fact, there are important local community resources that can be utilized for stuffing O-Class materials, aids, and equipment. The community-based organizations are still important partners for implementing O-Class to the extent of launching classes in their own premises. No doubt also that the preist and quranic schools can also be upgraded to O-Class and serve the purpose of providing quality O-Class education to children. Different NGOs have been involved in the implementation of preprimary education in this country. These agencies are obviously important opportunities to be exploited. The fact that many universities and colleges are launching ECCE programs at diploma, BA, and MA levels would still help producing qualified personnel for O-Class.

### 3.9 Improving Quality of O-Class

Many of the suggestions given relate to alleviating many of the problems above and hence we only mention new ideas here.

- Stretch O-Class to a three year program (*Parents, Beklo Segno*), *open more classrooms as there are children not getting the opportunity*, introduce school feeding (*Parents, Kenefa*);
- Empowering the training colleges themselves in the area of ECCE (*Head of the Teaching-Learning and Assessment Desk (SNNP Education Bureau)*);
- Making O-Class to become different from the primary (*Facilitator, Woyebo Mulu*), need to run the O-Class as a separate program with a separate budget (*Principal, Dola Mulu*). So far we take a small piece from the school's budget and fulfill some of the needs of the O-Class and hence there is a need for separate budget for O-Class (*School Principal, Woyebo Mulu*). Need for separate administration; there has to be a separate body for the O-Class (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*);
- All parents also agreed on the need to extend the length of time for O-Class until 3:00 PM in the afternoon. Here are some of their voices: *"The time is too short; sometimes I don't think my child is really learning; the time should be extended; it is really important if the school is full day because children can gain better with an extended time"* (*Parents-Edget Be Andenet; Parents, Hidasse; Parents, Tabor*);

- Introduce school feeding (*Parents, Kenefa*), provide school feeding at least during famine times like the present one, (*School Principal, WoyeboMulu*), if possible school feeding. There is a catholic school nearby where children from rich parents learn. Our children know that food is being served in this school. So, when they feel hungry, they go to this school searching for food but guards don't allow them get in (*School Principal, Doge Woyebo*). Establishing school feeding practices. School feeding (*Parents, WoyeboMulu*). The woreda education ...” “(...*the one thing which I think very important and necessary is feeding system. I believe it is the most important thing to improve the quality of O-Class program. But, I have no idea how it will be achieved. Anyways, it will be better if a mechanism/system is established at least to provide dried cookies and biscuits and alike...*)”The school principal From Tuni School stated a similar opinion about school feeding: “(...*from my experience at another school, the school provided food and biscuits so that children did not miss school days. Therefore, it would be better if money is allocated to serve school feeding. For example, children may attend O-Classes consistently if we give them a cup of jolly juice. The cost for a jolly juice packet is 5 to 10 birr that may be enough for a week and it not costly...*)”School principals from Assosa primary school, Dare-Selam primary school and Zigih primary school have similar views about the issue of school feeding;
- School feeding program would have also helped in controlling children's absenteeism (*Boloso Sori Woreda, Education Office, Head*). The O- class facilitator in Enatitu Mriam School said; since *o- class children are very young, they experience hunger at the mid time of teaching learning process but no food to be given*. Children do not stand with hunger; some of them come from a bit distant place and this seems to lead to some absenteeism (*School Principal, WoyeboMulu*);and
- Establish at least one additional center in every kebele, training to all the parties all the way from the top down to the classroom (*Principal, DolaMulu*).

## **4 Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **4.1 Conclusions**

O-Class in the study sites was found to retain some strengths, opportunities, and contributions. As expected, it has contributed a lot in terms of accessing early years' education to a large number of children entitled for the service. Parents have also expressed a number of contributions of the O-Class to the development and education of the children. In fact, O-Class is one of the most feasible, useful, and relevant early years' program for the greater majority of marginalized urban as well as rural children in Ethiopia. Parents and communities have also most welcomed, appreciated, and, in some cases, favored O-Class even comparing it with some private preschools. From the observations and experiences of the various stakeholders, the opportunity given for the little kids to read and write has similarly been mentioned as one of the advantages of the O-Classes. This implies that parents, facilitators, as well as education officials praise the schools for enabling the kids identify words and numbers, irrespective of the methodology employed. Interest of facilitators is amazingly driven more intrinsically than extrinsically; despite the fact that their salaries are lower by any standard-ranges from a minimum of Birr 250.00 to a maximum of Birr 1,000.00; excluding those who work for free as volunteers. Some facilitators even use some of their income for meeting the material needs of children from poor parental background.

There are again many opportunities that could even further access and quality of O-Class provision. First, there are community institutions (e.g. churches, mosques...) that could still be employed expanding access through O-Class in areas where primary schools are either distant or already saturated. There are lots of community resources (cultural games, stories, materials and facilities) that can be exploited towards a sustainable provision of O-Classes. Second, facilitator education colleges in the regions (e.g. five colleges in SNNP) have already started training in ECCE at diploma levels; though the trainers of trainers themselves may not necessarily be ECCE professionals per se. Third, we still say that Ethiopia is a country with a history of traditional early childhood church education and these indigenous experiences need to be explored to promote early learning experiences in the community.

But as a young program, O-Class was found incarcerated with lots of problems that need to be attended before the barriers turn out to be debilitating. For convenience, these problems are classified into the following six groups:

#### **i. Problem of Purpose**

- Focus on reading and writing, other skills, attitudes missing; i.e. cognitive, social (interpersonal) and emotional skills are not given due consideration.
- Focus only on education; the care aspect is almost missing: health services and kits not available, some risky school features embedded in and outside the

classrooms, overcrowded classroom resulting in stuffy room, nutritional needs totally neglected, concerns with toilets and tap water. The only exception to some aspects of caring for children is a school in Amhara region that has cows to provide milk for the children.

## ii. Identity problem

O-Class is basically an afterthought and seems to suffer from some confusion of Identity.

- O-Class is partly a school type: its compound, budget, purpose, approach, resources, and facilitators are shared with the regular schools. Furthermore, almost all supervisors of data collection in the four regions earmarked that the way education is being envisaged, designed and delivered in O-Class is like the regular grade one students. In fact, in most of the schools visited the sessions seem like formal academic classes that we commonly find in higher grades. Children were exposed to written words on the blackboard and were asked to repeat these words time and again. The same was true even with how they were being assisted to develop numeracy.

In a way, the tendency is schooling early childhood education; introduction of the O-Class seems as if that only the entry age of primary school is lowered to age 5 or 6. The distinct developmental profile and learning needs of the young child are not seriously noted. Need to institute separate management at all levels (regional, zonal, woreda, school level), compound, resources, budget, approach, facilitators... It is a bit worrying especially when facilitators mention children's mastery of letters and numbers as the only success story.

