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Lived experiences of teachers in implementing Early Childhood Care and Education Policy in Government Pre-primary Schools of Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopia Regional State

Morka Mogiso[1,*], Dawit Negassa[1], Garkebo Basha[2], and Yirgalem Alemu[3]

[1]Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Haramaya University, Ethiopia
[2]Department of Adult Education and Community Development, Haramaya University, Ethiopia
[3]Department of Psychology, Haramaya University, Ethiopia

A R T I C L E   I N F O.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of teachers in implementing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy in government pre-primary schools in the Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopia Regional State. A qualitative approach with phenomenological design was employed. Six information rich pre-primary teachers were purposively selected and involved in the study. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, analyzed inductively, and developed into four major themes and five sub-themes. The results revealed a significant disparity between the policy documents and actual practices. The findings also showed that preschools faced constraints in facilities, teachers lacked pedagogical skills for teaching and assessing children, and there was low parental and community participation. The Hadiya Zone Department of Education, Health, and Women's and Social Affairs is recommended to work closely with pre-primary schools and other stakeholders to ensure effective policy implementation.

1 Introduction

Education is a process that facilitates learning through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and habits. It occurs in both formal and informal settings, influencing one's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Typically, education is structured into stages including pre-primary, primary, secondary, college, and university. pre-primary education plays a crucial role in young children's development before they transition to formal schooling, enhancing cognitive growth and preparing them for early grades. It significantly impacts children's attendance and participation in primary school. A lack of school readiness can hinder children's adaptation to school environments and increase dropout rates.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

program aims to provide appropriate education and care for young children, yielding long-term positive outcomes. As noted by the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education in 2007, this program shapes early childhood development, fostering socially responsible citizens and promoting economic growth by reducing mortality rates, childhood illnesses, school repetition, and dropout rates.

International organizations like UNICEF and UNESCO stress the importance of quality pre-primary education for all children, regardless of their background. Research supports the long-term benefits of quality early childhood care and education, as highlighted by Curtis, Maureen, & O'Hagan in 2003 and cited by Gebre Egziabher in 2014. As indicated above early childhood period is a bridge between a formal primary school and preschool which lays a base for future development of chil-

dren.

Globally, the critical nature of the first 2000 days from conception to age six is recognized for its impact on lifelong cognitive, psychological, and emotional development. Programs offering pre-primary education are essential for improving life fate for the poorest children, ensuring they are prepared for formal schooling.

Early childhood are and education is considered an integral part of basic education, foundational for achieving the Ethiopian Education for All goals and overall human development. All children should engage in preschool activities early and be exposed to enhanced learning environments to inspire their creativity and abilities. As articulated in the Africa Fit for Children declaration of May 2001, investing in children today builds tomorrow's peace, stability, security, democracy, and sustainable development.

The right to education is upheld by various international and national legislations, emphasizing the development of a child's personality and abilities. Significant policy and strategic initiatives have been adopted in Ethiopia since 2010, focusing on ECCE to increase access and improve quality in early childhood education. Notably, the government's strategic operational plans and national policy framework for ECCE, supported by UNICEF, have led to considerable advancements, with pre-primary gross enrollment reaching 34% in 2022/2023.

Studies on ECCE in Ethiopia, such as those by Fedlu (2018), Fekede (2021), Misahun (2020), and Mamo & Kenea (2014), have identified various implementation challenges, including inadequate facilities, insufficiently trained teachers, and lack of comprehensive policy execution, particularly in rural areas. These findings underline the need for ongoing research and policy adjustment to ensure the effectiveness of ECCE programs, especially in less-performed zones such as Hadiya Zone. As it was indicated in previous South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State education bureau 2022/2023 annual report indicated that from other zones and special districts, with various reasons dropout rate was very high. This motivates researchers for further investigation into the lived

experiences of teachers engaged in ECCE policy implementation in this zone, where similar studies were conducted in only private pre-primary schools in towns. However, no similar studies have been conducted in government-attached preprimary schools.

Research Question

The study aimed at addressing the following research question:

What are the lived experiences of teachers engaged in early childhood care and education policy implementation in government pre-primary schools of Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopian Regional State?

2 Review of Related Literature

Scholars highlight that the first eight years of a child's life mark a period of rapid growth and development. Brain development reaches its peak in the first three years, while opportunities for promoting overall development remain high until around age eight. This period is often referred to as a critical "window of opportunity," which, if effectively utilized, ensures not only a child's individual well-being but also long-term societal benefits (Arnold, 2004).

Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development has increasingly gained recognition worldwide and across Africa as an essential area of focus (UNESCO, 2004). Reinforcing this idea, the Young Lives study (2016) stresses that early childhood represents the most crucial developmental phase. It also identifies this period as the most cost-effective stage for investment in preventive and intervention programs aimed at reducing poverty, inequality, and trauma.

Empirical research further illustrates that quality ECCE services encompassing care, learning opportunities, and enriching experiences play a transformative role in shaping lifelong success (ERPA, 2014). Beyond individual benefits, such programs help nations fulfill international commitments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, by ensuring children can exercise their rights and realize their full developmental potential (UNESCO &

UNICEF, 2012).

Concept of Policy Implementation Analysis

The notion of policy plays a central role in shaping the operations and functions of both public institutions and private organizations. When an individual or private body adopts a policy, it is typically referred to as a private policy, whereas those formulated by the government or its agencies are considered public policies (Ozor, 2004). In the present study, the focus is on public policies designed and executed by government bodies.

Different scholars approach the concept of policy from varying perspectives. Some describe it primarily as a form of action, others see it as a matter of choice, while still others interpret it in terms of the scope of activities involved (Ikelegbe, 2006). These diverse perspectives account for the multiplicity of definitions. For example, Ezeani (2006) considers policy as a proposed plan of action the government intends to carry out in response to a particular problem or situation. By contrast, Ikelegbe (2006) offers a more comprehensive definition, describing policy as an integrated set of actions and programs established by government, serving as a framework to guide practices and responses in specific areas of concern. In essence, policy can be understood as a structured course of action that directs government activities and facilitates the achievement of predetermined goals or objectives.

The 2010 ECCE Policy Framework in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, a formal policy framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was introduced in 2010 with the intention of improving children's early development. This framework clearly articulated its vision, mission, objectives, guiding principles, and areas of focus. The vision emphasized guaranteeing all children the right to a healthy start, access to nurturing and safe environments, and opportunities to reach their fullest potential. Its mission was defined as the provision of a holistic, integrated, high-quality, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate service that supports the comprehensive growth of every child.

The overall objective of the framework was to encourage early stimulation and provide children from the prenatal stage up to seven years old with the best possible start in life. Additionally, it aimed to enhance equity, accessibility, and quality in early education services through efficient partnerships, institutional capacity building, and a more balanced distribution of resources (National Policy Framework, 2010).

Modalities of Pre-primary Education

Pre-primary education in Ethiopia is organized into four major modalities: Kindergarten, O-Class, Child-to-Child Program, and Accelerated School Readiness. Each has its own structure and approach to preparing children for primary school.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten is designed as a three-year program targeting children aged four to six. Using a child-centered approach, it encourages learning through play, which helps children acquire social skills, develop self-expression, and build their identities. The program ensures that children enter primary school better prepared for the demands of formal education (AACEB, 2013).

O-Class

The O-Class is one of the most widespread modalities of pre-primary education. It operates within existing primary schools and provides a one-year preparatory program for six-year-old children before they begin grade one. Its main objective is to bridge the transition between home and formal schooling, ensuring that children are ready academically and socially (MoE, 2013/14).

Child to Child Program

The Child-to-Child initiative is based on the idea of engaging older children, typically in grades five and six, as facilitators for their younger siblings and neighborhood children. These older children are trained and supported by teachers to conduct structured, play-oriented activities either at home or in community spaces. Parents also play a role by supervising and rotating responsibilities. The goal of this program is to strengthen school readiness among younger children and smooth their transition into grade one (MoE, 2012).

Accelerated School Readiness

It's one of the four modalities of pre-primary education program and it's a two-month program for 6+ year old children who do not have other access. Children attend the program on July and august before entering grade one on September. The purpose is to avoid negative influence on those children who come to school without passing through preschool education (MoE, 2017).

Learning Material and Environment

According to AACAEB (2011/12), preschool classrooms should be equipped with a range of indoor learning materials, including puzzles, flash cards, geometric shapes, storybooks, construction blocks, toys, and resources for organizing learning corners such as family, health, science, language, shopping, and mathematics areas. Outdoor equipment should also be available, such as slides, balance beams, merry-go-rounds, and locally produced play items. These resources stimulate children's imagination, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, while also serving as emotional anchors and tools for connecting with their environment (NACECE, 2003).

