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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

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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 a 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 children.

* Corresponding author; Email: babymorka21@gmail.com

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 researcher for further investigation into the lived experiences of teachers engaged in ECCE policy implementation in this zone, where similar stud-

ies were conducted in only private pre-primary schools in towns. However, no similar studies have been conducted in government-attached pre-primary schools.

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?

2   Review of Related Literature

Literatures state 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 (Arnold, 2004).

Other literature further states that Early Childhood Care, Education and Development is a topic whose time has arrived in Africa as well as internationally (UNESCO, 2004). Young Lives, (2016) on the other hand underlines this idea by stating that early childhood is the most critical first phase of life, and the most cost-effective opportunity for investing in prevention and intervention programs that reduce the effects of poverty, inequality and trauma.

A number of researches conducted on the area of ECCE depict that high-quality care, learning and experiences of ECCE can be a powerful instrument for helping to be successful for the rest of life (ERPA, 2014). ECCE can assist governments in fulfilling their commitments (such as through the Convention on the Rights of the Child) to help young children exercise their rights and develop to their full potential (UNESCO and UNICE, 2012).

Concept of Policy Implementation Analysis

The term policy is central to the operation and activities of both private organizations and public institutions. A policy option made by an individual or private institution is known as a privacy policy while the one made by the government or its institutions is called public policy (Ozor, 2004). However, the term policy as it is used in this study refers to only the ones made by the government and which are, as such, regarded as public policies.

Scholars have viewed the term policy differently and from various perspectives. Some emphasize policy as an action. Others see it as a choice. Yet, some see it in terms of scope of action (Ikelegbe, 2006). In other words, the way a given scholar conceptualizes a policy depends on the perspective from which the scholar is viewing it and this accounts for the varied definition of the concept. While to Ezeani (2006), it is the proposed course of action which government intends to implement in respect of a given problem or situation confronting it. Ikelegbe (2006), in a more elaborate form, defines policy thus; "It is the integrated course and programs of action that government has set and the framework or guides it has designed to direct action and practices in certain problems area". In essence, a policy is a course setting action that provides the direction, the guide, and the way to the achievement of certain goals or objectives desired by the government.

The 2010 ECCE Policy Framework in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, early childhood care and education policy has been stated in 2010 for the better improvement of children in their early years. These statements were put in the way that its vision, mission, goals, and strategic objectives, guiding principles, and structural set-up and focus of activities. According to the National policy framework, (2010) stated: its vision was to ensure all children the right to a healthy start in life, be nurtured in a safe, caring, and stimulating environment, and develop to their fullest potential and its mission was elaborated as aimed to provide a comprehensive, integrated, quality, developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive service for the holistic development of all children. On the other hand, the overall goal of the policy framework is to promote early stimulation and the best start in life for all children from prenatal to seven years and enhance the quality, accessibility, and equitable distribution of services for education through more efficient partnership and capacity building programs.

Modalities of Pre-primary Education

pre-primary is delivered by categorizing it in to four classifications. They are kindergarten, O-class, Child to Child approach and accelerated school readiness. The approach of each modality is presented as follows:

Kindergarten

It is a three years' program. It makes children /age 4-6/ ready for the primary education by using child-centered approach. Children can learn through play at their own peace. This contributes to the formation of their identity, expression and social learning (AACEB, 2013).

O-Class

It's one of the four modalities of pre-primary education program and it's opened up in the already existing primary schools. It is single year program for 6-year old children before entering grade one (MoE, 2013/14).