- O-Class is partly neglected: budget, no administration lay out, no guide, no separate compound; less attention is given by the regional and woreda educational bureau, and surprisingly even less attention is given by the school itself.
- O-Class is partly independent, retains some ECCE features: in some limited schools, O-Classes were noted sharing features of preschools: separated compounds, outdoor and indoor facilities, playgrounds, classroom set up where children can sleep on mattresses and affectionate relationship with facilitators.
- O-Class is a program not only for one year: while O-Class is in principle a one year program and meant for children aged 5 to 6 years, it has been observed during field visits that even children with lesser ages are enrolled. This brings not only confusion in the identity of O-Class but poses at the same time difficulties for the children. That is, either they are to join formal school a year later yet in an age that is lesser than six or else are to repeat the one year O-Class in which case they are to be bored doing/ repeating the done thing.

**iii. Infrastructural, resource and budgetary constraints**

O-Class suffers from budgetary and resource constraints; classroom shortages, lack of toilet and water (potable and bathing), and indoor and outdoor materials like playground, resting space, puzzles, cards, models, blocks, colors, shapes, alphabets, different games, books, and other necessary materials that help both the facilitator and children. Children love school environment because it is more attractive than their home. Yet local resources and CBOs are not adequately exploited.

**iv. Orientation of O-Class**

A move towards O-Classing early childhood education in Ethiopia; need for other modalities has to be seriously taught about. Although coverage seems to be significantly improving, this is, however, for children aged 6 and above; the problem of access continues to persist for younger children of age 4 & 5 normally considered as critical & foundation periods for subsequent stages of development.

**v. Professionalism**

The professional profiles of O-Class seems negotiated because purpose is narrow; classroom interactions are less child-friendly; resources and materials are scarce in a classroom where learning can hardly occur with lecture; training competence of facilitators and relevant authorities is inadequate; there is feminization of facilitators and deprivation of O-Class children from paternal care; guidelines, standards, curriculum, and books missing.

**vi. Partnership**

Lack of coordination among stakeholders, parents not seriously involved and also assisted to getting parent education, partnerships being sporadic than deliberate; NGOs not adequately exploited and yet many of them are involved in the delivery of more expensive ECCEs Ethiopia; universities not adequately deployed; cluster schools not so much involved...



## **4.2 Recommendations**

### **1. Establishing O-Class**

The government needs to show a renewed interest and commitment to establish O-Class as a program, service, and system of its own. These include the following:

- Define purpose, prepare curriculum, set out standards, prepare guidelines, and prepare student learning materials.
- Introduce a strong administrative wing and focal agents all the way from the regional level down the road to the Zonal, Woreda, School, and Parental level; designate duties and responsibilities.
- Institute supervisory, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms and continuously supervise and regulate the practice.
- Allocate budget for O-Class, employ new facilitators, improve the salary of existing facilitators and use community contributions rather for improving quality.
- Improve opportunities for continuous professional development of facilitators, provide better career opportunities including introduction of career ladder for early childhood educators.

### **2. Empowerment**

- Professionally empower teacher education colleges so that they would provide quality early childhood care and education.
- Training of coordinators, facilitators (both preservice and in-service), and parents are imperative. Preparation of a training package for facilitators would ensure uniformity in the training of facilitators and with the required level of quality. The training of facilitators needs also to include preparation and utilization of local resources that would help addressing the resource problem. Training in local languages and utilization of technologies is still needed. Licensure of facilitators would also help improving and maintaining quality O-Class.

### **3. Construction and maintenance**

- Need to construct more O-Classrooms, toilets, water tap, playground, floors, walls and roofs (with communities).

### **4. Aids and resources**

- Aids and resources for promoting development of cognitive, motor, language, and interpersonal skills
- Improve care: improve risky environments and physical conditions, introduce school feeding at least for some of the days of the week and for one meal (with NGOs, and communities)

### **5. Building partnerships**

- Building partnership and networking would also help pooling resources for the O-Class.
- There needs to be a collaborative venture among relevant stakeholders to addressing the multi-faced problems of O-Class delivery.

### **6. Demonstration school**

- Given the significant variations in the way O-Class is conducted across schools and woredas, there is a need to establish, in addition to preparing standards, at least one demonstration quality school for others to be emulated in each Woreda.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup>The total number of schools and children enrolled in O-Class in SNNP are 5,759, and 1,088,540 respectively; suggesting that the school-child ratio is about 1: 189. This also means there are possibilities of having two O-Class sections in some schools. In the three woredas and nine schools visited, the average ratio ranges from 1 to 144 in Hawassa, 161 in Bolososori, and 243 in WoliyitaSodo.

<sup>2</sup>Exceptions to these experiences could be one child found in SNNP, five in Amhara, and two in Tigray. That is, one child was found with special needs in one of the nine schools in SNNP, “There is one child with a disability in both hands and with no special support given to him” (Dola, observation). In fact, there is a special place inside the compound of the O class in another school (Tabor primary school) specially reserved for children special needs but with no students so far (Observation, Tabor). In the BewuketFana and Tabor Elementary Schools of the Amhara region, some children with special needs were noted. In BewuketFana, the O- Class teacher reported that there are two children who have clear problems that look autism for one and conduct disorders for the other. There are also two children who appear to be gifted and talented. In Tabor Elementary School, there was one child with hearing impairment. It was reported by the teachers that there was no special consideration and treatment given to these children. In one of the schools in Tigray, the data collector noted two kids with disabilities (one with hearing disability and the other with speech disability).

<sup>3</sup>The following factors were mentioned as threats making children vulnerable to absenteeism and dropouts:

- *Age and health problems: There are 2 female and 3 male dropouts; the reason is that three of them were very young and others were because of health problems” (School Principal Interview-EdgetBeandenet, center).*
- *Weather: children may be absent when it rains and it is cold (School principal, Hidase; school principal, GurmoWeyedo).*
- *Holidays: May not come during holidays; come bit by bit (Facilitator, WoyeboMulu).*
- *Professional reasons: Children are absent when they are board because we don’t have any materials for them to play with (School principal, Hidase). I have the experience and I know children’s behavior; they can only be absent if they don’t like the way you teach, if you don’t give them love...then they dislike coming (Facilitator, Edget Be andent).*
- *Change of residences of the family (in the cases of DagmawiTewodros and Alabo Primary Schools) and because of the absence of the o- class teacher from the school due to illness or some other cases (Addis Amba Primary School in Bahair Dar).*
- *Sickness and contagious disease: children can only be absent when they are sick, experience hunger, and when there is a contagious disease that require them go to clinics for vaccination (School principal, Beklo Segno). An O-Class teacher in the Enatitu Mariam Elementary School of Debretabor town expressed that some parents do not send their children regularly because of their fears that their children will get infected by common cold as a result of their interactions with others in the school.*
- *Hunger: Particularly hunger was repeatedly mentioned, “This is a time of famine in the area and children are not properly feed at home and this makes them absent; but around the month of Hidar (or November), there is no problem and attendance is good” (School Principal, WoyeboMulu). When*

