Early Childhood Care and Education in Ethiopia

Tirussew Teferra (*teferratirussewt@gmail.com*)

Department of Special Needs Education, College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Addis Ababa University

Abstract

Early childhood care and education in Ethiopia is a critically important topic for consideration to promote the holistic development of citizens, quality education as well as the country's economic development. Indeed, these days it is encouraging to note that there have been promising initiatives in early childhood care and education to ensure access and equitable education in the years to come. This article first presents the theoretical foundations and global trends of early childhood care and education. It then highlights indigenous childrearing practices, traditional early childhood education, and the development of modern early childhood education in Ethiopia. It also briefly discusses the preparation of early childhood education teachers and provides an overview of policy directions and strategies in the country. The article concludes with a reflection on the current state of early childhood care and education and its future prospects in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Early child care, child rearing practices, traditional early childhood education, modern early childhood education, quality service

Introduction

Studies indicate that the quality of interaction between children and their parents or caregivers in the family or community is a crucial factor in the human development process (Klein et al., 2001). In the early years of development, young children naturally seek interaction through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures. Adults tend to respond with the same gestures. This is the pre-linguistic period when nonverbal interaction is the most important. If such responses are absent, if brain architecture does not form as expected, or if responses are unreliable or inappropriate, this can lead to inequities in learning and behavior in later developmental years (Harvard University, Center on Developing Child, 2017). According to mid-20th century theories of child development and many other miniature models, empirical studies, and practical interventions, early childhood experiences are critical for rapid development of the brain, cognitive skills, and language development. The human brain develops strongly particularly in the first five years of life, with nearly 85% of the "sculpting" of the brain's neurological architecture occurring between birth and age five (Heckman, 2011 in Blondin, 2011).

Numerous data from economics, biology, and psychology show that educational equity is not only a social justice imperative, but also an economic imperative with far-reaching implications for a nation (Heckman, 2011 in Blondin, 2011). The importance of early childhood development is powerfully demonstrated by an examination of the predictors of learning achievement in primary and secondary education (Britto, 2012). Research from high-, middle-, and low-income countries has shown that children who are prepared for school or enter school "ready to learn" are more

likely to be successful in school, have better learning outcomes, and are less likely to drop out or repeat a grade, thus reducing budgets (Naudeau, et al., 2010).

More broadly, interest in early childhood care and education is part of a global trend in which several nations have made substantial gains in gross enrollment rates (GER) in preschool between 1999 and 2010. For example, the global average GER increased from 32% to 48%, while in low-income countries it increased from 11% to 15% (UNICEF and UNESCO, 2012). In addition, the global trend points to the emergence of multisectoral interventions and the expansion of preschool education, as in Ethiopia. A research report by QESSP (2016) highlights this trend as follows:

> *Increasingly, countries have multi-sectoral policies that encompass education, nutrition, and social protection; 76 countries in 2014. Forty countries have instituted compulsory preprimary enrolment. It remains the case; however, that (on a limited database) gross enrollment in preprimary education in low-income countries is 19%, while in lower-middle-income countries it is 50% (weighted averages). Private provision accounts for 31% of this enrollment. However, patterns vary from country to country. Some countries have expanded their preprimary provision significantly in recent years, for example, Vietnam 77% and Kasakhstan 58%.*

The UN Sustainable Development Goal states that, by 2030, countries should, "ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education" (UN, 2015, n.p.).

Early Child Care in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, studies on early psychosocial care and development are scanty and fragmented. Most research focuses on health, nutrition, and sanitation, which are critical to a child's survival and overall well-being. However, the psychosocial component, which is one of the most important elements for an overall child development, has not received due attention. Moreover, studies show that mothers bear most of the burden of early child care and nurturing, even though older siblings and grandmothers have a stake in the child's upbringing. In addition to other household responsibilities, mothers typically care for their children's health, nutrition, and hygiene. That is, mothers are primarily responsible for feeding, washing, and clothing their children and keeping them safe, healthy, and clean (Klein et al., 2001).