Additionally, the natural outdoor setting plays a vital role in children's early development. A carefully planned outdoor environment offers richer experiences than the classroom alone, as it encourages children to notice weather patterns, plants, animals, and other aspects of their surroundings. Such environments nurture curiosity and critical thinking as children seek answers to their discoveries (Curtis, 1998, cited in Haile, 2010).

Parent and Community Engagement

Parents are considered the primary caregivers of children, making their involvement essential in early education. Collaboration between parents, teachers, and caregivers ensures that decisions about preschool activities and services reflect children's best interests. Parents can contribute by sending their children regularly, providing learning materials, assisting in monitoring classroom practices, and even mobilizing resources to support preschool operations (MoE, 2016).

The wider community, including neighborhood members and NGOs, also plays a key role in ensuring that preschool environments are safe, supportive, and conducive to children's growth (OECD, n.d.). Communities are expected to organize families, state institutions, and social organizations to provide holistic support in areas such as care, health, and nutrition (MoE, MoH, & MoWA, 2010). Moreover, community-based programs can promote early childhood development through family participation and shared responsibility (Eagle *et al.*, 2007, cited in Yalew, 2011; Yalew, 2011).

Learning Methodology in the Pre-primary School

The ECCE policy framework recommends that teaching methods in pre-primary schools should be child-centered, interactive, and play-based. Lessons are expected to encourage cooperation, sharing of experiences, and active participation, with teachers using varied instructional materials to enhance engagement (MoE, MoH, & MoWA, 2010).

However, interviews conducted with pre-primary teachers revealed a mismatch between the guidelines and actual practice. Many teachers reported relying heavily on explanation and question–answer techniques, with limited use of discussions, role-play, storytelling, play-based activities, or group work. Observations also confirmed that classroom instruction in many schools was dominated by teacher-centered methods such as lecturing, reading, and demonstration, while child-centered strategies were rarely applied. This indicates a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Assessment of Children in the Pre-primary Schools

The ECCE policy guideline specifies that assessment in pre-primary settings should be continuous, employ appropriate methods, and serve mainly to encourage children rather than determine promotion. In addition, results are expected to be communicated to parents (MoE, MoH, & MoWA, 2010). To evaluate how these practices are implemented, classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted.

Findings indicated that most teachers relied pri-

marily on written tests, daily attendance records, and class participation as their main forms of assessment. In contrast, alternative methods such as drawing, portfolio assessment, checklists, direct observation, and homework were used infrequently, if at all. Principals also acknowledged that challenges such as inadequate training, the absence of ongoing professional development, shortages of instructional materials, and insufficient budgets made it difficult to apply more comprehensive assessment practices.

Beyond policy documents, scholars emphasize that the evaluation of young children should be a continuous process rooted in both indoor and outdoor observations rather than limited to paper-and-pencil tests. Effective assessment should capture children's activities, behaviors, and efforts, reflecting their overall growth and development (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1993).

Qualification of Pre-school Teachers

Establishing a structured qualification framework for ECCE teachers is critical to ensure consistency across different levels of training. Such a framework allows for both short-term certification and longer-term diploma programs, serving as an entry point for expanding the ECCE workforce (Biersteker, 2008). Given the rapid need for more teachers, relying solely on traditional pre-service training is often insufficient. One proposed approach is to provide new teachers with a multi-month certificate in preschool education, enabling them to begin teaching quickly while continuing to upgrade their qualifications over time to achieve full ECCE teacher status (Orkin *et al.*, 2012; Biersteker, 2010). For assistant teachers, a minimum requirement could include completion of Grade 8 education and possession of basic volunteer or assistant certificates in education or health (Orkin *et al.*, 2012).

The effectiveness of ECCE programs depends heavily on teachers' skills, attitudes, and behaviors. The curriculum and pedagogical approaches for pre-primary education should therefore shape the content of teacher training, which must also include substantial practical experience. Research shows that positive relationships and meaningful interactions between teachers, parents, and children

are often more influential in determining program quality than material resources alone (UNESCO, 2007).