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*there is no food to eat and shortage of water to drink they can't tolerate because they are small and out of town (Facilitator, Doge Woyebo).*

<sup>4</sup>*The amount of money given to O- Class facilitators is not the same. Most of the teachers employed by the government education offices get 500 birr per month. But there is an exception. For example, the o- class teacher in Alaboschool gets 1000 birr per month although the source is the Woreda Education Office. The teachers in BewuketFana School get 800 birr per month and sources are the contributions of parents of the o- class children. Enatitu Mariam School pays salary to the o- class teacher from the school's internal revenue.*

<sup>5</sup>*There are not only obvious school differences but there are at the same time regional differences as can be noted below. In SNNP, there are schools where there are no materials for outdoor games and the space itself is too narrow (Dola, Observation; GurmoWoyede, Observation; Hidasse, Observation), or may not even exist (Doge Woyebo, Observation) or there is a separate space or playground for the children, but no outdoor facilities (Observation, Tabor) or only one locally made swing set or jewajewe (Kenefa, Observation). There are in some other cases outdoor facilities as swing set, balance, merry go round, see saw, slide (Observation, Edget Be Andenet; Beklo Segno, Observation) but all of these facilities placed very close to one another (Observation, Edget Be Andenet) or too high to the level of children and hence making children vulnerable to accidents during play (WoyeboMulu, Observation). For example, it was noted in one O-Class that there is one wooden material for children to swung on but beyond the height of the children, and one other material (pole on which a ball made of cloth was suspended) for children to play with but it is for older children (WoyeboMulu, Observation). We can present physical conditions in three groups: okay, partially okay, and not okay. One of the O-Class appears to be in a good shape; separated from the primary school, children have their own tap water which they physically access and the playground is more than sufficient (Observation, Tabor). Four of the O-Classes are only partially okay in the sense that although the outdoor space appears wider, separated, and had its own toilet, it is filled with bumpy and rough surface and therefore not convenient for the children (WoyeboMulu, Observation). In some cases, children have separate compound, tap water which they physically access, but the playground is crowded (Observation, Edget Be Andenet). There is separate compound and outdoor materials but the ground is muddy/ dusty and not convenient for children, no potable water, toilet is not constructed for children (Beklo Segno, Observation). Or there is in fact separate compound for O-Class but not clean and convenient, no play materials, toilet not clean, no potable water (GurmoWoyede, Observation). Contrary to these two groups is the third one in which the physical environment is not child friendly, the playground is not sufficient, and crowded (Hidasse, Observation). No play space, no materials, toilet shared with others and far, no potable water, and, hence, no facility for children except for the classroom (Dola, observation). There is nothing intentionally made for O-Class children; they share everything with regular students, the O-Class children do not have anything convenient (Doge Woyebo, Observation). Physical environment is not convenient for the children: playground is narrow, play materials are not fulfilled, toilet is shared with other students in the school, no tap water in the school (Kenefa, Observation). Common in all of them is the fact that there are no meal services, and many still lacked potable water.*

*In Tigray, all of the O-classes are found in the premises of the primary schools and whatever facility there is, it is meant for all the students in the primary schools. However, in most of these schools we did not witness things like slides, swings, and balances that are commonly found in many preschools. It was only in two schools that we've seen play facilities of the type mentioned above. For instance, in the school called GerebTsedo there is one although it is very old, damaged but still being used both by the kids in O-classes and the primary grades. Whereas in Hiwane they have newly installed slides, swings, balances that are being used by these children. Wooden blocks, puzzles, brooms, shovels, or other types of materials that encourage kids to be involved in make believe play and contribute to their physical and*

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cognitive development are not found in most schools. We did not also see drawing materials, such as markers and colors using which students can actively scribble various things. Toilets are available in most of the schools, but in some they are not being used. For instance, in one school called Kisanet, we learned that the toilet is not being used due to lack of water. In all the schools, except Hiwane that has built one specifically for O-class, the toilets are shared with every student in the primary grades. None of the schools have first aid toolkits. Some of the schools do not have enough play grounds. So whatever students have to do during break or as part of the O-class sessions, they do it outside the school premises. But even in schools where space is not a problem, they do not have appropriate facilities for children to play with. So the school environment does not encourage the kids to actively engage in play and socialize with their age mates. Here is what one of the O-class teachers said regarding the shortage of play facilities in one of the schools under level 1: 'To begin with, the children do not have their own classrooms and required facilities. As the children stay in the school until 3:00PM, they need play materials.' It is not just the lack of facilities in the O-classes that is worrying. It is hard to believe that the water taps in some of these schools are not being used due to shortage of water. The O-class teachers in these schools described that they do not allow the kids to bring food to school as they are not able to provide them with water, both for drinking and washing. This implies that the teachers are not able to practically teach the kids to flush the toilets and wash their hands afterwards. In schools that extend the programs till the afternoon, the children bring water from their homes.

All visited schools in Benishangul have good schoolyard and playing facilities for the children except for Gilgel-Beles primary school. In addition, Mandura, Dibate and Tuni schools have slides, wheels, scale, pinwheel and ropeswing games. Par primary school has balls for every student but no other material for playing. There are also some other entertaining materials for the children donated from the regional education bureau and NGOs. In all the O-class schools there is no child-friendly playground, toilet and potable water of their own. Rather the O-class students share with the primary school students. Likewise, Gilgel-Beles and Mandura schools do not have water supply at all in the compound, neither in nearby areas.

The observation data show that there are o- classes with relatively better outdoor facilities in Amhara. These schools are Yekatit 23, BewuketFana, DagmawiTewodros, Tabor and Addis Zemen. In these schools, there are adequate outdoor playing spaces and playing materials such as balls, sliding playing materials, and ጥንቅቅናጠረጠሪ. In most cases, the playing materials are accessible and child friendly to the o- class children. Although these facilities are available, there are issues that need attention. For example, some of the playing materials have been broken (Tabor School) and the place at the gate of the room in BeuketFana is not conducive. It is not leveled and there are stones that may be risks for the o-class children. In addition, in BewuketFana, the outdoor playing space is far from the o- classroom. The playing materials in this same school do not fit to the developmental levels of the o-class children. They are materials that look appropriate for elementary school children. On the other hand, Addis Amba, Angot No.2 and Alabo Schools do not have adequate outdoor physical facilities. They neither have adequate playing spaces nor playing materials. Besides, the physical environments in general are not child friendly. There is a shortage of playing space in Enatitu Mariam School and the outdoor environment of the school is not attractive to children. In Angot No. 2 School, there are no playing materials except ball and the playing field is not good. Furthermore, there is not thing except the classroom in Alabo o- class. In Addis Amaba, there was a pile of soil in front of the o- class. Tabor and Addis Zemen Schools are located in compounds separated from the primary classes. Alabo o- class is found in the Kebelle Administration Office and it is physically separated from the Alabo Primary School. Children in DagmawiTewodrs and Enatitu Mariam o- classes look unsafe and unprotected since they are located close to the major roads. They are not well fenced. Data were collected regarding the availabilities and adequacy of food, water and toilet in the studied o- classes. It was found out that food and feeding services is not available in all o- classes with the exception of Yekatit 23 School in the city of

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bahir Dar. In this school, there are 10 milk cows and children are provided milk in the school. They are also given breads (parents contribute 20 birr per month for the bread). In most of the schools, o- class children share water and toilet services with primary school children (BewuketFana, Addis Amba, DagmawiTewodros, Tabor and Angot No.2). O- class children in Yekatit 23 are provided with water and toilet services separately, not shared by other children in the school. In Addis Zemen School, o- class children have their own separate toilet but no water service. It was also observed that in Enatititu Mariam and Alabo Schools, there were no water and toilet services.

