



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

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences in enacting the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy within government pre-primary schools located in Hadiya Zone, Central Ethiopian Regional State. To accomplish this objective, the research employed a qualitative approach rooted in a phenomenological design, allowing for exploration of participants' shared experiences. Six pre-primary teachers were purposively selected based on their substantial professional exposure and practical engagement in ECCE implementation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis procedure. The analysis generated four major themes accompanied by five related sub-themes. The findings revealed a significant discrepancy between the aspirations articulated in national policy documents and the actual realities observed in school practice. The study further uncovered persistent challenges, including inadequate physical infrastructure, limited pedagogical and assessment expertise among teachers, and insufficient parental and community participation. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the Hadiya Zone Offices of Education, Health, and Women and Social Affairs reinforce inter-sectoral collaboration and strengthen partnerships with schools and relevant stakeholders to improve the effective implementation of the ECCE policy.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Education represents a dynamic process through which individuals acquire knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behavioral patterns. It takes place in both formal and informal contexts and significantly shapes an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development. Conventionally, education is organized into progressive stages such as pre-primary, primary, secondary, college, and university levels. Among these stages, pre-primary education occupies a foundational position, as it supports young children's developmental growth prior to entering formal schooling. It enhances

cognitive development and equips children with the readiness required for early grade learning. Moreover, participation in pre-primary education positively influences school attendance and engagement at the primary level. When children lack adequate school readiness, they may struggle to adjust to formal school environments, which can increase the likelihood of dropout.

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) program is designed to deliver developmentally appropriate care and learning opportunities to young children, thereby producing long-term developmental benefits. According to the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education (2007), ECCE plays a deci-

sive role in shaping early childhood development, contributing to the formation of socially responsible individuals and supporting national economic advancement. It achieves this by reducing childhood mortality, minimizing early childhood illnesses, lowering repetition rates, and decreasing school dropout.

International agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO consistently emphasize the universal importance of quality pre-primary education, regardless of children's socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Empirical evidence further confirms the lasting advantages of high-quality early childhood education (Curtis, Maureen, & O'Hagan, 2003, cited in Gebre Egziabher, 2014). As highlighted above, the early childhood phase functions as a transitional bridge between preschool experiences and formal primary education, laying a critical developmental foundation for future academic and personal growth.

Globally, the period extending from conception to approximately six years of age—particularly the first 2000 days—is widely recognized as crucial for long-term cognitive, psychological, and socio-emotional development. Access to structured pre-primary programs is especially significant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it enhances their preparedness for formal schooling and improves life outcomes.

Within the Ethiopian context, Early Childhood Care and Education is considered a fundamental component of basic education and is essential for achieving the national Education for All (EFA) objectives and broader human development goals. It is expected that children engage in preschool activities at an early age and experience enriched learning environments that nurture creativity and latent potential. The Africa Fit for Children declaration (May 2001) further underscores that investing in children constitutes an investment in future peace, stability, democracy, security, and sustainable development.

The right to education is safeguarded by various international conventions and national legal frameworks, all of which stress the holistic development of children's personality and capacities. Since 2010, Ethiopia has introduced several policy reforms and

strategic initiatives focused on expanding access to and improving the quality of ECCE services. The government's national ECCE policy framework and strategic operational plans—developed with UNICEF support—have contributed to measurable progress, with pre-primary gross enrollment reaching 34% in the 2022/2023 academic year.

Nevertheless, prior studies conducted in Ethiopia—including those by Fedlu (2018), Fekede (2021), Misahun (2020), and Mamo & Kenea (2014)—have identified multiple implementation challenges. These include shortages of trained teachers, inadequate facilities, weak policy execution mechanisms, and particular difficulties in rural settings. Such findings indicate the necessity for continued research and contextual policy refinement to enhance ECCE effectiveness, especially in relatively underperforming zones such as Hadiya. The 2022/2023 annual report of the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State Education Bureau documented elevated dropout rates across several zones and special districts. This situation motivated the present study to explore teachers' lived experiences in implementing ECCE policy within government pre-primary schools in Hadiya Zone—an area where comparable research has largely focused on private urban institutions rather than government-attached pre-primary schools.

1.2 Research Question

The study aimed to address 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?”

