

## **Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) System Coherence in Ethiopia: A Critical Analysis**

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### ***Abstract***

*Coherence in education refers to alignment among systems as well as a mindset and collective approach that consciously addresses fragmentation among systems, agents and responsibilities. Effective ECDE design and delivery then calls for coherence, within and among its various systems and subsystems, towards children's holistic learning and development. This paper attempts to conduct systemic analysis of these coherences in the ECDE system in Ethiopia employing a blend of four interrelated models: 'the Whole Child Approach', 'the Complexity Theory', 'the Coherence Making Model', and 'the Program Implementation Fidelity Model'. The analysis unveils that the ECDE system in Ethiopia seems incoherent for holistic learning and development. Children's holistic learning and development outcomes appear insufficient mainly because of policy, implementation, and leadership incoherencies. The paper concludes with the need for a system overhaul to address fragmentation and work toward greater coherence.*

**Keywords:** *Early Childhood Development and Education; ECDE System Coherence*

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## Introduction

Education has historically been likened with several impactful societal contributions: tool for societal advancement, source of human civilization, game changer of girls' life, breaker of the vicious cycle of poverty, a means to a healthier, more equitable and prosperous future etc. The purpose of educational establishments is then to enable children develop skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are required for holistic growth (Pink, 2011), lifelong learning, effective citizenry behavior, peace and nation building, and lay solid foundations for strong and sustainable society (Lennert, 2018).

However, there is globally an elite focused education that minimally contributes for sustainable societal development and calls for repurposing education to promote holistic learning (GEEAP, 2023). The increasing dissatisfaction with the narrowness of the purposes and methods of the existing global educational establishments require redefinition to turn them into a more enabling enterprise (Hargreaves and Sahelberg, 2013). Education is engrossed with narrow focus on mere academic learning (Hargreaves and Sahelberg, 2013), ended up producing misguided young people who, for example, engage in ethnic divide, ethnocentric socialization, and multifaceted conflicts and violence, substance abuse, and a lot more social evils (Belay and Getnet, 2022). Unbalanced focus on mere academic thoroughness would lead students' experience *"high levels of social-emotional stress, disconnection to school and the community, and boredom in a culture of rote memorization and repetition, such that they too are unprepared for anything beyond the world of multiple choice exams"* (ASCD, n.d., p.1). In doing so, it disregards such 21<sup>st</sup> century critical skills as collaboration, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, and living and working in an ever

changing environment (OECD, 2008) that are on high demanded for success in the (ASCD, 2007). The need to re-envision the role of educational institutions calls for a global education movement to widen the myopic academic oriented schooling to a more humanizing, enabling, and holistic education of learners. In developed nations, there is a growing appreciation of the need to promote development of the whole person as opposed to mere academic achievement and test scores (Sahlberg, 2010). The inadequate performance of education systems in developing countries is farfetched from ‘academizing’ learning; that achieving this academic learning itself has become a constant source of struggle for schools. In more recent years, there has been an emerging “Learning Poverty” where school-aged children were found unable to read and comprehend a simple text by age 10 and this is a disproportionately pervasive problem in developing countries like Ethiopia counting nearly for 90 % of the children (World Bank Group, 2022). An important reason for this serious deficit of learning outcomes in these countries is the focus of the education systems on improving access and enrolment rather than on learning, and the incoherence for learning between elements of the systems (Scur, 2016). There has been a challenge in ensuring education system coherence for learning whereby key elements of the education system operate in tandem for learning outcomes (London, 2023).

Pritchett elucidates how education in a nation disappointingly fails in the face of system incoherence by employing the analogy of a car. Any particular car with a functional mechanical system can obviously drive with more fuel than less fuel. However, if the internal mechanical system fails, pumping more fuel into the car will hardly make a difference (Pritchett, 2015). This would mean then, if the system does not add up to a functional whole, the causal impact of augmenting individual elements

is completely unpredictable. School systems that struggle are riddled with incoherence—mismatched strategies, competing cultures, and illogical initiatives” (Johnson, 2015).

In more substantive terms, addressing this global learning crisis calls for a systemic reform (GEEAP, 2023) that ensures holistic learning and sustainability in the long-term. In fact, many countries have carried out *some* kind of educational reform in the last couple of decades; yet very few succeeding at ensuring genuine improvements (Mourshed et al., 2010). Educational reforms need to take a complex texture of change with agents and elements properly coordinated with one another to be capable to learn and thrive (Trombly, 2014: 48). If the elements and subsystems are incoherent, then it is practically challenging to workout effective strategies for improvement (Looney, 2011). Instead, coherent systems enhance shared goals, meaning, and complementarity of functions that help conserving energy, reducing tensions between internal systems, and improving adaptation (cited in HSDI, 2022).