Child to Child Program

The core of the Child-to-Child Initiative is that older children in the community (so called young facilitators) engage in structured play-oriented activities with their younger siblings and neighboring children. They do so in their own houses or in a place close to the participating children's homes. The activities are as much as possible adapted to the local context and fit in with the children's daily life. The young facilitators are preferable grade 5 and 6 students trained and guided by their teachers. Teachers are involved as trainers and supervisors. Parents take turn and observe. The main aim of the Child-to-Child Initiative is to better prepare young children for primary school. Facilitators play with younger children to make the ready for 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), indoor learning materials for preschool education includes: puzzle, flash card, different geometrical shapes, story books, construction blocks, toys and materials to equip different corners in the classrooms (family corner, health, shopping, science, language and math's corner *etc*.). The same document states that outdoor playing material consists of balance, slide, Mary go round including some locally made playing materials. Furthermore, children develop their imaginative discovery and creative skill through the use of different learning materials. They have a very strong emotional attachment to them. Moreover, children also use this material as a link between themselves and the environment (NACECE, 2003).

Moreover, many of the skills and competencies which children develop during those early years are learned from the outdoor natural environment. Because it offers rich learning experiences not found indoors. In a well-planned outdoor environment children do much more than run, climb, and ride bikes. They notice the weather, insects, plants, and everything going on around them. Their curiosity is stimulated as they seek answers to their questions about new discoveries (Curtis, 1998, cited in Haile, 2010).

Parent and Community Engagement

Parents are the first caregivers of their children. This shows that all other caregivers and teachers need to work closely with them. Therefore, parents need to be involved actively in deciding what activities and services should be delivered in the pre-school. They can support preschool centers by: -Sending their children to the centers, assisting in the provision of learning materials, coordinating and supervising the teaching learning process in the preschool centers, raising funds for the running of the school *etc*. (MoE, 2016). On the other hand, Community is people from the same neighborhood or the whole community including non-governmental organizations (OECD, no year).

Communities have a responsibility to make environments safe and conducive to children in their early years of development and they have the power to organize families, the state and other social institutions so as to support pre-school education (MoE, MoH, MoWA, 2010). The preschool educational system can promote holistic child development through supporting comprehensive programs with active involvement of families and communities (Eagle, pall*et al*., 2007 in Yalew, 2011). Additionally, a community initiates and manages community-based services for young children by providing supports in care, health, and nutrition (Yalew, 2011).

Learning Methodology in the Pre-primary School

It was stated in the ECCE policy guideline that teaching-learning methods should be child-centered approach; should facilitating a group setting to help children share experience; should supporting and encouraging children effort in the process of learning; should be mainly play-based teaching approach; and utilization of different teaching aids in the classroom (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010). In order to check out and analyze the policy implementation regarding these issues, a researcher conducted interviews with pre-primary educations teachers. The result is discussed below.

Regarding used teaching method the interview result conducted by a researcher revealed that most teachers currently working in pre-primary schools were use explanation, sometimes question and answer, rarely use discussion, play-based lessons, learning by doing, grouping, learning through experience, and never use illustrating stories as well as role-play teaching methods in the studied area. This depicts that explanation and question and answer were the most commonly used teaching methods in the majority of the pre-primary schools. whilst, other important methods were rarely used or not

at all. As observation result witnessed in most classrooms more direct teaching with giving emphasis on telling, reading, showing, and asking (dominance of teachers centered) than the use of the rest (student-centered) methods.

Assessment of Children in the Pre-primary Schools

It was depicted in the ECCE policy guideline that assessment in pre-primary schools should be continuous using appropriate methods; it should not be used as a basis for promotion and encouragement; and the result should be communicated to parents (MoE, MoH and MoWA, 2010). In order to identify and analyze the major assessment techniques used, teachers in the classrooms and their assessment portfolios were observed.

Accordingly, from the observation conducted the assessment methods that most teachers used were noticed to be limited to test and daily attendance. Besides, several teachers used class participation. On the other hand, the assessment techniques like writing and drawing, as well as checklist, portfolio, observation, and homework were the least used techniques of assessment in most of the studied PPSs. In addition, the interview held with principals of PPSs also supported the above finding and pointed out issues such as inadequacy of training, absence of in-service training by government and stakeholders, and shortage of instructional materials, budget, and equipment were some of the major problems which adversely affects the proper implementation of assessment techniques in PPSs.

