



# Access To Quality Early Childhood Education: The Case Of North Shewa Zone, Oromia National Regional State, Ethiopia

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe the status of access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) in the North Shewa Zone of Oromia National Regional State, Ethiopia. A mixed research method - Concurrent nested model (QUAN+qual) was employed to achieve this purpose. A total of 20 schools were selected randomly using stage sampling from five districts- Fitch town administration, Kuyu wereda, Debrelibanos wereda, Degem wereda, and Were Jarso wereda of North Shewa Zone. For the study, 76 teachers, 17 principals, and 20 officers of education bureaus have participated. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and document reviews were used to collect data. The collected data were analyzed as follows: the close-ended questions from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics and mean; the data collected through open-ended questions were also coded, entered into MS Excel 2010, and converted to percentages; the information obtained through the interview was transcribed and interpreted qualitatively, observation and document reviews were analyzed qualitatively. This research finds that access to ECE in the North Shewa Zone of Oromia regional state is low and there are attempts to provide the necessary inputs like physical facilities, learning resources, play materials, and manpower but they are not sufficient to bring the quality of ECE. Furthermore, this research confirms that the quality of the educational process is promising. It also identifies the following challenges that ECE faces: Shortage of qualified teachers trained in ECE. Lack of on-the-job training for teachers both at government and private schools. Shortage of teaching and learning resources such as textbooks, reference books, flashcards, and stationaries. Moreover, shortage of play materials, shortage of classrooms and unsuitable grounds for children to play, and lack of support and follow-up are also among the challenges.

**Key words:** access, quality, early childhood education

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## Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an important and fundamental first step in the education system in which children get ready for school(UNESCO, 2010). Access to quality ECE is believed to have positive impact on child's future development. Among the positive impacts forwarded are higher achievement in test

scores, lower rate of grade repetition and drop-out, and higher educational attainment (Barnett,2008; Rossiter,2016), rapid brain, cognitive and language development(Belay and Hawaz ,2015). Furthermore it is one of the timely issues emphasized following the UN declaration of “ The 2030 agenda for sustainable development” (UN, 2015).

The Ethiopian government emphasis on access to quality ECE, after a century old experience of the country in the field, gained its momentum in 2010, when it issued a policy frame work called Strategic Operational Plan and Guideline , which is built around four pillars: – Parental Education, Early Child Health and Stimulation (pre-natal period up to age 3 ) , Preschools: Kindergartens(4-6+years) and non-formal School Readiness (notably Child-to-Child) initiative (Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health & Ministry of Women Affairs, 2010). The guideline also encourages the establishment of preschools of various kinds, including community-based preschools, private preschools and preschools attached to public primary schools (Rossiter ,2016). Particularly, the establishment of preschools attached to public primary schools was a significant step in which government directly engaged in the provision of ECE. This in turn helped the rapid expansion of accelerated school readiness programs such as a one year ‘O’ Class and Child-to-Child initiatives (MOE, MOH & MOWA, 2010). These efforts enabled the sub sector to achieve a Gross Enrolment Rate(GER) of 34 % in 2013/14(MOE,2015). This was by far a remarkable success comparing the previous experience when it was 6.9% in 2009. The increment of the GER also continued in the subsequent years to get at 40.7 % in 2019 (MOE,2019). Still however, ECE is hampered by disparity in access between urban and rural areas on one hand and among regions on the other. The data from 2019 indicated that out of nine regional states and two city administrations found in Ethiopia, four regional states had GER less than the national one (40.7 %).These were Beneshangul Gumuz 36.7%, Oromia 29.4%, Afar 12.9 % and Somali 7 %. The low enrolment rate in the regional state of Oromia, has its implication on its *Zones*. North Shewa *Zone*, the focus of this study cannot be free from the regional trend (Oromia Education Bureau,2019). Besides, studies attested that ECE is the most neglected area in the education system of Ethiopia (Sisay,2016; Tsegai, 2015). Moreover, it was recommended that Universities conduct research on ECE program in their respective regions (MOE,2018). Therefore this study was designed to describe the status of access to quality ECE in North Shewa *Zone* of Oromia regional state, Ethiopia through assessing the extent that ECE was accessible; examining the quality of ECE and identifying the challenges the ECE faced.