Furthermore, training programs that encourage teachers to reflect on their practices and the environments in which they teach are particularly beneficial (UNESCO, 2007). Finally, ongoing learning through research, evidence, and innovation remains an essential component of strengthening teacher capacity and ensuring the quality of ECCE delivery.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in ECCE Program

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) strongly advocates for the use of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in early childhood education. DAP serves as a research-based framework that guides teachers and caregivers in creating learning experiences suited to children's developmental levels, while still challenging them to achieve new goals. According to NAEYC (2020), DAP is at the heart of the organization's mission and resources, ensuring that children are supported in ways that match their current abilities but also encourage progress.

Copple and Bredekamp (2009) emphasize that DAP does not mean making tasks easier for children. Rather, it ensures that learning goals and experiences align with their developmental needs while remaining sufficiently challenging to stimulate growth and maintain interest. Teachers practicing DAP are expected to know their learners well enough to provide the right balance of support and challenge.

Within developmentally appropriate programs, children learn not only through teacher-directed activities but also through opportunities that are guided by their own interests and explorations. Such programs combine structured, teacher-led activities with child-initiated learning, as well as both small-group and large-group interactions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

3 Research Design and Methodology

This section deals with the design, method, sample population, sampling techniques, data gathering tools, data collection procedures, method of data analysis and ethical considerations.

3.1 Description of the Study Area

Hadiya zone is found in the Central Ethiopian Regional State, (CERS) Ethiopia. This region is one of newly established regional state in Ethiopia. It was formed from the then northern part of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) on 19 August 2023 after a successful referendum. It was located at a distance of 232 km away from the Addis Ababa, capital city of the country, to south direction. Hadiya is bordered on the South by Kembata Tembaro (KT), on the Southwest by the Dawro Zone, on the West by the Omo River which separates it from Oromia Region and the Yem Zone, on the North by Gurage, on the Northeast by Silte, and on the east by the Alaba Zone. Hossana town is the center for Hadiya Zone administration and center for Central Ethiopian Regional State. Besides this, the number of pre-primary schools found in this zone is 586. Of this, private pre-primary schools are 127 (21.6%) and government owned pre-primary schools are 459 (78.3%). Besides this, the number of preprimary school learners found in this zone are M= 52,082, F=50604 T= 102,686. The pre-primary teachers found in this zone are M=141 (27.3%) F=375 (72.6%) T=516.

3.2 Research Design

To capture the essence of the lived experiences of pre-primary teachers, a qualitative phenomenological research design was selected for this study. In this phenomenological study, the researchers sought to describe the meaning of participants shared lived experiences regarding the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This research design allowed participants to share their lived experience of teaching with the researchers regarding the implementation of ECCE. In this regard, for this research undertaking, a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was employed. Phenomenological research requires a researcher to focus on people's experi-ences of a phenomenon to obtain comprehensive details that provide a basis for reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience (Linda A. Bliss, 2016).

3.3 Sampling Technique

A standard sampling method within phenomenological research is purposive sampling, which is often used when the characteristics of a specific group of individuals match the characteristics of the phenomenon being researched (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006). Purposive sampling guarantees information-rich responses from a knowledgeable audience (Higginbottom, 2004).

In the Hadiya zone, there are sixteen government structures (12 rural districts and 4 town administrations). By using a purposive sampling technique, the researchers took six pre-primary teachers from each well and rewarded six districts/town administration and primary schools, such as Danama, Bonosha, Shone number 1, Alemu Woldehana, Ansho, and Sokokta primary schools from West Badawacho, Shashogo, Shone town, Hossana town, Duna and Amaka, respectively. The reason for the use of these samples was that both the participants and the sampled study area were awarded from the Hadiya Zone Education Department for outstanding performance in ECCE in the 2012/2022 academic year. (Hadiya Zone Education Department annual report, 2022).

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

In phenomenological research, interviews are generally considered the most effective tool for collecting data, as they allow participants to describe their lived experiences in depth. Both open-ended and semi-structured interview formats are suitable, since they give informants the flexibility to explain their perspectives fully while enabling researchers to explore the phenomenon under study in detail. Such interviews provide rich descriptions that closely represent participants' realities (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

For this study, researchers designed a semi-structured interview guide after conducting a thorough review of literature on ECCE policy imple-

mentation. This guide ensured that core issues were covered while still allowing participants to elaborate on their personal experiences. To validate the instrument, the draft guide was reviewed by two pre-primary teachers outside of the study area, helping to ensure its clarity and trustworthiness before actual data collection.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

In a phenomenological study, data collection techniques have the flexibility to allow participants to provide detailed accounts of their own experiences (Smith, 2004). Phenomenological research methods use a systematic method to analyze shared experiences and gain meaning from them (Watson *et al.*, 2015).