Interestingly, in such practices, grandmothers and even neighbors help new mothers and train them to develop the skills necessary to properly handle their newborns, including hugging, feeding, washing, and dressing. New mothers may need quite a while to practice these basic skills freely. In rural areas, it is common to see mothers carrying infants and toddlers on their backs or stomachs. This is usually done until the child begins to walk independently at about one and a half years of age. They carry their children when they perform domestic duties at home, go to the market, or work on their farms. However, if grandmothers, younger siblings, especially girls, or reliable neighbors are at home, they usually take turns caring for the child, for example until the

mother returns home from market. The role family members, neighbors and the extend family play in the course of child care and development is invaluable tradition that should be maintained in our society

On the other hand, fathers' involvement and participation in child care, especially in the early years of development, is often limited. However, studies show that fathers' roles gradually increase over time, especially in urban areas. Indeed, across the country, there remains a need to increase fathers' involvement in early childhood care and management to support mothers. Building the necessary emotional bond with the child at the right time through playing, hugging, feeding, washing and sharing feelings has a positive long-term impact not only on the child's overall growth, but also on the trustworthiness of their relationship. Studies also show that smiling, eye contact, sharing of feelings, physical contact, body language, and other types of nonverbal communication are crucial to the development of the child's brain (Fuglesang, 1994; Klein et al, 2001). Ethiopian parents, especially mothers and caregivers, need to be sensitized to the fact that good parent/caregiver and child interaction and early stimulation are essential components for holistic development, along with nutrition, health, and hygiene. This is not to say that some of these features are not present in the traditional mother-child dyad; rather, it is to make mothers aware of their role in child development so that they can exercise it consciously and intentionally in their daily interactions. Indeed, it is to make parents what they do with the child during this critical period of development is crucial for the child's development, success in education and life in general. A longitudinal study of mothers of young children in one of the kebeles in the Kechene community in Addis Ababa has reported that the presence of such gaps in mother-child interactions (Teferra in Klein, 1996). There is evidence that society in general understands the impact of early child care and nurturing on later developmental years. On the other hand, there are misconceptions and traditional childrearing practices that hinder adult-child interaction and thwart the holistic development of the child in one way or another. For example, the following Amharic proverbs or metaphors demonstrate society's understanding of the importance of early experiences for a child's later behavior (Teferra in Odom et al, 2003):

"ልጅን በጡት እህልን በጥቅምት፡፡" (*Lejen betut ehilen be t'kimt)* [The time of breast-feeding is the right time for molding a child's behavior, as the month of October is the right season for crop harvest]

"ዛፍ በልጅነት ይታረቃል፡፡" *'Zaf belejenet yetarekal'*

 [It is easy to straighten a tree during its nursery stage]

"የሚያጠግብ እንጀራ ከምጣዱ ይታወቃል" *(Ye'miyategeb enjera keemetadu Ya'stawuqal)* [An *injera* that is satisfying is known from its traditional baking pan]

"የሚያድግ ጥጃ ከገመዱ፡፡" (Ye'miadeg Tija Kegemedu) [A Calf that grows is known from the rope]

In different languages there may be more or less proverbs with similar meanings, for example, in Afan Oromo as 'Adeemsiganamaannamahafa'.

Such deeply rooted proverbs have far-reaching implications for the public's understanding of the importance of early childhood care and management. In addition, there are invaluable traditions associated with children in a playful format in Amharic storytelling "ተረት-ተረት- የመሠረት" 'Teret-Teret-Yemeseret' and riddle-type "እንቆቅልሽ-ምን-አውቅአልሽ" ' Enkok-Elish-Men-Awk'elish'. The riddle game involves a question and answer round, which can be followed by some sort of positive or negative reward depending on whether you are on the right track or not. Similar and related games exist in other languages, e.g., Oduu Durii and Nati Asguri; and Hibbo Hiphi and Tinkkuta, Tinko Tinko Tinkirib in Afan Oromo and Kambatgna, respectively.

These are playful and joyful traditional events held among peers, parents, grandparents, relatives, or the elderly, and are often held in the evening at home or outdoors. Nowadays, however, this is only the case in some families, especially in rural areas. Such informal platforms are instructive, contributing not only to children's cognitive, sociocultural, and moral development, but also improving social skills and fostering good relationships. Nevertheless, these useful communicative practices tend to disappear as the habits and lifestyles of families and communities change due to modernization and other factors. These customs are gradually disappearing in today's society, especially among urban dwellers. Finally, the long-standing and extensive breastfeeding habits of Ethiopian mothers should be preserved and passed on to the new generations. It is encouraging to note that this practice is still intact in rural areas, while it is gradually declining in urban areas due to the changing lifestyle of mothers. Mothers are usually employed in public, private or non-governmental organizations and have little time to take care of the infant. Nowadays, the establishment of day care centers in some workplaces provides mothers with the opportunity to closely observe and breastfeed their children. This is an encouraging move that should be practiced across the country both in public and private institutions.