<sup>6</sup>As in the outdoor facilities, there are school as well as regional differences as can be noted below.

**Indoor Physical Facilities in Benishangul:** All the materials that are used in teaching are letter-figures, numeric figures, different models, and cards, teaching aids posted on the wall, pictures, cartoons, paintings and different local materials. As a special case, Selam-Ber primary school uses additional materials like radio and game. However, some schools like Gilgel-Beles primary school, Tuni, Zigih and Par schools have no teaching aids in the class except for alphabets. A teacher from Zigih stated about the shortage of teaching materials as follows: (“There are no books prepared for the children. There are no books. And there are problems in the school; there is no teaching material, no chairs and tables for the children”).

**Indoor Physical Facilities of O- Classes in Amhara:** Like that of the outdoor physical facilities, the physical facilities in the o-classrooms vary from school to school. There are schools such as Yekatit 23, BewuketFana, DagmawiTewodros, Tabor and Addis Zemen that have relatively better classroom conditions. For example, Yekatit 23 and Addis Zemen Schools have good ventilation and lighting systems. The classroom in DagmawiTewodros is clean and safe. In relative terms, the physical spaces in the classrooms of these schools are adequate for children to move easily. Other schools like Enatititu Mariam, Angot No 2. And AlaboSchhols have very impoverished classroom conditions. The rooms in Enatititu Mariam and Alabo Schools are unclean, narrow, crowded, and have lack of adequate spaces for children to move here and there. Similarly, the floors of Addis Amba and Angot No.2 Schools are full of dust particles with no adequate space for children to move. As compared to other schools observed in Amhara Region, Yekatit 23, BewuketFana, DagmawiTewodros, Tabor, Enatititu Mariam and AddisZemen have relatively more number of playing and educational materials including pictures, letters, numbers, blackboard, chalk, duster, photographs of o- class children and a paper with future career visions of o- class children ( only in BewuketFana school), cards, and different playing materials. Although not used by the teacher because of her lack of skills, there were six computers provided by Bahir Dar University in the Yekatit 23 School. There were very limited educational and playing materials in Angot No.2 and Alabo Schools like blackboard, chalk and balls. Another important aspect of the o- classroom situation observed was the availability of chairs, tables, mattress, mat and others. In this regard, there were chairs in the schools of BewuketFana, DagamawiTewodros, Tabor, Addis Zemen, Angot and Alabo Schools. However, except the chairs in Addis Zemen School, the chairs in all other schools do not fit to the o-class children. These are chairs used by primary school students. In Addis Amba and EnatitituMariam Schools, children sat down in mats, while in Yekatit 23, children were sitting on mattresses during the observation sessions. In Tabor School there were mats and mattresses used by children during sleep. Nearly, in all schools studied, there were no separate rooms for children to fall asleep. In addition, there was no any learning corner in all the schools. Emergency service and first aid providing service materials and equipment are not available in all the schools.

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**Indoor facilities in Beneshangul (Learning Materials, Teaching Aids, Seating Arrangements, Learning Corners, Types of Chairs and Desks, Lighting System and Ventilation, Health Kits, etc.):** In almost all the schools, the physical condition is not fully child-friendly. In some of the schools, we observed that they have a shortage of teaching aids. Some classrooms like Gilgel-Beles, Assosa and Dare-Selam primary schools are not protected from wind and rain. The windows are broken. Seating arrangements are very poor. No learning corners and no health kits. The lighting system and ventilation is naturally good in all the schools. However, none of the classrooms are specially designed for O-class children; instead one of the classrooms constructed for regular students is used as O-class room. Concerning seating arrangement, we observed child-friendly chairs and desks in Selam-Ber and Mandura schools only. At the worst edge, we observed one special condition at Tuni primary school. It uses locally constructed hut for o-classes. The hut has lost the ceilings, the wall was not mud covered, not protected from wind, has no chairs and, simply, it was collapsing by the time our team made the observation.

<sup>7</sup>Physical conditions of the visited O-Classes still show some encouraging and discouraging experiences with some regional and school variations:

**Physical condition in SNNP:** O-Class is ventilated, clean (Kenefa, Observation), and wide room (GurmoWoyede, Observation) in few cases. In other cases, the classroom is neat (Hidasse, Observation; Beklo Segno, Observation), illuminated (Tabor, Observation) or may not generally be a source of concern for children's wellbeing (WoyeboMulu, Observation) but appears inconvenient for young children's learning because there is no ventilation in five of the nine classrooms. In a bit extreme form, classroom is approximately 5m X 4m but contains 73 students; only one window and no adequate ventilation; floor is naked ground of soil and not clean; not safe for children (Doge Woyebo, Observation). But, in all the classrooms, there are no health kits of whatsoever. As regards classroom furniture, there are child-sized chairs that are different from the primary school in seven schools but there are no chair at all (Dola, observation) or the seats were collected from different houses in the communities and are inconvenient for children as they are made for household purpose (Doge Woyebo, Observation). There is enough space in the classroom and children can freely move in four of the observed classrooms. But, in the rest of the five classrooms free movement is impossible either because of large number of children making the classroom become overcrowded or because of the type of seats put in place (benches on which children seat in rows, connected desks) or both. For example, children seat in a row of benches collected from individual households. There were some children absent on the date this observation was made. Otherwise, the teacher told the observers that they would have seen children seating on the ground because of lack of space (Doge Woyebo, Observation). In another case, no chairs existed in the classroom and children seat on plastic mat covering only part of the floor. So to get a covered space, children seat very closely to one another such that they can't move from place to place (Dola, observation). With respect to educational materials, there are some donated materials in one school like TVs, computer, radio, DVD, mini blackboards, playing materials, and educational aids (Hidasse, Observation) but not used because teachers are not trained to use them.

For example, the Alabo O- Class teacher in Amhara region reported; the floor is full of dust, no mats and mattresses, in the room there are properties of the Kebele Administration Office, since there are metals, we asked them to take it another place because it will harm children.