In addition to ECCE policy guidelines, other evidence shows that assessment of young children should be based on continuous observation both in-out door environments that should be an ongoing process rather than a single paper-pencil test. Rather than the mere presence of children's in the classroom, it should be looking at their activities, attitudes, and efforts (Isenberg and Jallongo, 1993).

Qualification of Pre-school Teachers

A qualification framework for ECCE teachers is essential to link qualifications at different levels. Whether a short-term certificate or a longer-term

diploma and is a useful first step in rapid expansion of ECCE provision (Biersteker, 2008). It is difficult to increase capacity rapidly through traditional pre-service teacher-training routes. One progressive model would be for new teachers to obtain initial qualification with a multi-month pre-school training certificate so that they can begin work in the short term and follow steps in the framework to upgrade their skills to fully qualified ECCE teacher status over time (Orkin *et al.*, 2012; Biersteker, 2010). Assistant teachers could be required to attend school to at least the Grade 8 level and to hold education/health volunteer or education/health assistant certificates (Orkin *et al.*, 2012).

Teacher attitudes, skills and behaviors play a key role in the effectiveness of curriculum delivery. The skills required by pre-primary classroom curricula, pedagogies *etc.* should guide the content of teacher-training, including extensive practical experience. Positive relationships and interactions with pupils, parents and other teachers appear crucial to program quality – and are often much more important than material inputs (UNESCO, 2007).

To develop these relations, training approaches that help teachers become more reflective about their teaching practices and the environments in which they work are effective (UNESCO, 2007). A final challenge is about learning through evidence, research and innovation.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in ECCE Program

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) acknowledges and supports the effort of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in a child's early years of learning. DAP is a framework designed to reflect research-based practices that promote a child's optimal learning and development. "DAP is the heart of all the NAEYC's work and resources" (NAEYC, 2020, para 2). Educators and caregivers use developmentally appropriate practice to meet children where they are while challenging them to meet their achievable goals.

According to Copple and Bredekamp (2009), in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), the

teachers should understand their students well enough to support them in reaching their achievable goals as well as challenging goals. "Developmentally appropriate practice does not make things easier for children. Rather, it means ensuring that goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. xii). In developmentally appropriate programs, children benefit from experiences that are presented through child-guided as well as teacher-guided techniques. They also gain knowledge from activities that are planned, teacher-guided, interactive small-group and large group experiences (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 pre-primary 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 teacher in 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 experiences 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 performing in ECCE in the 2012/2022 academic year. (Hadiya Zone Education Department annual report, 2022).

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

The most appropriate data collection approach for phenomenological research is an interview with open or semi-structured questions to explore a phenomenon in a detailed manner. These two types of interviews allow researchers to address a phenomenon under study deeply, so long as there is adequate time for the informants to articulate their experiences in detail, approaching authenticity as faithfully as possible. The detailed descriptions or interpretations provided by the participants in the profound phenomenological interview should be as representative of experienced reality as possible (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In line with this a semi-structured interview guide was developed by the researchers after a comprehensive review of the related literature on ECCE policy implementation was performed. The trustworthiness of the developed tools was checked by two pre-primary teachers who were outside of the study area.

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 (Mous-takas, 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 the data-driven result.

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 in 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 in to 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 preprimary 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 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 did not implemented as the government as well as community expect. That is, the implementation is did not boldly align with the MoE (Ministry of Education's) ECCE policy framework and strategic operational plan.

As various studies conducted in Ethiopia scholar's in different regions showed that, the implementation status is differ 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 finding of this study result indicated that, the real implementation of early childhood education did not aligned with the stated MoE, ECCE (2010) policy reality.

On the other hand, the study conducted by Arnold (2004), state 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 these regard, the current study highlights major challenges hindered the remarkable growth and development of children's 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 of 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 lead-

ing 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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