## Materials

### Participants

The participants of this research were selected from four *weredas* and one town administration. Accordingly Fitcha town administration, Kuyu *wereda*, Debrelibanos *wereda* , Degem *wereda* and Were Jarso *wereda* were selected using purposive sampling. This was mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, majority of schools are found within the first four areas and secondly Were Jarso was included to represent the remote areas. Stage sampling was employed to select schools from the sample *weredas* and town administration as well as teachers and principals from sample schools. Thus 16 kindergartens were selected using simple random sampling. 4 “O” classes were also taken using available sampling. 76 teachers, who were selected using simple random sampling participated in the research. 17 Principals, 20 Officers of different *wereda* education bureaus were selected using available sampling. Table 1, presents the characteristics of the participants.

**Table: 1: Participants Characteristics**

No	Variable	Characteristics	Teachers		Principals	Officials
			N=76	%	N=17	N=20
1	Gender	Male	20	26.3	6	
		Female	56	73.7	11	
2	Qualification	Diploma Teaching	44	57.9	12	
		Diploma ECCE	18	23.7	-	
		Certificate Teaching	8	10.5	-	
		Certificate ECCE	3	3.9	-	
		12 th grade complete	1	1.3	-	
		10th grade complete	1	1.3	-	
		First Degree Teaching	1	1.3	5	
3	Experience	<5 Years	45	59.2		
		6-10 Years	14	18.4		
		11-15 Years	10	13.2		
		16 -20 Years	2	2.6		
		>21	5	6.6		
4	Additional Training	Child Development	7	9.2		
		Child Pedagogy	61	80.3		
		Child Care	1	1.3		
		No Training	7	9.2		

## Instruments

The major data collection instruments employed for this research were questionnaire, interview, observation and document review.

**Questionnaire:** Three versions of questionnaire were developed based on the existing relevant literatures, knowledge and experience of the researchers. Two versions of the questionnaires were developed with both close ended and open ended questions and administered to teachers and principals. The second version of the questionnaire was developed with open ended questions and administered to 10 officers of education bureau. For the sake of convenience the questionnaires were translated in to *afan* Oromo and Amharic languages.

**Interview:** Semi structured interview was developed to gather data from 10 officers of education bureau.

**Observation:** Non-participant observation checklist was developed and employed to observe the physical environment, facilities, and the indoor and outdoor materials of the schools.

**Document analysis:** to secure facts and figures along with new policies, directives and strategies, different documents like education abstracts and reports, were consulted as source to supplement the data collected through means mentioned above.

## Method

### Research site

In the current Ethiopia's political and administrative structure, there are regional states, which are further divided in to administrative structure called *Zone*. *Zones* are further divided in to administrative units called *Wereda*. This research is conducted in North Shewa *Zone*, one of the *Zones* in Oromia National regional state, Ethiopia. It is located in the northern part of the capital Addis Ababa covering 10,322.48 square kilometer area. Administratively the *Zone* is divided in to 13 *weredas* and one town administration. Its administrative center Fiche town is located at 114 kilo meters north of Addis Ababa along the main road to Bahirdar.

### Operationalizing Terms

In Ethiopia, the Strategic Operational Plan and Guideline use the term Early Childhood Care and Education to refer to the health, care and education of children before admitting to formal school. In this study Early Childhood Education is employed to refer only to the education part and the term Preschool is also used to refer to the institutions whenever necessary. Generally Early Childhood Education is operationalized as an education designed for children aged 4-6+years, before they join primary school. In Ethiopia, it is provided through three modalities. These are Kindergarten (a 3 year program), Child to Child (1 year) and 'O' Class (1 year). Kindergarten, which is believed to prepare children sufficiently for primary school, is predominantly operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities, private institutions, and faith based organizations. Child to Child modality is an accelerated school readiness program, in which older children play with younger siblings or other children in the neighborhood, supervised by qualified teachers, to teach basic skills such as counting, differentiating colors, and identifying letters before joining primary school. 'O' Class, is a reception class based in government primary schools for children aged 6, before starting formal schooling at age 7 (MOE, 2019).