**Physical condition in the classroom in Tigray:** In some of the schools visited there are printed letters and pictures, either hanging on ropes across the classroom or posted on the walls. In others the letters and pictures are made by the teachers themselves. Still in others there was nothing in display except the chalk and the chalkboard. What is more, most of what can be considered as teaching aid is produced by the teachers themselves. See how one teacher describes the classroom situation: 'As compared to other similar privately owned schools in the area, there is a very serious shortage of required facilities. The



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school environment is not conducive for the kids to play and desks are old and big in size. I brought these desks myself by selecting the better ones. In general the school is not inviting for children and there are no materials they can use for play. 'The sitting arrangement in most of the O-classes is the same as the one we commonly see in the primary or secondary schools. The kids sit in desks of bigger size, in some cases up to five of them being sandwiched without any learning material to read or to play with. It was only in one school that we witnessed chairs and tables designed for these age groups. We were told that this school, called Hiwane, has received some donor support from Save the Children specifically for O-class students. In this school, the sitting arrangement is designed in such a way that the kids can sit in round tables. In one school called Hawatsu that was selected in what is labeled as remote area, the O-classroom is made of corrugated iron sheet. As there is no single chair or desk for the students, all of them sit on the dusty floor, partly covered by plastic sheets. Worse even there is no printed material or teacher made learning support the children can use. The teacher in this school mentioned that parents complained about the fact that the kids are sitting on the floor. See the extract below: 'Some parents accuse us for the fact that their kids are sitting on the dust and become unclean'. With regard to the improvements needed, a group of parents who participated in the focus group discussion mentioned the following: 'The Classroom is not good and there is no required material. Because of the dust in the classroom our children become sick. We expect the government to construct classrooms and supply the required facilities.'

<sup>8</sup>Observation of the nature of interactions in O-Classes has yielded many interesting features. All the teachers name children by name, greet the children before proceeding to anything else and the children, too, respond but by standing from their seats. Large class size, lack of child-engaging resources, and

**The nature of interaction in the classroom in SNNP:** All the teachers name children by name, greet the children before proceeding to anything and the children respond by standing from their chairs. In SNNP, at the time we get into the classroom for observation, teachers and children were found engaged in some kind of learning/ teaching activities: a teacher reading a book for the children (Observation, Edget Be Andenet), teaching children English alphabets (GurmoWoyede, Observation) inviting at the same time children read alphabets turn by turn (Kenefa, Observation), teaching addition and subtraction (Beklo Segno, Observation), matching animals from environmental science book inviting children to do the match (Dola, observation). It was also noted that a child was teaching the rest about letter identification (Hidasse, Observation), children were in a group exercise (Observation, Tabor), were reading English alphabets on the board one at a time (WoyeboMulu, Observation).

Two-way communication between the teacher and the children doesn't occur in the strict sense except for questioning-answering; children rarely initiate talk with the teacher as in, for example, asking questions. Child-to-child interactions don't basically occur unless during play. In fact, facilitators have indicated that they deliberately nurture this child-to-child interaction: give them group work (Facilitator, Tabor; Facilitator, Doge Woyebo) and also get them use their own black boards to learn from one another (Facilitator, Edget Be andent), put strong and weak ones in one group and then get them support each other (Facilitator, Kenefa), follow this 1 to 5 approach of organizing children for learning (Facilitator, DolaMulu), let the student who writes help the others who don't (Hidase, Facilitator), give them tasks in pair such that one would ask and another would answer (Facilitator, Beklo Segno).

In nearly half of the classrooms, teachers stand near the board; as the classrooms are overcrowded or arrangement of seats was inconvenient for movement, they maintained limited physical contact, and give opportunity to answer questions only those raising hands. Despite the nature of classrooms, children in all the classes seem to be actively involved in their learning and are happier. All the facilitators interviewed indicate that they tell stories to children along the meanings and also require the children to do the same, play with the children, and sing with them. When children misbehave, facilitators use a

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variety of techniques to manage the problem except for physical punishment. These include preventive measures, positive disciplining, attention diversion, and others: I teach through play, songs (Facilitator, WoyeboMulu), clapping hands, songs, drama; but no beating because if you beat them they don't come again (Facilitator, DolaMulu). I let them do sport, make him/her sit separately and explain why (Hidase, Facilitator). I advise (Facilitator, Tabor) and reprimand (GurmoWeyede), but don't beat them (Facilitator, Kenefa). I try to divert their attention by singing and storytelling (Teachers' Interview Edget Be Andenet). I ask them count alphabets or numbers so that knowing that they don't answer what is being asked they fear and stop. If they continue misbehaving, I get them face the wall and tell others that misbehaving will result this. If it still persists, then I engage them in different plays, songs so that they forget misbehaving in due course (Bekelo Segno, Facilitator). It appears that the measures taken wouldn't harm the relationship because facilitators report to do it with love, care, and understanding with the purpose to improve communication between them.

**The nature of interaction in the classroom in Tigray:** In many of the classes observed, it was common for the O-class teachers to write Geez or English letters, read them aloud, and ask the children to repeat the letters after her. In some of the others, the children were invited to do the same, with the rest of them repeating out loud what was being said, a practice otherwise known as rote learning. In some cases, though, the kids were just saying the letters without even seeing on the blackboard. What may be considered 'child-facilitator interaction' is what we observed in one school. In this school every one of the children was given mini blackboards to scribble the letters the teacher has shown them. The teacher was then revolving around the students, praising those who did correctly, and correcting those who did not. The children were also being directed to study numbers either by following what the teacher says or by reading printed numbers. With the exception of few teachers that provided opportunities for students to interact with other students or with the teachers, many of them expose the students to long hours of literacy and numeracy instruction. So the classroom experience was much more academic at the expense of play dominated learning environment recommended for preschool kids. It was mainly dominated by teacher directed instruction instead of child selected activities. Of course some of the teachers have the knowledge of how different children behave and what kind of approach would be more appropriate. With the limited resource in place they try their very best to help the kids become active. See an extract from what one of the teachers said: 'Sometimes the children get bored. It is only for some minutes that they give attention to a topic. They cannot stay longer in one seat like grownups. They want to touch things. So I keep on changing the play or the other tasks after a brief period.' The description above given by one of the teachers was not, however, implemented in some of the classes we observed. Most of the sessions were long and dominated by teachers, with students repeating the words. At times some of the kids were not even able to follow the teacher's lectures and take a nap.

Equally if not more important to lack of facilities is the limited number of O-class teachers. In Tigray, on average a single O-class teacher has to deal with 46 children. It is practically difficult for the teacher to design tasks that engage every one of the kids, make a follow up of their progress, and coach them.

**Quality of interaction in Beneshangul:** Generally speaking, interactions between children and children as well as between teachers and children seem very good in most of the schools except for a few cases where children quarrel among themselves at Zigi. Similarly, teacher-children relationships at Gilgel-beles and Tuniare like slave -master. Our observation finds that there are teachers who still believe that anger is important to correct children's misbehavior.