The following procedures were used while collecting the data. A permission letter to conduct the study was obtained from the Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education at Haramaya University and delivered to the head of the Hadiya Zone Education Department. The Hadiya Zone Education Department subsequently wrote a letter of permission to the sampled districts and town administration. The sampled districts and town administration subsequently wrote a letter of permission to the sampled primary schools. The field work was conducted intensively for a period of one month from 12 March 2023 to 12 April 2023.

3.6 Method of Data Analysis

Data analysis in a phenomenology approach attempts to analytically present the lived experiences of those who are participating in the study (Moustakas, 1994). The data analysis process heavily relies on the participant's dialogue to process and understand what is unique to the specific individual, their shared experiences, and the participant's views (Creswell, 2007).

Data collection, management and analysis were carried out concurrently. After the interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into text by the researchers within 12 hours. After the audio recordings were transcribed into text, the text was interpreted with field notes containing nonverbal clues from the participants to assist in the data analysis. Inductive thematic analysis was adopted

to obtain data-driven results.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Before the data were collected, the participants were informed and agreed to participate in the study. It was also confirmed that no information would be disclosed without the consent of the study participants or kept confidential.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

The results and discussions are presented in a way to provide answers to the research question raised at the beginning of the study. The study question is about the lived experiences of teachers engaged in early childhood care and education policy implementation in government pre-primary schools of study area Hadiya Zone, Ethiopia. In doing so, the study result was categorized into four themes such as: theme one; pre-primary school facilities, theme two; teaching methodologies, theme three; the relationship between teachers and parents and theme four; an assessment of children in pre-primary schools.

Theme 1: Pre-primary School Facilities

The ECCE policy guideline mandates that pre-primary schools should be physically safe, distanced from garbage sites, and equipped with adequate latrine and water services, as well as sufficient classroom and compound space (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). Additionally, the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional Education Bureau (2012) emphasize that "learning by playing should be the primary instructional method in pre-primary schools, necessitating a safe and adequate area to foster the development of all children.

In light of these guidelines, experienced Preprimary Teachers (PPTs) were interviewed to ascertain the availability of fundamental facilities in pre-primary schools. One participant from School 2 noted:

> *"As a PP teacher, I observe that both the outdoor and indoor spaces are insufficient for children to learn through play or move freely. The school was originally not intended for PP use, lacking complete fencing and essential*

facilities such as water, clean latrines, and ventilated classrooms". (PPT, 2)

When queried about the adequacy of outdoor and indoor environments, teachers from School 3 expressed significant concerns:

"As evident, the facilities are far from adequate for children's learning. Our school faces numerous issues; the learning spaces are unsuitable, and the outdoor area is cluttered with trash. The school infrastructure was initially designed for primary education, not pre-primary. Even parts of the school farm are leased to generate funds for stationery". (PPT, 3)

The investigation highlights that the physical environments (indoor and outdoor), learning materials, and equipment at these schools are subpar, necessitating the engagement and dedication of all school stakeholders. A teacher from school 2 detailed her struggles:

"I have repeatedly reported to the district education office that our learning spaces are inadequate, and the outdoor environment is littered. All planning and budgeting are geared toward primary education without considerations for PPE". (PPT, 2)

Moreover, teachers from school 6 shared their frustrations:

"Since my employment here, I have never felt content due to the unsafe physical conditions of the school. Despite frequent reports to the principal regarding the need for improvements in gateways, play areas, and toilets, no changes have been made". (PPT, 6)

Another teacher from school 1 remarked on the challenges of teaching without proper facilities:

"I often teach my students outside the classroom without any support or facilities, relying solely on oral instruction". (PPT, 1)

Furthermore, the overall physical and classroom learning environments, teaching materials, and equipment are described as unattractive and unsuitable for fostering a conducive educational setting.

Tovey (2007) underscores that both indoor and outdoor spaces should offer diverse play opportunities and quiet areas for solitary activities, essential for children's autonomy and security.

Despite the intentions of the ECCE policy to create garbage-free, spacious, and safe educational environments, its implementation has been markedly inadequate, particularly in providing sufficient space, sanitation facilities, and safety, thus compromising children's play opportunities and exposing them to potential hazards and distress.