Moreover this study addresses two inseparable concepts- access and quality of ECE. The inexplicability of the two concepts has been emphasized. It is argued that achieving access to ECE alone could not bring the desired outcome unless it has quality (Myers, 2006; UNICEF, 2007). Thus the two concepts are operationalized as follows:

Access to ECE is conceptualized as the availability, accessibility and affordability of education for all preschool age children. According to the national guideline in Ethiopia, all children aged 4-6+years are eligible to be admitted to preschool program regardless of their culture, gender, social class or ethnicity (MOE, MOH & MOWA, 2010). Therefore, the accessibility of ECE through the three modalities was assessed. Access to ECE could be measured by the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) and Net Enrolment Rate (NER) (MOE, 2019). This study used GER to measure access to ECE, because it is the most widely used measure.

Quality of education at any level of the education system is a complex concept with no universal consensus. It is a context specific relative concept. In this study it is conceptualized in terms of inputs, processes, and outputs of the education system. Accordingly an education system is said to be quality if its input, process and output meet a minimum standard set (Ishimine, Tayler, & Bennett, 2010). These quality dimensions more or less are in harmony with the quality standards set for ECE at national level in Ethiopia. Thus, the concepts that surround ECE and its corresponding standards used for the analysis of this study are adopted from, the National Preprimary Standard (MOE, 2009), and the Strategic Operational Plan and Guideline for ECCE in Ethiopia of 2010 (MOE, MOH, MOWA, 2010).

### Design

This study employed mixed method research, concurrent nested/embedded design, because Mixed method research is helpful to get better and deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon like quality of education by making use of the strengths of the qualitative and quantitative researches and counterbalancing

their weaknesses (Creswell, 2012 ; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie , 2004). A concurrent embedded design is characterized by having a primary method (quantitative or qualitative) that guides the project and a secondary database that provides a supporting role in the procedures (Creswell, 2012).

### **Research Ethics**

Prior to data collection, permission letter to conduct the research was secured from Salale University Research and Community Service V/ President Office. Then using the letter permission was secured from the education bureaus and schools. Data from questionnaire, interview and observation were gathered with informed consent of participants. Each of the participants was personally contacted and given the consent form and told that the participation is voluntary, that there would be no risk except spending an hour of their time, that the information obtained would be kept confidential and that their anonymity would be secured as they would not write their names on the questionnaire and the information they provide would be used only for study purpose. All interviews were held with the agreement of the participants at time they feel comfortable. The distribution and collection of the questionnaire was done by data collectors who were trained. Observations, interview and document review were accomplished by the researchers.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data was analyzed based on the following procedure. As a general rule the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately but concurrently. Accordingly, the close ended questions from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics-percentage and mean, and the result was presented using frequency table followed by discussion. The data collected through open ended question were also coded, entered to MS excel 2010, themes identified converted to percentage. The information obtained through interview were transcribed to text form and interpreted qualitatively. Similarly data collected using observation and document reviews were interpreted and used to substantiate and supplement evidence from other sources. Finally both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated in the discussion stage of the research to be the sources of the findings.

## **Discussion**

### ***The extent that ECE is accessible***

From the results this research finds that access to ECE is low in the Zone. This means that more than hundred thousand children are out of school in the Zone. The GER of ECE in the Zone has decreased since 2016. Despite a slight increment in the number of preschool age population for the last three years, the number of kindergartens remained the same 45; the number of 'O' class has also been decreasing since 2016 except in 2019 when there was some increment; in the same way the number of child to child modality has been decreased since 2016 and finally ceased. Besides this the existing GER trend and absence of new education establishments, i.e, no new KG, and 'O' class, and even the end of Child to Child modality in the Zone, indicate that there would be no increment of enrolment in the next two or more years.