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According to our observation, the interaction between children was very good. Children were playing, chatting, singing and laughing together. Generally speaking, we can conclude that they have smooth child to child interaction. However, rather naturally, there were some students who misbehave. We observed a student chewing gum in the classroom at Gilgel-Beles and some children were aggressive and fighting each other at Zigih school. Similarly, we observed disturbing children in Assosa, Dare-Selam and Mandura Schools. If the teachers left them by themselves even for a moment, they start to closing doors, standing on chairs and shouting.

There is good interaction observed between children of O-class and their teachers. The teachers called their pupils by their names, hug them, smiled to them, chatted with them, sang for them and played with them. The teachers have strong care towards their students. Still, in some schools like Gilgel-Beles and Tuni, the teacher-student relationship is like master and slave. The teacher asks the students furiously and the students reply fearfully. So we can see that the student - teacher relationships are not all smooth and with care as needed. From our observations, it is difficult to confidently assure that teachers do not punish children rather harshly. The teacher from Mandura School believes there should be a certain level of reservation while interacting with children. She said "I dance with them, I sing with them, I play etc. I am very close to the children. However, it is not always good to be very close to the students. I believe it is important to show some severity. For example, when I tell them to stop disturbing, they do not pay attention because of our friendliness. So, I have to be serious sometimes. But the school does not allow me to be weighty for children."

**Nature of interaction in Amhara:** The data obtained through observation as well as from the o- class teachers revealed that with the exceptions of Addis Amba and Angot No.2 Schools, there was good flow of communication and interaction between the o- class teachers and their respective o- class children. It was consistently observed in the schools that o- class teachers greet children and children in their own turns actively responded to the greetings. In addition, except the teacher from Angot No. 2. School, all other teachers called children by their names. The o- class teachers reported that to facilitate communication with children, they approach and treat children in a motherly care, love and affectionate ways. In addition to this psychological proximity, teachers had good and close physical contacts with children. For example, the o- class teacher in Alabo School was hugging and holding the hands of children during the observation time. The teachers in Bewuket Fana and Addis Zemen Schools were going to the children's seat and physically approaching them. They were physically near to children. O- class teachers in Dagmawi Tewodros, Tabor, Enatitu Mariam, and Yekatit 23 were in good physical closeness to children. However, the o-teacher in Angot No.2 School was physically distant from the children during the observation time. Various mechanisms used by o- class teachers to facilitate the interaction between the teachers and o-class children were reported by o- class teachers during the interview sessions. These mechanisms were singing songs together, sitting with children, playing with children, telling stories, use concrete examples, asking questions, inviting children for questions and discussion, and providing reinforcements. Some of the stories narrated and interpreted by the teachers to children include stories from Aleqa Gebrehana (teacher in Addis Zemen) and from the book entitled Ayiresamna Ydegsew Sira (teacher in Angot No. 2 School) as well as Astewayu Leul Zereyaccob (teacher in Dagmawi Tewodros). In most cases, these stories were described to children concretely in such a way that children can understand the core messages of the stories and learn from them. During the observation, children were engaging in different kinds of activities. They were playing (Tabor), identifying and producing words from letters (Addis Amba, Addis Zemen, Angot No.2, and Alabo Schools), learning letters individually and in-groups, singing, listening stories ( Yekatit 23, Bewuket Fana and Dagmawi Tewodros Schools). It was observed that in all the schools, children were actively playing and enjoyed the tasks they were doing. The use of rewards in dealing with the behaviors of children was reported by o- class teachers. It was reported that teachers use rewards when children come up with answers to questions asked by the teachers and when they display desirable behaviors instead of disturbing. To prevent and stop disturbing

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behaviors of children, teachers reported that they use advice, telling them not to behave badly (teachers in Yekatit 23, DgamawiTewodros, Tabor, Enatitu Mariam), holding privileges, giving extra tasks, changing seats ( BewuketFana), making them play, expressing anger ( Angot No.2), calling parents and discuss with them, soothing and mediating conflicts within kids themselves (Alabo), and expressing anger (teachers in Angot No.2 and Alabo Schools). As the report from the o- class teachers indicate, no physical punishment was used to deal with the misbehaviors of children.

The observation data showed that all o – class children of the study schools had communications and interactions with each other. They were playing, talking, singing and learning letters and numbers together.

<sup>9</sup>School time is from 8:00 to 11:30 including break time. List of activities seem varied from school to school but this could mainly be a memory failure of the details as they all are governed by the teacher guide for O-Class. Common in the list they gave are, however, reading and writing or language education (Amharic and English), environmental science, math, storytelling and songs all taught mainly through local languages, and such outdoor activities as sport and playing games that are, however, less guided and supervised by facilitators. Indoor games rarely occur because of lack of materials as well as the over crowdedness of the rooms. Arts and drawing that promote children's imagination are not included in any one of the lists given. Lesson is over and students are set free at 5:40. Nobody takes them home; they do it themselves (Facilitator, WoyeboMulu).During break, they go to toilet; go out of the compound and buy sugarcane to eat. Out of school time, they keep cattle, fetch water for the family, collect firewood, take care of younger siblings; work the assignments we give them (Facilitator, Doge Woyebo). Are released from school at 5:30 and no parent comes to collect them; they rather go home in groups (Facilitator, Doge Woyebo).Children play outdoor game from 4:30 to 5:20 by themselves and the teacher is not involved; no materials provided for play; released at 5:00 (Facilitator, DolaMulu).

**Child activities in Beneshangul:** Children's daily activities (both indoor and outdoor) were posted in the wall by their teachers in some schools. The daily activities includeclass room learning time, playing time, educational games and rest time. More specifically, the indoor classroom activities that children do with the teachers are rehearsing alphabets, numbers, games, riddles, story tales, singing songs and other related educational games. Likewise, children have nearly equal time for outdoor activities. Teachers allow children to play what they wish to play outside classrooms either on playing facilities or freely on ground yards. However, indoor activities take the lead in school with than playing facilities. The time allocated for indoor and outdoor activities is an hour for each day. In other words, children stay 2 to 2 and half hours in the school every day. Children are expected to arrive at 8:00 o'clock in the morning but they sometimes come an hour late unless they have someone to bring them to the school. For example, at Gilgel-BelesSchool, some children arrive at theschool at 9:00 o'clock in the morning. The team observed no specific rest time allocated;rather the program for rest is included in theoutdoor activities.

**Arrival to School in Amhara:** According to the report of o- class teachers, the o – class progarmme begins at 8 AM in the morning. In most of the schools ( BewuketFana,AdisZemen, Angot No.2), children arrive at their schools at 8:00 AM . In one of the o- classes of Amhara Region (Yekatit 23), children reach at school from 1:30 to 8:00AM. Children in DagamawiTewodros, Enatitu Mariam and Alabo Schools come to school between 8:00 and 8:30 AM. It was mentioned by the o- class teachers that most children (younger ones), are accompanied by their parents, or siblings, or other children in their ways to school. O- class teachers and parents indicated that some children, who are relatively older and whose homes are close to the school go by themselves. There are also conditions when some o- class teachers accompany children when they go to school. In most cases, the schools are physically near and it does not take much time to reach to the schools.