In contrast, there are conservative traditions that are deeply rooted with misconceptions about children's abilities and behavior. Misconceptions that discourage play and interaction with children and belittling children's work have negative effects on children's development. For example, the following metaphors illustrate some of the unpleasant beliefs that impede adult-child interactions and misconceptions about the quality of behaviors (Teferra in Odom et al., 2003):

"ከልጅ አትጫወት ይወጋሃል በእንጨት::" (*Kelej atch'awet yewogahal bench'et)* [If you play with a child, s/he will poke your eyeballs out]

"ከልጅ የዋለ ልጅ አከለ::" ('*Kelej yewale lej akele)* [Anyone who spends time with a child will become a child.]

"ልጅ ያቦካው ለራት አይበቃም::" (*Lej yabokaw lerat aybek'am*') [Children's dough won't be sufficient for a dinner]

"ልጅና ፊት አይበርደውም::" (*Lejena fit ayberdewum*) [A child and human face can endure cold.]

"ዝምታ ወርቅ ነው።" '*Zemeta Work New* [Silence is as valuable as gold.]

Children are the source of joy and hope for every family, society and nation, and it is important to protect them from anything that might harm them as they grow and develop. In Ethiopia, children are often exposed to harmful traditional practices that violate their rights as children. Abusive practices include early employment as herding boys/girls or housemaids where they are subjected to physical abuse such as rape, corporal punishment through beatings with sticks and other dangerous instruments that can cause physical injuries to children. Female genital mutilation (UNICEF, 2015), cutting the uvula, pulling milk teeth, cutting eyebrows (Gebrekirstos et al., 2013), preventing babies from receiving colostrum (CCF, 2016), and corporal punishment are all forms of physical abuse that are still prevalent in different parts of the country (Ogando et al., 2015). During early initiation rites, boys are often intentionally injured through circumcision (UNICEF, 2015). In general, the country observes acceptable and incorrect beliefs, as well as beneficial and harmful childrearing practices. This emphasizes the need for a broad cross-cultural study of indigenous childrearing practices across the country to improve the beneficial practices and eliminate the negative ones.

Indeed, a nationwide, cross-cultural, multidisciplinary study of educational practices in the country is long overdue. Such a study may help preserve and promote useful traditional practices, prevent harmful practices and develop culturally sensitive intervention strategies, and identify, understand and compile state-of-the-art multicultural educational practices. Most importantly, this material could enable teachers, parents, and caregivers to reflect inwardly, cross-pollinate indigenous knowledge, and thus lay the foundation for a healthy, diverse, and culturally sensitive young generation.

Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia
A. Traditional Early Childhood Education

Traditional and modern school systems characterize the history of education in Ethiopia. The traditional system is deeply rooted in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, recognized as one of the oldest educational systems in the world since the 4th century (Wagaw, 1979). The church school system has been playing an important role in the preservation of traditional Ethiopian education and its faithful transmission to the future generations. It includes various stages, ranging from the basic 'School of Reading' ('Nebab Bet' in Amharic), where reading is mastered to the advanced level of scholarship (School of Commentaries_ 'Metshaf Bet' in Amharic), where church books are carefully read and critically commented upon (Dagne, 1970, 2015).

Traditional church education begins with the mastery of the 'Amharic' alphabet and phonology, reading and reciting religious texts, followed by theology, philosophy, arithmetic, history, poetry, and music (Punkhurst, 1955; Wagaw, 1979). The lowest or first level of the traditional church school, which is called the "house of the alphabet" (Fidel Bet in Amharic), prepares the child for the next level, reading. Even though a teacher appreciates the speed at which students learn to

reach the next level, it takes a long time for the learner to reach the next stage. In fact, the time needed to reach the next higher stage is flexible because it depends on the competence of the individual learner. That is, some children take a long time to reach the next level, while others do it quickly. Active learning, peer teaching, and acceleration are examples of modern pedagogies that have long been used in traditional church-based education in the country. Not only that, they are also well known by practicing inclusive education for children with disabilities such as the Blind.

After the introduction of modern education, the role of the 'Nebab Bet" or 'House of Reading", the lowest level of the "Abinet Timhiert Bet", began to expand in Ethiopia by meeting the needs of children to develop literacy skills in 'Amharic' and serving as a relay for formal education. In the absence of modern pre-primary education in the country, the "Nebab Bet" has played an important role in preparing children to complete primary school.

The following are some of the distinguishing characteristics of traditional preschools:
- They are found in various locations (for example, in a church compound, in a village under shade, or alongside a road);
- They are fairly spread in rural and urban areas;
- Their school size does not typically exceed 20 children; and
- They are facilitated by one teacher popularly known as 'Yeneta' (Dagne, 1970).