1.3 Review of Related Literature

Extensive literature consistently emphasizes that the first eight years of a child's life constitute a period of rapid and profound developmental transformation. During the initial three years in particular, brain development progresses at an extraordinary pace, creating a powerful opportunity to influence long-term cognitive, social, emotional, and physical

outcomes. The developmental potential remains substantially high up to approximately eight years of age. Arnold (2004) describes this stage as a critical “window of opportunity,” arguing that strategic investment during early childhood yields enduring benefits not only for individual children but also for families, communities, and society at large. Failure to utilize this developmental window may result in long-term disadvantages that are difficult to reverse.

Similarly, UNESCO (2004) identifies Early Childhood Care, Education, and Development as a pressing priority both within Africa and globally. The organization notes that growing awareness of early childhood’s foundational importance has brought the issue to the forefront of educational policy agendas. In parallel, Young Lives (2016) asserts that early childhood represents the most sensitive and formative stage of human life. The report emphasizes that interventions implemented during this period are among the most cost-effective strategies for mitigating the adverse impacts of poverty, social inequality, and exposure to trauma. Early preventive and supportive measures can therefore substantially improve life trajectories.

A range of empirical studies further demonstrates that access to high-quality ECCE services—including appropriate care, stimulation, and early learning experiences—serves as a powerful determinant of lifelong success (ERPA, 2014). Beyond educational achievement, early childhood programs strengthen social competence, emotional regulation, and adaptive behavior. UNESCO and UNICEF (2012) additionally argue that effective ECCE systems enable governments to fulfill international commitments—such as those articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child—by ensuring that young children can exercise their rights and realize their developmental potential.

Conceptualizing Policy and Policy Implementation Analysis

The concept of policy plays a central role in the functioning of both private and public institutions. While decisions made by individuals or private organizations are typically classified as private policies, actions formulated and executed by governments are referred to as public policies (Ozor, 2004). In

the context of this study, the term policy specifically denotes public policies developed by governmental authorities.

Scholars conceptualize policy from different analytical perspectives. Some define policy primarily as a course of action, others as a deliberate choice among alternatives, and still others as a framework guiding decision-making and implementation processes (Ikelegbe, 2006). These varying interpretations reflect differences in theoretical orientation. Ezeani (2006) defines policy as a proposed line of action that a government intends to pursue in response to identified problems. Expanding this view, Ikelegbe (2006) describes policy as an integrated set of actions and programs accompanied by guiding frameworks that direct practices within specific problem domains. From these perspectives, policy may be understood as a structured direction-setting mechanism designed to achieve predefined governmental objectives.

The 2010 ECCE Policy Framework in Ethiopia

Ethiopia formally introduced a comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in 2010 with the objective of strengthening children’s development during their formative years. The framework articulates a clear vision, mission, strategic goals, guiding principles, institutional structures, and priority intervention areas.

According to the National Policy Framework (2010), the vision of ECCE in Ethiopia is to ensure that every child enjoys the right to a healthy beginning, grows within a safe and nurturing environment, and attains their fullest developmental capacity. The mission emphasizes the delivery of integrated, culturally responsive, high-quality, and developmentally appropriate services that promote balanced and holistic child development. The overarching goal of the framework is to enhance early stimulation from prenatal stages to seven years of age, while improving access, equity, and service quality through coordinated partnerships and institutional capacity-building initiatives.

Modalities of Pre-primary Education

Pre-primary education in Ethiopia is implemented through four primary delivery models: Kinder-

garten, O-Class, Child-to-Child Approach, and Accelerated School Readiness. Each modality operates within a distinct structural and organizational framework.

Kindergarten

Kindergarten operates as a three-year program serving children aged four to six. It employs child-centered pedagogical approaches that emphasize learning through play and experiential engagement. Within this setting, children develop social identity, self-expression, and cooperative skills in an environment that respects individual learning pace (AACEB, 2013).

O-Class

The O-Class model functions as a one-year preparatory program integrated within existing primary schools. It targets six-year-old children immediately prior to Grade One enrollment (MoE, 2013/14). This approach seeks to enhance school readiness among children who may not have previously accessed structured pre-primary services.

Child-to-Child Program

The Child-to-Child initiative engages older children—typically Grade 5 and 6 students—as young facilitators who conduct structured play-based activities with younger children in their homes or nearby community spaces. Activities are adapted to local cultural and environmental contexts to ensure relevance to children’s daily lives. Teachers provide training and supervision to facilitators, while parents participate through observation and support. The primary objective is to enhance younger children’s preparedness for primary schooling (MoE, 2012).

Accelerated School Readiness

This modality is designed as a short-term, two-month preparatory intervention for children aged six and above who have not previously attended preschool. Conducted during July and August, it aims to reduce entry-level disadvantages before children begin Grade One in September (MoE, 2017). Its primary purpose is to bridge readiness gaps among first-time school entrants.