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**Indoor Activities in Amhara:** As indicated in table 3, the types of indoor daily activities of the o- class children and their duration are not uniform. It appears that o- class teachers do not have already structured lists of activities to be performed within certain time intervals. Learning letters and numbers, identifying letters and numbers, plying, ordering letters and numbers were the most frequently mentioned activities of children in most of the o-classes. The time that a child's activity takes varies from activity to activity and from school to school. The data taken from the o- class teachers tell us that like that of the indoor activities, no uniformity in the types of outdoor activities of o-class children. It is surprising that in some of the schools like Angot No.2 and AaddisAmba the outdoor activities were not clearly identified and specified by the o-class teachers. The same is true with the durations of the activities. It is indicated in table 4 that the durations of outdoor activities in BewuketFana and Addis Zemen were not specified. Most teacher respondents reported that children engage in any type of activity that they want do during their rest/break time. Most of them play different games they have seen from children in the school and some others go to toilets, drink water where available. In Yekatit 23, they take milk and breads during their break times.

**Time to Leave in Amhara:** The times that o- class children leave the schools vary greatly. O-class children of Tabor, Enatitu Mariam, and Alabo Schools leave early around 10:30AM in the morning where as those who are attending o- classes in BewuketFana, Addis Amba and Addis Zemen go back to their homes at 11: AM. Finally, children in Yekatit 23 and DagmawiTewodros stay in the school up to 12:15 AM and then go to their homes. Similar to their ways to school, some children go with others like parents, siblings, neighboring children, o- class teachers and some others go back home individually. Most FGD participant parents requested that the duration for o- classes should be extended to some hours in the afternoon.

<sup>10</sup>In SNNP, all the participating parents in the FGDs indicated that they visit the school when invited; usually for annual or biannual parent meetings. Some parents report to school to school and check how children learn particularly when the school is near. Visiting the O-Class, "I have seen that the teacher brings himself down to the level of the children and teach by playing with them. Other parents also do the same" (Parent, GurmoWeyede). I went three times into the classroom with my child and watched how they are taught. I have also learned during this time and enjoyed being there. Other participants have also indicated making follow up of how children are taught and learn, their plays, how they interact with one another, talked to teachers what is being required and then provided support (Parents, DolaMulu). Parents also involve in the O-Class school in many other ways. There are O-Classes in which parents pay for the salary of the facilitator, no matter how small it could be (Parents, GurmoWeyede; Parents, Kenefa). In some cases, parents may involve in supporting the facilitator, "when the teacher is absent, we sometimes go to the O-Class and supervise the children so that they may abstain from disturbing and engage them in play..." (Parent, Beklo Segno). There are situations in which parents also participate in constructing room for the O-Class (School Principal, Doge Woyebo), fence, toilets, prepare child- sized stools, walling the rooms with a mix of mud and β.፫ 'chid' (Parent, WoyeboMulu; Parent, Beklo Segno), or any other invited school development work (School Principal, Doge Woyebo). Parents claim to consistently take the children to and bring them back from school when they children are younger, if there are no other older children in the neighborhood, or if there are security concerns, "It is an obligation for us to bring and take our children because there are lots of motorcycles and streets to cross. And, also because if you send them alone they might end up playing somewhere instead of going to the school (Parents, Hidasse,). Most of the children come by their own, but children who are 4 or less are taken by their parents (Facilitator, Tabor; Facilitators, Edget Be andent). If children are to be escorted by someone, this is done either alternatively by parents and other adults having children, or with the help of older siblings.

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In Amhara, all focus group discussants stressed that they are interested to send their children to the o-classes for various reasons including the following:

- Parents need their children to get good knowledge and skills. One FGD participant in Addis Zemen reported as a person who is not educated cannot lead his/her life and could not benefit others. They further said that when children go to the next level (grade one), they know many things including identifying letters, know how to behave in acceptable ways, and they know their environments. So they will have a good foundation (FGD participants in Yekatit 23, Enatitu Mariam Schools).
- It is good when children begin schooling early and it will be easy for them when they join the next level. In addition, it was reported that since they create problems when children stay in the home, it is good to send them to school (FGD participants in Angot No.2 School).
- O-classes provide better educational services to children than private preschools (Addis Amba and Bewuket Fana Schools).
- Private school fee is too much that parents can't afford (FGD participants in Dagmawi Tewodros)
- Children will be disciplined and educated (FGD participants in Tabor)
- It is an opportunity for children to learn in their own nearby areas. It is also good for children to get the chance to learn with their peers. It is the base/foundation. It helps them to know letters and numbers before their formal education. They learn acceptable and ethical behaviors (FGD participants in Alabo School).

In Amhara, although parents are interested to send their children, their actual involvement in the o-class matters was not to the expected level. In most o-classes such as Alabo, Yekatit 23, Bewuket Fana, Addis Amba, Angot No.2, and Addis Zemen, parents have reported some levels of active participation in providing financial and manpower support as well as in attending meetings. For example, parents pay 25 birr per month in Addis Amba School and 30 Birr per month in Bewuket Fana School for teachers' salary. It was also reported during the focus group discussion that in Yekatit 23, parents pay 20 birr for the breads given to o-class children. Parents also reported during the FGD that they have attended meetings conducted to address issues and concerns like absenteeism and dropouts. Parents in Addis Zemen School reported that they have participated in motivating the community members to send their children to the o-classes. FGD participants in Alabo stated that they have participated in fundraising activities to support the o-classes and as a result of their effort, the school was able to get support from an NGO named CADET. On the contrary, the participation and involvement of parents in Dagmawi Tewodros, Tabor and Enatitu Mariam was found to be very low. This was confirmed during the focus group discussions of parents in these schools. Parents attributed that the school did not invite them to be involved in o-class issues. The data obtained from school principals and o-class teachers show that parents did not come to meetings when they are invited to do so.

**Parent- School Contact in Beneshengul:** In all the schools there is complaint from both sides. School principals and O-class teachers claim that they ask parents to do things cooperatively to no avail. On the contrary, parents also blame schools that they have never been called to involve in school matters. For example a parent from Tuni School said the following: "(Until this time, no one called parents to come to school. However, if the school called for our participation in the future, we are ready to participate and help.)" In this regard, parents at Selam-Ber primary school claim that they have helped in fixing the windows and parents at Dare-Selam School said that they had contributed when the school was built. In similar vein, parents from Assosa primary school said that they have contributed money and labor for the sake of sanitation of the O-classes.

Regarding the sensitivity of parents to schools' calls, the field team witnessed that many parents were not keen to act in response to schools' requests. The field team were challenged. Parents were not willing

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to come to the school when called to participate in focus-group discussions probably because of workload.