### ***The status of the quality of ECE***

The first group of input dimension assessed was the physical environment of the school. This study finds out that preschools are safe for children as they are far away from risks such as pollution and garbage site and that they are conducive for teaching and learning. Thus in this regard the schools seemed to fulfill the standards that the location should be free from pollution and far away from garbage sites and safe for children (MOE, MOH and MOWA, 2010). Regarding the suitability of the school compound for children's play, the study identifies irreconcilable results, even though majority of the teachers agreed that the school compounds are suitable, the data from officials of education bureau and observation present it differently. The situation is worth in "O" classes where there is no separate fence between most of the primary schools and the "O" class and children have no leveled ground to play. With respect to the size of the school compound, it is found out that most of the schools have a size required by the standard. In relation to the distance between the school and students' home it is found out that majority of the schools fulfill the standard, as they are located within one kilometer distance.

The second group of input dimension this research addressed was facilities/ infrastructures/, particularly classrooms, drinking water, toilet, learning resources, indoor and outdoor play materials. Accordingly whether or not the schools have sufficient classrooms in relation to the number of their students was checked. Thus this research finds incompatible results. Whereas majority of teachers stated that schools have sufficient number of classrooms to support their students, majority of principals, education officials and informants claimed that classrooms are not sufficient. The sufficiency of classrooms was also checked using classroom-student ratio, which ranged between 1: 15 and 1:48, however this acceptable classroom-student ratio is not in harmony with the standard which requires 1.55 m<sup>2</sup> space for each child (MOE, MOH, MOWA, 2010). Our observation of schools witnessed that most of the classrooms are small which could accommodate up to 20 students and that they are not up to the standard. It was also found out that the classrooms are clean and ventilated.



Regarding the availability of clean and adequate drinking water this research finds it difficult to say that schools have sufficient clean drinking water. From the data this research identifies the availability of separate toilets for girls and boys, but the issue of cleanness is doubtful. Those "O" classes have no separate toilet for the children, hence the children are left to use the toilets made for primary school students and these toilets are far from being clean.

The availability and sufficiency of learning resources and play materials are important elements of quality of education. Therefore, this research finds out that although not adequate, resources such as journals, magazines, kids' books, mathematical signs, counting materials and different cultural musical instruments are available in majority of schools. It is also identified that such resources important for different corners – for science corner(science kits), for family corner(coffee pot, spoon..), culture corner( cultural clothes) as well as different construction blocs, and sand box are not available in majority of the schools.

Regarding the indoor and outdoor play materials, this research identifies that different toys, merry go round, and seesaw are not available in majority of schools. The other play materials- swing, slide, balls, tiers and ladder are found in majority of the schools, but not sufficient. These findings supported the findings of Tsegaye(2014) that uncovered the unavailability of text books and the findings of Beide and Yegzaw (2019) that identified the availability of inadequate indoor and outdoor play materials and unsuitable playground. Furthermore the result of this study also conforms to the problems Teka et al.,(2016) have identified in their study about the shortage of classrooms, shortage of children's books, limited play and learning resources.

Human resources are the main components of the input element of quality of education. Based on this, the major man power of preschools- principals and teachers were checked. As a result this research finds out that majority of the principals are male and that all of them have at least no diploma in ECE. This in turn does not conform to the standard which states that principals of preschool should be holders of diploma in ECE and should preferably be female. The number of teachers in schools, their gender and their qualification were checked against the standard which noted that teachers of ECE should hold diploma in ECE and should preferably be female. Thus it is identified that almost all of the schools have sufficient number of teachers, that majority of teachers are female, which manifest the presence of attempt to fulfill the standard. With respect to the qualification of teachers only 18( 23.7 %) have diploma in ECE. This means that the qualification of teachers does not fulfill the standard. Two principal reasons are found to be responsible for this below standard qualification of teachers; these are lack of sufficient qualified teachers in the field and low salary of teachers which cannot attract competent and qualified teachers. Regarding the additional training necessary to be a teacher in pre-school program, particularly for those who do not have diploma or one year certificate in ECE, the Zone seems in a good status, as majority of the participants are trained in child pedagogy, child development and child care. The other issue regarding teachers checked was their skill, knowledge and character. In relation to this it is found out that majority teachers have good knowledge, skill and character necessary for a given ECE teacher.