Learning Materials and Learning Environment

The availability of appropriate learning materials and safe environments is fundamental to effective pre-primary education. According to AACAEB (2011/12), indoor learning materials should include puzzles, flashcards, geometric shapes, storybooks, construction blocks, toys, and resources for thematic classroom corners (e.g., family, health, shopping, science, language, mathematics). Outdoor facilities should include play equipment such as swings, slides, merry-go-rounds, balance tools, and locally constructed play materials.

NACECE (2003) highlights that such materials stimulate imaginative exploration and creative expression. Children often develop strong emotional attachments to these materials, which function as mediating tools between the child and their environment. Moreover, Curtis (1998, cited in Haile, 2010) emphasizes that outdoor environments provide learning opportunities that cannot be replicated indoors. Well-designed outdoor spaces encourage curiosity, observational skills, and engagement with natural elements such as weather patterns, plants, and insects. These experiences foster inquiry-based learning and holistic development.

Parent and Community Engagement

Parents serve as children’s primary caregivers and foundational educators. Therefore, effective early childhood programs require close collaboration between families and schools. MoE (2016) underscores that parents should actively participate in selecting preschool activities, contributing learning materials, supervising educational processes, and mobilizing resources for school operation.

Beyond families, broader community engagement—including local organizations and non-governmental institutions—is essential (OECD, 2001). MoE, MoH, and MoWA (2010) emphasize that communities bear responsibility for creating safe and supportive developmental environments. Community involvement strengthens holistic development through contributions in health, nutrition, care, and educational services (Eagle *et al.*, 2007, cited in Yalew, 2011). Effective partnerships between schools and communities thus enhance the

sustainability and quality of ECCE programs.

Learning Methodology in Pre-primary Education

The ECCE policy guidelines recommend child-centered, play-based instructional approaches that promote active participation, peer interaction, and experiential learning (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). Teachers are expected to support children's efforts, utilize diverse teaching aids, and facilitate group-based activities that encourage collaborative exploration.

However, evidence from observational studies suggests that instructional practices frequently diverge from these recommendations. In many contexts, teacher-centered methods—particularly explanation and question-and-answer formats—predominate. Approaches such as play-based learning, role-play, experiential engagement, discussion, and storytelling are reportedly underutilized. Classroom observations indicate that instruction often emphasizes telling, reading, and demonstrating, reflecting traditional teacher-dominated pedagogies rather than learner-centered engagement.

Assessment Practices in Pre-primary Schools

The ECCE framework advocates continuous and developmentally appropriate assessment methods that are not used solely for promotion decisions but rather to inform learning support (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010). Assessment findings should also be communicated to parents.

Nevertheless, classroom observations indicate that assessment practices are often limited to tests and attendance records, with occasional consideration of class participation. Techniques such as portfolio assessment, observation-based evaluation, drawing, writing samples, and checklists are rarely implemented. Interviews with school leaders suggest that inadequate training, absence of ongoing professional development, shortages of instructional materials, and limited financial resources hinder effective assessment implementation.

Isenberg and Jalongo (1993) argue that assessment in early childhood settings should rely on contin-

uous observation across both indoor and outdoor activities. Evaluation should focus on children's engagement, effort, attitudes, and developmental progress rather than solely on written test performance.

Teacher Qualification and Professional Development

Establishing a structured qualification framework for ECCE teachers is essential to ensure consistent standards and progressive skill development (Biersteker, 2008). Rapid program expansion often challenges traditional pre-service training systems. Biersteker (2010) and Orkin *et al.* (2012) suggest flexible models in which teachers initially obtain short-term certification and subsequently upgrade their qualifications through staged professional pathways.

Teacher competencies—including pedagogical skills, attitudes, and relational capacities—are central to curriculum effectiveness. UNESCO (2007) stresses that positive teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships significantly influence program quality, often more than material resources. Reflective teaching practices and continuous professional learning are therefore vital components of quality ECCE delivery.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) strongly endorses Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as a guiding framework for early childhood education. DAP integrates research-based principles to support optimal learning by aligning instructional experiences with children's developmental stages.

Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explain that DAP does not reduce expectations but rather ensures that goals are appropriately challenging and achievable. In such environments, children benefit from both child-initiated and teacher-guided activities. Structured small-group and large-group interactions, interactive learning experiences, and carefully planned instruction collectively promote balanced cognitive, social, and emotional development.

2 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.