**Parental Follow-up of Children's Progress in Beneshangul:** There are parents that follow up their children during and after school. As part of good education, some parents bring and take their children on time, and help their kids with their homework and practicing songs too. However, all parents do not bring their children to school in the morning and take them back after school except for one parent in Manduraworeda of Metekelzone. The main reasons given were the school is nearby to home, they have elder brother/sister learning at the school to go with and children know the path to schools. O-class teachers have stressed it too that parents do not bring children and take back to home after school. Mostly, teachers take children to their villages after school.

**Interest and Commitment in Terms of Support and Attendance of the O-class Program in Beneshangul:** Parents have responded that they would have loved to bring their children to o-class. But they want their children to be independent and adapt to the circumstances. Parents want their children to attend o-classes. Parents understand adapting to the school environment helps to acquire knowledge, protect children from playing on dirty/dangerous places and build friendship with other children prior to primary school so that they would not get strange while they start grade one. A parent from Tuni said, "I always told my child that he should go to school. Because, he has to get knowledge, that's why I always do this for my child..." On the other hand, some parents that we spoke with in Dare-Selam and Selam-Ber need the O-class for the sake of daycare only. Furthermore, there are also parents who are ambitious to see their children grow up to be well educated.

**Distance from School in Beneshangul:** According to the data we collected from informants, the maximum distance of the school from residence of children is 25 minutes walking distance. And the closer is three minutes walking distance. This may be disregarded as it is reckoned by the time it took parents and teachers. Therefore, we can conclude that the average distance is a little bit far for the children. The school site is also mentioned as a main problem in Mandura School. The school principal, o-class teachers and Parents alike complained about the school's location. The school is located adjacent to a busy cross-country road where many cars and heavy trucks including the GERD vehicles travel the whole day. Children are obliged to cross this road to enter the school compound. It is dangerous and risky. In addition, the school is far from the villages and it takes 20 to 25 minutes on average.

**Parents' involvement in the O-class programs in Tigray:** Parents of the children in the O-classes variously attend in the affairs of the school. In the nine schools we visited, the O-class teachers helped us inform the parents to come for the focus group discussions. It was interesting to see that the parents made it to the schools in such a short notice. Asked whether they are willing to send their kids to the O-class a group of parents in one school said the following, 'Oh yes we are willing. To begin with we do not pay school fee. But more importantly our kids have been spending their time either playing with dust or looking after the livestock. Now they are able to identify letters. We believe the quality is even better than the kindergartens.' We were able to meet and discuss with 52 parents whose children are attending at the O-classes. Most of the participants were mothers of the little kids who are also responsible for bringing them to the schools. We learned from the responses given by the parents that their involvement in the O-class differs from school to school. In some of the schools, the parents proactively come to the schools and discuss with the teachers on the progress of their children, the problems in the O-classes, and what they should do to alleviate these problems. The women are organized in what they call one-to-five networks and one of their duties is discussing the schooling of their children. Parents contributed money and bought kid mats in one school since they were briefed by the teachers that their children were sleeping during the sessions. They also contribute money whenever the teachers ask them for the purchase of educational materials. In one of the schools called Hiwane, the mothers spend one day per week to assist the only O-class teacher, although they did not say what kind of support they provide. Here is what

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these group of parents said: 'We've been told by the O-class teacher that our kids are sleeping during the sessions. So we sat together and decided to contribute 25 birr each and bought kid mat.' Other parents, on the other hand, mentioned that either they have never participated at all or they come to the school only when invited by the O-class teacher. In some areas the parents mentioned that they come to school every three or so months only if invited by the O-class teacher to discuss certain issues or when they want to complain about the fact that their kids are becoming dirty as they are sitting on dusty floors. A teacher in one school, who is currently studying nursing, checks the quality of the food of the children and calls parents to brief them about the precautions they should make when packing food to their little ones. Parents were asked regarding the changes they observed on their little ones after they started attending the O-classes. Here is what one group of parents said: 'They have become hygienic, They started to read in six months, They start reading even after school'. As the O-classes are located in the premises of the primary schools, they are easily accessible for the children. The parents reported the time it takes the kids to reach the school varies from a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 30 minutes. Those who are close by, the parents said, walk to school where as the kids a little further either come together with their brothers and sisters or their parents accompany them. There are certain issues the parents in one school suggested that need to be addressed to improve the quality of the services in the school: 'Our kids need school uniform as some of them become jealous when they see their friends wear new clothes. They also need their own classrooms, desks, chairs, as well as books with pictures. More importantly, the program needs a follow up from higher officials.'

<sup>11</sup>We may need to elucidate these experiences taking vignettes from four such facilitators. Although the salary I am paid from the community is small, I still don't collect from those who are unable to pay so that the children may not quit school. Rather, I buy them exercise books and pen. There was also timewhen I bought a small shirt for a child. I plough for income; I don't only rely on the salary(Facilitator, GurmoWeyede).I give them pencils and help them in teaching and learning. For the children who came to school without eating, they tell me they are open and I feed them breakfast(Hidase, Facilitator).I buy them chewing gum and candies per head from my own pocket so that they may not quarrel. I also provide pen from myself to those who are unable to buy theirs so that they may not be absent from school. Doing those, I make them love me and love the school(Facilitator, Beklo Segno).I teach them, bring them alphabets made from different objects, give pen to those who have lost theirs, buy exercise book to those who drop out from school because of parental inability to provide them with these materials(Facilitator, Doge Woyebo). In Tigray teachers had also described that they buy some of the materials using their meager income to help the students. A teacher has also expressed how she encourages the children from her own small income, 'I use various ways to encourage my students and enable them to interact with me. For example, I buy caramel, pencil, and eraser and give them as an award when they perform.'



Table 2: Summary of data on children's profile					
Regions	Age	sex	Drop out	Children with special needs	Family background
Amhara	Plus or minus 6 years with the minimum 4 years and those with ages > 6 years being those who couldn't benefit from formal school	519 (50.4 %) males and 510 females.	79 children out of 658 (12%).	No identified disabilities except two children with some kind of autism and two other children in another school that seem gifted and talented	Family background is more or less similar; most children come from low-income and illiterate families.
Benishangul-Gumuz	Plus or minus 6 years with a mean average of 6 years ; 3 and 4 years attending in some schools	270 males (53.5%) and 235 females		No students with noticeable disabilities.	
SNNP	Plus or minus 6 years with a mean average of 6 years ; 3 and 4 years attending in some schools	A total of 1,241,779 children in the region (87.7 %) of whom 52.4 % are males	A total of 88 (.43%) in the study areas	An insignificant 0.54% (i.e.6,671) for the region	
Tigray	Most of the children in the O-classes are in the ages five and six- in some cases even four year olds are also in attendance	A total of 124,317 children in the region (81% of the age cohort) with 50.8 % males. But, in the nine sampled areas of 784 children, about 55 % were males		Only two children with disabilities in one school (one with hearing disability and the other with speech disability)	