In addition, these schools are affordable and easily accessible to rural and urban children. These pre-primary institutions are scattered and located in certain areas of Ethiopia, restricting their accessibility and the participation rate of children. Traditional early childhood education emphasizes child-centered, flexible pedagogy with multiple grade levels and peer teaching, as is the case at all other levels of traditional church education (Teferra, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the time required to complete each level is determined by the learner's speed and performance. That is, there is no under- or over-taxing of children, because some need less time while others need more. A teacher decides whether or not a learner should advance to the next level (Dagne, 2015).

There is a general belief that children who have attended a traditional school perform better in formal education than others. However, in some places, including Addis Ababa, it is notable that some children attend both regular schools and traditional church schools simultaneously during their free time. These traditional preschools have made an important contribution not only to the development of literacy skills, but also to the moral and ethical development of children. It is also known that more recently, traditional preschool programs have become utilitarian rather than religious in their focus on literacy and numeracy (Teferra, 2006). In some parts of the country, such as Dessie, Wollo, children of Orthodox Christian denomination attend these preschool centers along with children from Muslim families. In any case, there is now serious concern that

these traditional preschool centers, with their educational potential, economic advantages, and cultural heritage, are on the verge of collapse.

The contribution of traditional early education and Quranic teaching in Ethiopia has a paramount importance. There is evidence that the origins of Quranic schools in Ethiopia date back to the 7th century. In these centers, children start learning the Arabic alphabet and go through the different stages of Koanic instruction. Koranic instruction is divided into three stages: 'Tehaji or Mejelis', where children learn the Arabic alphabet and read Arabic; 'Elim', where the Arabic language, religious teachings and social norms are taught; and Koranic instruction, which includes high-level translation and interpretation (Dagne, 2016). This segment of traditional education, which has made a significant contribution to Arabic language reading and writing, is an area that needs to be systematically studied nationwide.

B. *Modern Early Childhood Education*

The emperors Menilek II (1889-1913) and Haile Selassie I (1930-74) developed a solid, albeit limited, primary and secondary education system, laying the foundation for modern education.

Imperial Period: A lot of evidence suggests that modern early childhood education began in 1900 for French children whose parents worked as railway consultants in Dire Dawa (Teferra et al, 2008). There were also English and German preschools intended to serve children from affluent families in Addis Ababa (Mwamwenda, 2014).

From 1908 to 1974, there were 77 Early Childhood Education (ECE) schools for children aged 4 to 6 years. Most of these schools were located in urban areas; there were hardly any in rural areas. Missionaries, private organizations, and the Ministry of National Community Development and Social Affairs (MNCDSA) were responsible for the preschools. The MNCDSA immediately began training preschool teachers and child care workers and explored the possibility of establishing a long-term training program. As a result, a six-month training program for preschool personnel was proposed in 1967. in 1971, MNCDSA launched the first six-month model training course for preschool staff at the Community Center around Ras Desta Sefer in Addis Ababa with the promise that the second batch of trainees would be relocated to Debre Zeit (MNCDSA Report, 1972 in Teferra et al, 2008).

As a result, the Ministry of Education (MoE) became involved in the administration of early childhood education (Mwamwenda, 2014). Traditional church-based and community-based preschools, as well as 'Madrasas' (Koranic schools), were found in both rural and urban areas during this period. As mentioned earlier, children from Muslim families were observed attending traditional church-based preschools to learn Amharic reading and writing for formal school preparation.

The 'Derge' (Military Regime): Following the Socialist Revolution in 1974, women's participation in economic activities increased under the socialist military regime (Derge), leading

to increased demand for childcare services and facilities. During this time in 1981, the Ethiopian Children's Commission was established, with the main task of looking after the rights and welfare of Ethiopian children, educating and promoting them (Mwamwenda, 2014). Later, initiatives such as awareness workshops and seminars were held, and early childhood education was implicitly recognized as part of the Ministry of Education's overall educational goal. Subsequently, a curriculum for ECE teacher education was developed, and a program for the training of preschool teachers was introduced in 1986. The initiative was part of a broader collaboration between UNICEF and the Ministry of Education. The program was implemented on the compound of the 'Etige' Menen (Empress Menen) School, which was renamed 'Yekatit 12' School. It is located in the Gulele sub-city in the Sidist Kilo area. Currently, the school is back to its original name 'Etige' Menen School, which is one of the oldest schools in Addis Ababa. The training center was called 'Menen Preschool Teacher Training Center' (MPTTC). It was a three-month intensive early childhood teacher education program managed by a Director appointed by the Ministry of Education. The Center was staffed by five competent preschool educators as well as part-time staff from the Department of Psychology of Addis Ababa University. The short-term intensive courses include theoretical and practical courses such as preschool pedagogy, child psychology, methodology, practicum, and learning material production. At the end of the training, each graduate has to produce a variety of learning materials to take back to their workplace. The center used to admit about 300 students per year or 100 students every three months. The candidates were recruited through the Ministry of Education from all administrative regions of the country. Participants who had completed eighth grade or higher came from urban kebeles and farmers' associations in their respective regions. The MPTTC produced about 4700 preschool teachers, which can be considered the highest number in the history of preschool teacher education in the country. Most graduates continued to work as principals, teachers, and teaching assistants in public, community, or "kebele" preschools (Teferra , 2010).