2.1 Description of the Study Area

Hadiya Zone is administratively located within the Central Ethiopian Regional State, one of the newest regional administrations in Ethiopia. This regional state was officially established following the referendum conducted on August 19, 2023, which led to its separation from the northern part of the former Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPRS).

Geographically, Hadiya Zone is situated approximately 232 kilometers south of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. The zone is bordered by Kembata Tembaro to the south, Dawro Zone to the southwest, and the Oromia Region and Yem Zone to the west, with the Omo River serving as a natural boundary. To the north, it shares a border with Gurage Zone, while Silte Zone lies to the northeast and Alaba Zone to the east. The administrative center of the zone is Hossana town, which also functions as the capital of the Central Ethiopian Regional State.

In terms of educational infrastructure, Hadiya Zone comprises 586 pre-primary schools. Of these, 127 schools (21.6%) are privately owned and managed, whereas 459 institutions (78.3%) operate under government administration. Enrollment statistics indicate that a total of 102,686 children attend pre-primary programs within the zone, including 52,082 boys and 50,604 girls. The teaching workforce consists of 516 pre-primary educators, among whom 141 (27.3%) are male and 375 (72.6%) are female”.

2.2 Research Design

To explore and understand the lived experiences of pre-primary teachers in implementing the ECCE policy, this study adopted a qualitative research approach grounded in a phenomenological design. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for examining shared human experiences and capturing the

essence of participants' perspectives regarding a specific phenomenon.

As Creswell (2007) explains, phenomenological research seeks to describe the meaning individuals attribute to their lived experiences. In this study, the design enabled participants to articulate their personal and professional experiences concerning the implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education policy within their respective schools.

Furthermore, phenomenological inquiry requires researchers to focus intensively on participants' descriptions of their experiences in order to generate a reflective structural understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bliss, 2016). By employing this design, the researchers aimed to uncover the underlying meanings embedded within teachers' daily professional realities related to ECCE policy implementation.

2.3 Sampling Technique

Phenomenological studies commonly utilize purposive sampling, as this technique allows researchers to select individuals who have direct and meaningful experience with the phenomenon being studied. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), purposive sampling is appropriate when participants possess specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives. Higginbottom (2004) further notes that this method ensures the inclusion of information-rich cases capable of providing detailed insights.

Within Hadiya Zone, there are sixteen administrative units, consisting of twelve rural districts and four town administrations. For the purpose of this study, six government pre-primary teachers were purposively selected from six districts/town administrations and their respective primary schools. These included Danama (West Badawacho), Bonosha (Shashogo), Shone Number 1 (Shone Town), Alemu Woldehana (Hossana Town), Ansho (Duna), and Sokokta (Amaka).

The rationale for selecting these specific sites was that both the schools and the participating teachers had been recognized by the Hadiya Zone Education Department for exemplary performance in ECCE during the 2012/2022 academic year

(Hadiya Zone Education Department Annual Report, 2022). Their demonstrated engagement in ECCE implementation made them suitable participants for exploring lived experiences related to policy execution.

2.4 Data Collection Instruments

In phenomenological research, in-depth interviews—particularly open-ended or semi-structured formats—are widely regarded as the most appropriate tools for data collection. These methods enable participants to express their experiences comprehensively and authentically. Padilla-Diaz (2015) emphasizes that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore a phenomenon deeply while providing sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on their lived realities. Detailed descriptions generated through such interviews contribute to a more faithful representation of experiential meaning.

Consistent with this approach, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview guide after conducting an extensive review of relevant literature on ECCE policy implementation. To enhance the credibility and clarity of the instrument, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by two pre-primary teachers who were not part of the study sample but possessed relevant professional experience.

2.5 Data Collection Procedures

Phenomenological research values flexibility in data collection, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in rich and meaningful detail (Smith, 2004). Such methods aim to systematically analyze shared experiences in order to derive interpretive understanding (Watson *et al.*, 2015).

Prior to data collection, official authorization was obtained from the Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education at Haramaya University. A formal letter of permission was subsequently submitted to the Hadiya Zone Education Department. The Zone Education Department then issued authorization letters to the selected districts and town administrations, which in turn granted access to the sampled primary schools.

Fieldwork was conducted over a one-month period, from March 12, 2023, to April 12, 2023. During this time, interviews were carried out intensively to ensure comprehensive data generation from each participant.