ECDE system coherence in general helps ensuring focus, collaborative culture, collective accountability, and deepened learning outcomes (Allen and Penuel, 2015). It reduces distractors (Fullan and Quinn, 2016), *address* fragmentation, restores shared purpose to create a better learning experience for all students (diSessa et al 2004). In educational settings, program coherence aids in sustaining school change (Madda, Halverson and Gomez, 2007), enhances common understanding on educational goals, principles and values and pedagogical approaches (Bryk, 2010). It supports school improvement and students’ achievement (e.g. Newmann et al., 2001) particularly when coherence of instructional components prevail (Crouch and DeStefano, 2017) as seen in tightly focused interventions with coherent systems of pedagogical practices in

developed countries in general (Smithson and Collares, 2007; Gamoran et al., 1997; Porter, 2002) and in Kenya (Freudenberger and Davis, 2017; Piper et al., 2018), Brazil, Chile, and Puebla (Crouch, 2020) in particular.

To ensure that all children receive proper education, the systems of education need to become coherent for learning outcomes and this requires a shift from a schooling approach to learning (Pritchett, 2015). However, measuring and diagnosing system coherence and understanding areas of intervention for incoherence in learning has been a challenge (Pritchett, 2015). One such measure that is critically important in ECDE reform requires more systemic ECDE analysis because “coherence is more complex than lining up of systems and requires a redirected focus on overarching issues” (Fullan and Quinn, 2016). Furthermore, contexts also determine the applicability of coherence of one educational system with another. There is a need to understand how the central level designs, organizes and kicks off education systems across different tiers of administrative arrangements. Understandably, how the federal and regional governance levels communicate one another would affect trust, cooperation and alignments between them, and this ultimately affects the reform outcomes (Lennert, 2018).

Understanding coherence also calls for a macro level analysis; which in fact is rarely noted in sub-Saharan Africa (Twaweza, 2015). An exception could be a work in which curriculum standards, examinations, and teacher instructional content were conducted in low and middle income countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (Twaweza, 2015). Newmann, Smith, Allensworth and Bryk (2001) developed the concept of instructional program coherence to understand the degree to which the different artifacts “fit together.” Studies that examine the content and progression of

curriculum standards and the alignment of examinations and classroom instruction with the standards are in fact very important (e.g. Atuhurra and Kaffenberger, 2022; Crouch and DeStefano, 2017; Freudenberger and Davis, 2017; Piper et al., 2018)<sup>5</sup> but rare (Burdett, 2017) especially in low- and middle-income countries (Atuhurra and Kaffenberger, 2022). Few studies find high levels of incoherence across instructional components. In Uganda, for example, only four of the fourteen topics in the English curriculum standards appear on the primary leaving exam, and two of the highest-priority topics in the standards are completely omitted from the exams (Kaffenberger and Spivack, 2022).

Coming to the Ethiopian case, the first policy direction that initiated ECDE formal systemic action was formulated nearly a decade ago in Ethiopia, to steer up the stagnant early childhood education movement so that it would assist achieving the universal enrolment in primary school; this has led to the introduction of the one year pre-primary O-classes attached to public primary schools that in fact ensured a massive expansion of pre-primary education. This expansion was supposed to compel the MoE systems to prioritize and align, what Pritchett (2015) called large-scale logistical tasks of building preschools, procuring supplies, and training and hiring teachers. But for Ethiopia, this was done by redistributing the resources of primary schools (including teachers) that host the O-classes; which in effect meant undue pressure on quality of education and making the education system of the level to be principally coherent only for schooling.

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<sup>5</sup>*interventions focused on certain tightly focused and aligned (“coherent”) pedagogical practices can have large effect sizes (Crouch and DeStefano, 2017) in Tusome program implemented by the Kenyan government (Freudenberger and Davis, 2017; Piper et al., 2018).*

There is a need to conduct critical macro-analysis of ECDE system coherence in Ethiopia to understand how well the system enjoys holistic development and learning coherence, coherence among the various systems and subsystems including policy coherence, leadership coherence, and implementation coherence.

## **Conceptualization**

### **A Coherent Meaning of Coherence in Education Systems**

Coherence is a systematic connection, consistency, and (vertical and horizontal) integration of diverse elements (Pritchett, 2015), the reciprocal relationships in the parts and the whole to build resilience or a fit for function/ purpose (HSDI, 2022). In education settings, it is an alignment and continuity within and between the elements of the curriculum (e.g., Newmann et al., 2001) as well as alignment of governance, management, financing mechanisms, human resources, and quality assurance systems around the goal of raising learning outcomes (World Bank, 2013). ECDE system coherence in Ethiopia may then be the extent to which the various systems and subsystems in relevant sectors and actors are aligned among themselves to ultimately expedite children's development, health and learning outcomes.