More recently, the Ethiopian Education and Training Roadmap has recommended that the ongoing teacher education program of pre-primary education should be upgraded to a diploma level immediately, and that a degree be pursued as a long-term strategy. In addition, the introduction of a competitive teacher recruitment strategy, the development of a comprehensive teacher education curriculum, and the introduction of career development programs have been proposed to improve the quality of services at this level of the education system (Teferra et al. 2018).

Present Country Context: Like other Sub-Saharan African countries, Ethiopia has problems with access to preprimary education, which is the major cause of school dropout, repetition, low literacy and low numeracy, among other problems. The Ethiopian Government has recognized this gap and is working to improve children's chances for a successful life by investing in early childhood education. Early childhood education is the period when children begin to develop learning skills

and cultural scripts that will make them successful in school and beyond. It is proven that a child's success in life must be based on a strong foundation in the early years of life (Teferra, 2003).

Policy and Practice

This section assesses early childhood care and education policies and strategy frameworks as well as the ongoing practices since 1991. Early child care and education requires adequate nutrition, stimulation, social protection, and education to ensure the holistic development of children. In this regard, Ethiopia has issued a Health Policy (1993), an Education and Training Policy (1994), a Development and Social Welfare Policy (1996), and a Revised Family Code Proclamation (2000), all of which emphasize the promotion of holistic child development. The Health Policy (1993) "encourages early use of available health facilities for the management of common childhood diseases..." (Article 10.6). In addition, some areas of health care such as "maternal health care" (Article 10.1), "family planning" (Article 10.2), "maternal nutrition" (Article 10.3), and "optimizing access to and utilization of immunization services" (Article 10.5) related to child health and well-being were included. This Policy emphasizes the importance of active parental involvement in protecting and maintaining family health (Article 10.8). The Health Extension Program (HEP) of the Ministry of Health has deployed an innovative, door-to-door, community-based health care delivery system and has made positive progress in primary health care in the country. The HEP focuses on 17 health areas primarily to improve the well-being and survival of women and children, including hygiene and sanitation, disease prevention and control, and family health services (USAID, 2012). In brief, the program does not directly address the quality of parent-child interactions and tends to neglect the psychological aspect of child development.

The Federal Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA, 2012), which is responsible for coordinating and enforcing children's rights in the country, makes every effort to eliminate child abuse and neglect. The Family Code of 2000 abolished the power of guardians to impose mild corporal punishment on children. In addition, the Ministry of Education issued a circular listing the permissible disciplinary measures teachers can use to discipline their students that do not include corporal punishment (MOWCYA, 2012). Despite significant efforts by ministries to promote the well-being of children, there are still gaps in areas such as traditional physical and psychological harmful educational practices that require systematic cross-cultural studies and interventions in the coming years.

The Education and Training Policy (ETP) (TGE, 1994), in its section on general objectives (Article 2.1.1), aims to "develop the physical and mental potential and problem-solving capacity of individuals through the expansion of education and, in particular, through the provision of basic education for all." It also emphasizes that "kindergarten will focus on the all-round development of the child in preparation for formal schooling" (Article 3.2.1) to ensure the smooth and holistic development of children during their formative years. Article 3.4.5 goes on to state that teachers

from kindergarten to high school must have the necessary teaching qualifications and competence in the language of instruction, through initial and in-service training (TGE, 1994). In addition, Article 3.5.3 emphasizes that the language of teacher education for kindergarten and primary will be the nationality language of the area. However, the policy leaves the responsibility of pre-primary education to the community and the private sector and dilutes the role of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, the Education and Training Policy Implementation Strategy states pre-primary education should not be a mandatory and top priority, although the government will still be indirectly involved (MoE, 2002). According to the implementation strategy, the role of the Ministry of Education is limited to providing support such as curriculum development, training of preschool teachers, and offering land at nominal lease rates to private investors (MoE, 2002). The first two five-year continuous education sector development programs (ESDP I & II) (MoE, 2002 & 2004) contained little information on this subsector. ESDP III considered early childhood education as one of the most important areas in the education sector. It also stated that the government's goal for this subsector was to support policy development, curriculum design, standards setting, and oversight rather than to build and manage preschools (MoE, 2005).