Data analysis in phenomenological research seeks to systematically interpret participants' lived experiences in order to reveal the essence of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). The analytical process relies heavily on participants' narratives, focusing on both individual meanings and shared experiential patterns (Creswell, 2007). In this study, data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim within twelve hours of each interview session to preserve accuracy. Transcriptions were carefully reviewed alongside field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations, which enriched interpretation. An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed to generate findings grounded in the data itself. Themes emerged organically through repeated reading, coding, and categorization of participants' responses, allowing the researchers to identify patterns and develop meaningful thematic structures.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were carefully observed throughout the research process. Prior to participation, all respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily consented to take part. Participants were assured that the information they provided would remain confidential and would not be disclosed without their explicit consent. Anonymity was maintained in reporting findings to protect participants' identities and ensure ethical integrity.

3 Results

The findings and their interpretations are organized to directly address the central research question introduced at the outset of the study. Specifically, the investigation focuses on understanding teachers' firsthand experiences in implementing the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy within government pre-primary schools in 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 the 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) emphasizes 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 Pre-primary 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 out- door 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 Discussions

The findings of this investigation reveal that the actual implementation of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy within the study area does not correspond with the expectations of the government or the broader community. More specifically, the practical realities observed in government pre-primary schools demonstrate limited alignment with the Ministry of Education’s ECCE Policy Framework and its associated strategic operational plans.

Evidence from earlier Ethiopian studies indicates that the level and quality of ECCE implementation vary considerably across regions and among pre-primary institutions. Research conducted by Gebre Egziabher (2014), Fekede (2021), Misahun (2020), and Mamo and Kenea (2014) consistently emphasizes that early childhood education functions as a foundational bridge between preschool experiences and formal primary education. These scholars argue that this stage plays a decisive role in

shaping children’s long-term developmental trajectories. They further maintain that high-quality early childhood programs contribute to socially responsible citizenship and national economic progress by lowering child mortality, reducing illness, minimizing grade repetition, and preventing school dropout.

While these prior studies underscore the transformative potential of ECCE, the present study identified a contrasting reality within the selected government pre-primary schools. The physical infrastructure and classroom environments were found to be largely unattractive and inadequate for supporting a stimulating and developmentally appropriate learning atmosphere. Instructional practices frequently relied on teacher-centered approaches rather than child-directed, play-based methodologies. In addition, parental involvement in children’s educational processes appeared minimal, and assessment practices did not consistently consider developmental appropriateness, age-related capabilities, or child-centered evaluation strategies.

Overall, the findings indicate a significant discrepancy between the intended policy framework outlined by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2010) and the on-the-ground realities observed in the study context. The implementation process appears constrained by structural, pedagogical, and relational challenges that weaken the effective realization of ECCE objectives.

Arnold (2004) emphasizes that the first eight years of life represent a period of intense and rapid development, particularly in neurological growth during the initial three years. This stage constitutes a critical “window of opportunity” for maximizing children’s developmental potential. Strategic investment during this phase generates long-term benefits not only for individual children but also for society at large. In contrast to this ideal perspective, the current study identified multiple barriers that limit children’s optimal growth within the studied pre-primary schools.

Among the most significant obstacles were inadequate and unsafe indoor and outdoor learning environments, shortages of appropriate learning materials, limited professional training and ped-

agogical competence among teachers, and weak supervisory and monitoring mechanisms. Furthermore, collaboration among parents, community stakeholders, and teachers was found to be insufficient. The data suggest that policy implementation gaps stem partly from inconsistencies between national standards and actual institutional practice.

In a similar vein, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) advocates strongly for the adoption of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in early childhood settings. DAP is grounded in research-based principles that guide educators in designing learning experiences aligned with children's developmental stages while providing appropriate levels of challenge. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explain that developmentally appropriate practice does not reduce expectations but ensures that goals are suitably challenging and achievable. It combines child-initiated exploration with carefully structured teacher-guided activities.

However, the findings of this study demonstrate that many pre-primary classrooms and school environments within the study area fail to create conditions conducive to developmentally appropriate learning. The absence of stimulating physical spaces, limited play opportunities, and reliance on traditional instructional methods hinder children's holistic development. These shortcomings ultimately undermine the core principles embedded within the ECCE policy framework.

In summary, although the national ECCE policy articulates comprehensive and progressive standards, its practical implementation in the studied government pre-primary schools remains constrained by infrastructural inadequacies, pedagogical limitations, weak parental engagement, and insufficient alignment with developmentally appropriate educational practices.

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.

6 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 schools,
- 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 playgrounds and to encourage the children's learning,
- to understand their children's learning gaps and achievement and to take a common decision in every issue parent should work with teachers intimately.

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