The status of process dimension was also checked using elements such as curriculum, teaching and learning methodology, working with parents and assessment in ECE. With respect to curriculum this research identifies that only the locally adopted government approved national curriculum is used as guide in majority of schools. On top of this it is identified that majority of teachers believe the appropriateness of the curriculum for the holistic development of children. (MOE, MOH,MOWA,2010). In addition this research also uncover that the curriculum give much emphasis to play.

Regarding the teaching and learning methodology this research identifies that teachers employ active learning techniques. Moreover it is found out that various teaching methods are applied. The most dominantly used are role play method, demonstration method, group play method and explanation method. Thus based on the above data the method of teaching used in the preschools are in harmony with what the standard requests.

Concerning the involvement of parents or care givers in preschools this research finds out that parents participate in schools, even though it is not sufficient as expected. The common means of communication are found to be phone call, letter, in person when parents bring their children to school and meeting. The chief areas of participation are found to be assisting their children at home, signing and providing feedback on students' homework, discussing on the problems of the school, forwarding ideas that can improve the school and controlling the behaviors of students. This finding doesn't support what Gebregziabher (2014) came up with that low participation of parents in Kindergartens.

Regarding the assessment in ECE, it is noted that assessment of preschool children should be continuous, holistic and focusing on all aspects of their development (MOE,MOH,MOWA,2010). In relation to this this research finds that teachers are implementing continuous assessment in line with the strategic plan and guideline, except that they use exam to determine the academic achievement of students, which is against the standard( MOE,MOH,MOWA,2010). This research also finds that assessment types such as exam, group work, classwork, oral question, assignment, class participation and home work are the assessment types dominantly used in the schools.

### ***The challenges the preschools face***

The findings of this research reveal that ECE have faced challenges. The prime challenge is related to teachers. Accordingly shortage of qualified teachers trained in ECE; lack of on job training for teachers; inability of private schools to employ well trained competent preschool teachers because they are unable to pay their high salary, and lack of government's involvement in supplying teachers and providing on job training for private schools are found to be the dominant ones. This research also finds out that challenges related to teaching and learning resources, play materials and physical facilities. Therefore, shortage of resources such as text books, reference books, flash cards and stationaries are also challenging in the preschools. The reason behind the shortage is lack of budget and lack of sufficient supply of either text book or reference books in the area. It is also finds out that shortage of play materials are among the challenges. With respect to facility, shortage of classrooms, inadequacy of drinking water and the presence of unsuitable ground for children to play are also the challenges. The other challenges that preschools face are lack of support and follow up from the government education bureaus.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the findings the following conclusions are drawn. Access to quality ECE has been the focus of world's nations including Ethiopia. To address the issue Ethiopian government encouraged the expansion of kindergartens and engaged directly in providing ECE through accelerated programs in which two modalities of Preschool-'O' class and Child to Child modality- have been implemented. However, the finding of this research reveals that access to ECE in North Shewa Zone of Oromia regional state is low and unable to bring the desired result as intended. The three modalities –kindergarten, 'O' class and Child to Child modalities- haven't been expanded in a way that they can accommodate the school age population of the Zone. As a result more than hundred thousand preschool age children are still out of school. This in turn implicate that the policy of ECE formulated to address the existing equity issues is far from narrowing the gap after 10 years of implementation, and hence requires serious government intervention.

Regarding the status of quality of ECE this research concludes that even though there are attempts to provide the necessary inputs like physical facilities, learning resources, play materials and man power, they are not sufficient to bring about quality of ECE. Furthermore this research concludes that the quality of the educational process is promising, as those elements of process dimension like curriculum, teaching and learning, working with parents and assessment are found to be implemented in accordance with the standard, but it also shows that much has yet to be done.

With respect to the challenges that the ECE faces this research concludes that there are challenges that influence preschools. Shortage of qualified teachers trained in ECE. Lack of on job training for teachers both at government and private schools. Private schools have no capacity to hire qualified and competent teachers due to low income. Shortage of teaching and learning resources such as text books, reference books, flash cards and stationaries which are associated with either lack of budget or shortage of supply in the area. Shortage of play materials are also among the challenges. It is also identified that shortage of classrooms, inadequacy of drinking water and unsuitable ground for children to play are also challenges. Lack of support and follow up is the last but not list challenge this research identifies.

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