Meanwhile, through the joint initiative of UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, the first national study on early childhood care and education (ECCE) was conducted in Ethiopia (Teferra et al. 2008). This study, which was sub-contracted by the College of Education of Addis Ababa University, marked a turning point in the history of early childhood care and education development in Ethiopia. Based on the findings of this study, the National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NPFECCE) was developed, endorsed and signed by the three ministries.

The NPFECCE was a step forward in emphasizing the importance of a comprehensive program from conception to the first six years of postnatal development to enhance a child's holistic development. Its vision is to ensure every child's right to a healthy start in life, to grow up in a safe, caring, and stimulating environment, and to reach his or her full potential. To facilitate the implementation of this Framework, the MoE has developed a Strategic Operational Plan to achieve the vision of the policy by improving access and quality of ECCE. The ECCE program consists of four basic pillars, namely (i) parent education, (ii) health and early learning program, (iii) preschools (community-based kindergartens), and (iv) community-based non-formal school preparation. The Document further states that a mother tongue will be the medium of instruction and play will be used as a method to enhance a child's learning experience (MoE, 2010). It was assumed that there would be a strong synergy between the policy framework and the strategic operational plan that elaborates the health, nutrition, care, and education activities to be implemented from the prenatal period until the child begins formal education.

A little later, ESDP IV (MoE, 2010) emerged with relatively comprehensive and clearly articulated statements about the role of the government, the importance and the direction of the

development of ECCE. In it, ECCE is considered as one of the priority areas for the education sector, and the potential of ECCE for the overall improvement of the quality and efficiency of education, the increase of enrollment rates in elementary school, the basis of EFA goals, and the right of the child is emphasized. In addition, the Ministry of Education stated that it would play a leading role in creating a coherent governance structure for ECCE in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and MoWCYA.

Following the NECCEPF and its Strategic Implementation Plan (MoE, 2010), the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with UNICEF, has launched new initiatives with different modalities for school readiness programs such as O-Class, Child to Child, and Accelerated School Readiness (ASR). These new interventions, along with the ongoing preschool programs in the country, have not only dramatically increased the enrollment rate from 5.3% in 2011/12 to 39% (MoE, 2016), but also increased parental awareness and public interest in the program (Tefera et al, 2018). The following sections highlight the characteristics of the three modalities of school readiness intervention programs.

First, the O-class is a one-year (actually 9-month) school readiness program that takes place on the premises of primary schools. It is designed to accommodate only children aged 6 for one year before they enter first grade. Child to Child, on the other hand, is an informal after-school program run by volunteer girls in the fifth or sixth grade in the community. It enrolls children who do not have access to O class. The quality of this program depends largely on the commitment and competence of the volunteers, the availability of space, and the resources needed for the children's learning experience. In most cases, these conditions do not exist locally, and the sustainability of CtC is questionable. Therefore, it is suggested that CtC should not be used as a full-fledged ECE program, but rather as backup support for the ongoing O-Class program. For example, children who need additional support from the O-Class can be referred to the nearby CtC program to receive the necessary support. The third modality, the Accelerated School Readiness program (ASR), is a two-month summer Kiremet program organized by schools for those who do not have access to either O-Class or CtC. That is, it is a very condensed program that can run for 8 weeks either during the summer or before the regular school program begins.

The three school readiness programs focus primarily on children's literacy, numeracy, and environmental awareness, as well as parental engagement in children's early learning and transition to formal education. Preliminary assessments in Ethiopia have shown that the O-Class modality has a high prospect of scalability and feasibility (Britto et al, 2012, Tefera et al, 2018). Studies suggest that O-class is one of the most feasible, useful, and relevant early childhood programs for the majority of marginalized urban and rural children in Ethiopia. This innovation is generally well received, but has drawbacks in terms of consistency and appropriateness of instruction that are not always present in kindergartens (MoE, 2015; MoFED, 2015). It is an

innovative approach that has opened up broader access by dramatically changing the national gross enrollment of pre-primary education from 4.8 percent in 2009/10 to 39 percent in 2014/15 (MoFED, 2015). This figure includes all children enrolled in the new programs as well as those already enrolled in existing programs, i.e., including those operated by municipalities, faith communities, and private and nongovernmental organizations. The most recent ESDP VI (2021/2022) (MoE, 2021) reveals that in 2018/19, the preschool rate GER was 40.7%, a very slight improvement from the 2014/15 baseline (39%). The report also reveals significant regional disparities in access to preschool education, with very high preschool GERs in the capital regions of Addis Ababa (97.6%) and Harari (91.2%) and significantly lower enrollment rates in Benishangul Gumuz (36.7%), Oromia (28.4%), Afar (12.9%), and Somali (7.9%) regions.