Theme 2: Teaching Methodologies

According to the ECCE policy guideline, teaching learning methods should be child-centered and facilitate a group setting to help children share experiences. These methods should support and encourage children's efforts during the learning process, primarily employing a play-based teaching approach, and utilize various teaching aids in the classroom (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). To evaluate the policy's implementation, interviews were conducted with experienced Pre-primary Teachers (PPTs).

One participant from school 5 explained,

"As a teacher at this level, I am well aware of the appropriate teaching methods. However, I often resort to lecture methods due to the classroom's limited size and safety concerns. Additionally, the lack of proper playing fields and materials constantly raises concerns about the program's success in our school". (PPT, 5)

Similarly, a PPT from School 6 stated,

"I primarily use teacher-centered or lecture methods, both indoors and outdoors, due to the unmanageable class size, lack of space, and absence of play areas and teaching materials. Children often request to engage in sports and cultural games, yet I cannot facilitate these play-based learning activities. The school premises are partially covered by grass, with the remainder being farmland". (PPT, 6)

The responses highlight significant challenges in applying the ECCE guidelines, primarily due to inadequate facilities. From School 1, a participant shared,

> *"I possess adequate training and awareness in PPE teaching-learning methodologies. However, the nature of our school does not encourage the practice of these methods. Despite understanding the importance, I have yet to implement child-centered approaches due to the lack of suitable and safe conditions".* (TTP 1)

Research by Paciorek and Munro (1999) suggests that methods emphasizing child-directed activities are more effective than teacher-directed instruction in the PPS curriculum. Education in PPS should focus on engaging with children to help them understand the world around them through cooperative work and responsible learning. This study reveals that reliance on teacher-centered methods hinders the curriculum's effective implementation, affecting the holistic development of children.

Theme 3: The Relationship between Teachers and Parents

The ECCE policy guideline emphasizes the importance of regular communication between teachers and parents through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and sharing information about the child's home environment to foster collaborative relationships (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). However, the investigation into parent-teacher partnerships revealed shortcomings.

A teacher from school 6 remarked,

> *"While I am familiar with the learners' behaviors and activities in the school environment, I lack insight into their home settings. Despite repeated attempts to engage parents, only a few consistently participate in meetings, suggesting that many view school as a respite from their responsibilities".* (PPT, 6)

Another response from School 5 indicated a similar trend:

> *"I continuously reach out to parents to discuss their children's learning issues. Unfortunately, the majority of parents show*

> *little interest in engaging with the school or addressing their children's educational challenges".* (PPT 5)

MoE (2010) states that parents play a crucial role in their children's upbringing and development. Active parental involvement is necessary for selecting activities and services in pre-schools, contributing to learning materials, and supporting educational processes. Despite this, the practice of collaborating closely with parents and the community was found to be minimal, indicating poor implementation of the ECCE policy.

Theme 4: Assessment of Children in the PPS

The ECCE policy guideline describes the assessment in PPS as continuous, using appropriate methods that should not solely determine promotion but should involve parents in the process (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). Despite this, the assessment techniques employed often do not align with these standards.

A PPT from school 3 stated,

> *"Appropriate assessment in PPS should continuously evaluate children's activities across various environments. However, our school confines assessments to classroom-based tasks like homework and tests, which do not adequately measure children's innovative skills or promote their creativity".* (PPT, 3)

From School 4, a similar observation was made:

> *"There is no continuous assessment of outdoor activities here; I only assess students through classroom tasks and final examinations. A suitable assessment should include diverse activities that reflect the children's learning in more dynamic environments".* (PPT 4)

Mooney (2000) advocates that assessment should track understanding throughout educational activities, not just the outcomes. A multi-source and multi-measure assessment approach offers a more valid and comprehensive view of a child's progress. However, the findings suggest that such comprehensive assessment methods are underutilized in

many PPSs, necessitating improvements to align with the policy's intentions and the local context.

4.2   Discussions

The results of this study indicated that the real practices of early childhood care and education policy implementation in the study area were not implemented as the government as well as community expect. That is, the implementation did not boldly align with the MoE (Ministry of Education's) ECCE policy framework and strategic operational plan.

As various studies conducted in Ethiopia scholars in different regions showed that, the implementation status is differed from regions to regions and from pre-primary to pre-primary schools. Those Ethiopian researchers like Gebre Egziabher (2014), Fekede (2021), Misahun (2020), and Mamo and Kenea (2014), which almost unanimously indicated that the early childhood period serves as a bridge between preschool and formal primary school, laying a foundation for children's future development. These researchers argued that early childhood education is crucial in providing appropriate education and care for young children, yielding long-lasting positive consequences. They noted that such programs help mold socially responsible citizens and contribute to economic growth by reducing mortality rates, childhood illnesses, school repetition, and dropout rates.

From these point of views, this study presents different findings such as:the overall physical and classroom learning environments are unattractive and unsuitable for fostering a conducive educational setting for early grade learners, teaching methods did not emphasized child-directed activities rather than teacher-directed instruction, parents did not soundly play a crucial role in their children's upbringing and development, and the appropriateness of early grade learners assessment was not consider the age, level of understanding capacity and suitability of child-centered assessment techniques.

In general, the findings of this study result indicated that the real implementation of early childhood education did not align with the stated MoE, ECCE (2010) policy reality.

On the other hand, the study conducted by Arnold (2004), states that the first eight years of a child's life is a period of tremendous growth and development. Brain development is high in the first three years, and the potential for ensuring optimal development is very high up to age 8. It is imperative that this true 'window of opportunity' is fully used and strengthened to ensure long-term benefits, not just for each individual child's development but also for the larger community. In this regard, the current study highlights major challenges hindered the remarkable growth and development of children in pre-primary schools of the studied area such as: lack of safe indoor and outdoor materials and equipment, insufficiently trained teachers, inadequate facilities, and a lack of monitoring.

There was also limited participation among parents, the community, and pre-primary teachers. Moreover, the implementation of the pre-primary education policy was found to be weak due to misalignment with the established pre-primary education standards.

Similarly, the study conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), acknowledges and supports the effort of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in a child's early years of learning. The DAP is a framework designed to reflect research-based practices that promote a child's optimal learning and development and it is the heart of all National Association for the Education of Young Children's work and resources and educators and caregivers use developmentally appropriate practice to meet children where they are while challenging them to meet their achievable goals. However, this study result indicated that most pre-primary school's classroom as well as physical environment did not encourage the developmental and learning aspects of the early grade learners.

Major Findings

The findings indicate that government pre-primary schools suffer from a lack of attention from various stakeholders, including government officials, parents, community representatives, school management bodies, and non-governmental organizations. Confirming earlier research, this study identifies

significant obstacles in the implementation process, including inappropriate school facilities, a shortage of budgetary resources for the program, and inappropriate assessment techniques. Furthermore, there is a notable deficiency in learning materials, such as developmental play equipment, textbooks, and other teaching aids across all studied areas. Another crucial aspect for policy implementation is the involvement of active parents and the relationship between teachers and parents, which this study found to be insufficient and lacking regular communication regarding children's progress.

5 Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced by pre-primary teachers (PPTs) in implementing ECCE policy in Hadiya zone, Ethiopia; by using a phenomenological design and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal continuous deep-rooted problems and shortages that hinder effective policy implementation in the studied area. Although the policy includes approaches intended to make services available to all children, there remains a significant disparity in access between rural and urban areas, and it fails to address quality concerns.

In all studied areas, preschools are not managed independently, not secured and non-attractive school inside and outside environment, face high shortages of educational materials, and suffer from inadequate curricula, lack appropriate toilet and pure water in the school compound, outdated teaching methods, still now teacher centered teaching approach is dominant in most of studied areas pre-primary schools, old (classroom evaluation system was leading the assessment of early grade learners) and poor parent-teacher interactions, all of which obstruct the successful implementation of the ECCE policy.

Recommendations

To address the study problem and to reach to sustainable solution for early grade learners successfulness and to implement the ECCE policy in the studied area the following recommendations were forwarded to improve the early grade learners leaning capacity school stakeholders should fulfill infrastructure and teaching-learning inputs

for neighboring pre-primary school, to facilitate safe teaching environment for children's school stakeholders should provide appropriate classroom (avoid over classroom size) and avoid unbalanced teacher-student ratio in the classroom, to provide active and participatory learning environment; the pre-primary teachers should create child-centered teaching approach with attractive and stimulating classroom and play grounds and to encourage the children's learning, to understand their children's learning gaps and achievement and to take a common decision in every issues parents should work with teachers intimately.

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