The O-Class initiative has been implemented for six years in both rural and urban areas of the country. Because it is a nationwide new initiative, it is not free of limitations; there are gaps and challenges that need to be systematically addressed in the coming years. Recent research indicates alarming concerns about practice that affect the quality of the O-class program (Teferra & Hagos, 2016). According to this study, the following are among the most important issues that deserve the immediate attention of governments and relevant stakeholders:

- Governance and accountability, that is, the absence of a responsible body to closely monitor and follow up O-Class,
- The curriculum focuses on developing pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills but neglects the socio-emotional dimensions,
- Keeping 4, 5, and 6-year-olds lamped together in the one-year O-Class program,
- Limited space, indoor, and outdoor facilities,
- No standard guideline for recruitment, qualification & salary of teachers across regions,
- Lack of inclusiveness, that is, inaccessible to children with special needs,
- Variability in the daily programs across the O-Classes, that is, in terms of duration some finish early and some have to stay long in the afternoons, and
- Inadequate budget earmarked for the program.

According to the ESDP V in GTP II, 2015, the education system should reach an average gross enrollment rate of 80% in pre-primary education by 2020. This ESDP VI gives the baseline (2018/2019) for GER in pre-primary education for 5-6 year olds as 41.8% and the target for 2024/25 as 74.16%. Furthermore, the participation rate and target for children with disabilities and refugee children were given as 1.3%, 11.1%, 61.2%, and 82.7%, respectively. In the coming years, a combination of modalities such as a three-year kindergarten program for children aged 4-6, a one-year O-class for children aged 6, the Child to Child (CtC) program, and the Accelerated School Readiness (ASR) program will be explored to achieve the target (MoE, 2015). In addition, teachers who teach in these modalities are not adequately trained for each level. Presently, preparation for preschool teacher training in colleges of education is done through a (10+3) diploma program. Practice, however, shows that most teachers are primary school teachers and

dropouts with short training (Teferra & Hagos, 2016). This is a serious gap that requires special attention and should be considered as one of the priority areas to be addressed in general education.

The present policy environment in line ministries, new efforts in the field, and the government's commitment to reach disadvantaged groups in the coming years should contribute to building a democratic and inclusive society. In its draft Universal Education Proclamation, the government has reiterated in Article 5 its commitment to ensure "the right of every child to free and compulsory education" (FDRE, 2021). In addition, ESDP VI is committed to providing free and compulsory pre-primary education and considers preschool education as a key priority for the education sector (MoE, 2021). This is in line with the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure that all girls and boys have access to inclusive, equitable, and quality pre-primary education (UN, 2015). Achieving these national and international goals requires systematic coordination and efficient and effective mobilization of the country's available resources. To this end, collaboration among line ministers should begin in the prenatal period and continue throughout the early years of development.

The Way Forward

Following the assessment of early childhood care and education in the country, and given the growing national and global interest in the field, the need to mobilize all key local and international stakeholders in the country is critical. Accordingly, the Government should adopt an open, flexible and inclusive policy to promote different modalities of early childhood care and education to reach children in the country without compromising quality. Regarding early care, the initiatives of the Ministry of Health and MoWSA and particularly the intervention packages of the Health Extension Program, should include a child care and management component that promotes the psychosocial dimension, which in one way or another affects the holistic development of the child. In terms of ECE, the Government should focus primarily on the O-Class initiative (School Readiness Program), which has a good chance of scaling up in the Ethiopian context. This is mainly because of its strategic benefits in bridging the gap between rural and urban, rich and poor, girls and boys, children with and without special talents, and regional inequalities in Ethiopia. The O-Class program should be run parallel with support for ongoing government, nongovernmental, community, and private sector preschool programs.

Finally, the pre-primary level in the education system is the foundation period when the desired moral, aesthetic and ethical values can be easily cultivated and promoted. If the causes of violence in a country are to be seriously addressed, the early years of development must be focused on. It is accepted that childhood is a formative period for the acquisition of basic attitudes, values, behaviors, and skills that are formed and structured in later development. Consequently, peace education practices can be effectively incorporated into children's behavioral repertoires when they begin during this important formative and sensitive developmental period. Such an early start

of bottom-up peace building strategies and practices would hopefully guarantee that children can develop their potential and resilience for the ultimate development of a rich, stable, and peaceful society in the country.

In conclusion, early childhood care and education in Ethiopia is an area of great concern and needs urgent attention. In order to improve the quality of services and ensure more equitable access, it is important to consider solutions such as expanding access to services, focusing on the quality of services, and increasing public awareness. Through these efforts, more children may have access to the important opportunity to develop the necessary skills and foundations for lifelong learning.

Given the   present situation of early childhood care and education in Ethiopia, it is important to consider measures to address the problems. One solution could be to focus on expanding access to services to provide more children to receive early childhood care and education. The Government and international organizations could invest in building new centers, training more teachers, and providing resources and materials to ensure the availability of quality services. In addition, it might be beneficial to look for ways to make services more affordable for families in poverty and to provide better incentives for teachers to attract more qualified professionals. Another solution might be to focus more on the quality of services. This could include training teachers to use evidence-based teaching practices, implementing quality assurance systems, and developing monitoring and evaluation systems to enhance progress. In addition, investing in research and development to improve the quality of services could lead to the development of best practices that could benefit all children. Finally, focusing on increasing public awareness could be beneficial. Public awareness campaigns could help increase understanding of the importance of early child care and education and its impact on future success. These campaigns could help dispel myths or misconceptions that prevent some families from enrolling their children in early care and education programs.

Following the preceding discussion, due attention should be given to the following areas to improve access and quality of early care and childhood education in the country.

i. Early care and management
   A. Coordinate and promote inter-sectoral collaboration, and integrate early child care and management as an integral part of intervention package in the primary health care, nutrition, child's right and parental education programs.
   B. Encourage the establishment of community-based daycare centers attached to the different working places to allow working mothers to breastfeed and get in touch with their children during the day.
   C. Extend maternity leave to six months or more and introduce a scheme of short leave for fathers so that they can spend some time with the infant.

ii. Pre-primary /School Readiness Program/
   A. Curriculum

a) Design a comprehensive, relevant and inclusive curriculum that covers the holistic development of the child, that is, socio-emotional, cognitive, communication, and psychomotor development.

b) Develop a mechanism to extend the duration of the program to three years so that children aged 4, 5, and 6 will enjoy an age-appropriate relevant curriculum and experience.

c) Contextualize by making it culturally relevant through using local languages and learning materials such as games, songs, stories, and riddles.

d) Employ an inclusive and interactive play-based learning approach which promotes diversity management and learning experience.

e) Provide digital technology to support learning as well as to familiarize children to digital technology.

f) Consider appropriate location, space, indoor and outdoor facilities as well as adequate budget.

B. Teacher Education

a) Develop attractive and competitive teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention mechanisms for preschool teachers.

b) Ensure that teacher training institutions are preparing preschool teachers with qualified staff and relevant curriculum.

c) Conduct need-based continuous in-service professional development for the teachers and caregivers.

d) Design an attractive career development schemes for caregivers and preschool teachers career development within the system.

C. Governance and accountability

a) Assign professionally competent leader/manager in charge of running the Center /O-Class/Preschool/.

b) Make the Center accountable for the 'Woreda' Education Office.

c) Introduce inclusive school policy to promote inclusive culture through appreciation of diversity, team-work, mutual respect and assistance.

d) Promote inter-sectorial collaboration among government and non-governmental actors (such as MoE, MoH, MoWSA, UNICEF, World Bank, Save the Children)

e) Create platforms for experience sharing among schools.

f) Ensure the smooth flow of information and accountability in the system among different actors.

g) Set quality assurance minimum standard for the school readiness program/preschool and; periodically monitor and evaluate to improve the quality of the program.

iii. Parent and community engagement

    a) Encourage parents' active involvement in the care and follow-up of the children's education and progress.

    b) Engage the community by mobilizing material and human resources (such as fund raising, sharing indigenous knowledge and values through inviting resourceful persons to participate in storytelling and in caregiving services).

iv. Non-government and private preschools

    a) Introduce incentive schemes and support the expansion of non-government, community-based, faith-based, and private preschools in the country.

    b) Ensure that they are inclusive to accommodate children with disability/ special needs.

    c) Develop mechanisms to upgrade the traditional preschools (Church and Quaranic).

v. Undertake and compile research on traditional child rearing practices across different cultures in the country.

    a) Collect children's indigenous stories, riddles inventories, indoor and outdoor traditional games, and systematically compile resource materials for early learning center schools as well as parents.

    b) Develop and employ play-based learning methods or approaches as to how to use the material.

vi. Budget

    c) Allocate adequate annual budget to run the program.

    d) Make early childhood education free and compulsory.

    e) Mobilize community–based and other resources to support the program.

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