Some scholars consider the complexities of educational systems (Snyder, 2013; Johnson, 2008) and argue that there is more to coherence than mere lining up of elements, subsystems (Looney, 2011). The social aspect of alignment is often overlooked in discussions regarding standards-based systems. Social alignment refers to the social capital in systems, including shared values, motives and efforts (Gallotti et al., 2017) rather than good results of an education system (London, 2023). A nation may have good education performance but possibly lower coherence among the systems as in the case of, for example, Vietnam where higher assessment results were

achieved compared to other countries yet the education system was found to be weakly coherent around learning and is best understood as a formal process compliant system that, despite its many strengths, is nonetheless underperforming relative to its potential (London, 2023). Coherence in education systems is, then, defined as “the shared depth of understanding about the purpose and nature of the work across governance levels (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

### **Approaches and Theoretical Framework**

Education as a sector calls actors at different levels of the system share common goals (Fuhrman, 1993), enhance smooth flow of information throughout the system (O'Day, 2002), engage all the system in educational change (Knapp, 1997), and ensure better alignment among national and state educational instruments and practices (Herman & Webb, 2007; Knapp, 1997) to ultimately impact practice. In lieu of these complexities, our review of the ECDE system coherence in Ethiopia utilizes a blend of relevant theories and models: the ‘Complexity Theory’, the ‘Whole Child Approach’, the ‘Coherence Making Framework’ and the ‘Program Implementation Fidelity Model’.

The ‘Complexity Theory’ holds that education system is complex (O'Day, 2002; Looney, 2011; Lennert, 2018; Johnson, 2008; Snyder, 2013; McQuillan, 2008; Mason, 2008; Trombly, 2014) and offers a mechanism for understanding the dynamics of this complex social system (e.g., Snyder, 2013, Johnson, 2008) to expound how the different elements/ agents of the system are, or are not, fitting together (McQuillan, 2008; Mason, 2008) especially in a multilevel educational governance setting (Trombly, 2014). Drawing on these ideas, the ‘Complexity Theory’ may be extended to describing ECDE system in terms of encompassing a complex array of interacting



systems and parts that are believed to be coherent to one another and to the whole system (O'Day, 2002; Looney, 2011; Lennert, 2018; Johnson, 2008; Snyder, 2013; McQuillan, 2008; Mason, 2008; Trombly, 2014).

The 'Whole Child Approach' (ASCD, 2007; Sahlberg, 2010), an emerging educational philosophy and practice that upholds development of the whole person (Sahlberg, 2010), takes the ideas of Complexity Theory further and explains it in terms of aligning educational systems towards creating a holistic child learning. It underscores that there is a need to shifting educational systems from one that focuses solely on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long term development and success of children and charts out a roadmap for coherence among policies and resources that allow children get opportunities to succeed in holistic learning (ASCD, 2007).

The 'Coherence Making Framework' (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) underscores that creating such coherences for holistic growth of children goes beyond alignment of systems; it is rather subjective, on the becoming, never perfect, and continuously evolving process of making and remaking meaning in the minds and culture of those involved, resulting in consistency and specificity and clarity of action across schools and across governance levels, as a way to create consistency and alignment (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

The 'Program Implementation Fidelity Model' (Belay, Solomon & Daniel, 2020) positions coherence from the perspective of policy and program enforcement and rollout. It upholds that effective ECDE implementation may mean an internal and external adherence/ alignment of elements with the ordained program intentions and

design as well as the bigger contextual (socio-cultural, economic and political) factors that critically structure program implementations.

In sum, what aspect of coherence of a system needs to be prioritized in a reform process may depend to a greater extent on the specific context. However, alignments toward learning need to target a range of issues including actors, policy matters, curriculum and pedagogical issues, resources and capacity (GEEAP, 2023). When implementing interventions, it particularly demands for complementarities across interventions, dynamic complementarities, and the role of interventions in advancing or inhibiting systemic reform (GEEAP, 2023). However, we may, for our present purpose, gauge ECDE coherence reform for holistic learning in Ethiopian may call for analysis of alignments of the broader array of systems; mainly because ECDE is only in the making and lacks in identity; making coherence analysis impossible based on specific components as foci. ECDE system coherence in Ethiopia may then be taken to refer to the extent to which the various ECDE systems and subsystems in relevant sectors and actors are aligned among themselves to ultimately expedite children's holistic development, health and learning outcomes.

## **ECDE System Coherences in Ethiopia**

### **System Coherence for Holistic Child Learning and Development**

Children in many low-and middle-income countries are exposed to multiple risks including malnutrition, disease, and inadequate stimulation and these deprivations compromise their cognitive, motor, socio-emotional and educational performance. Hence, it is estimated that over 200 million (nearly 43%) children younger than five years are at risk of not achieving their developmental potential (WHO, 2020), 61% are

stunted (World Bank, 2013) and that children living in Sub Saharan Africa are five times less likely to reach the minimum level of proficiency in reading by the end of primary school, than children elsewhere (UNESCO GEMR, 2023) and this would, in the long-term, sustain the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007).

Nationally, about 13 million children live under extreme poverty in Ethiopia and, therefore, nearly 60% of those under five are lagging in their full developmental potential (CSA & UNICEF, 2020) with stunting, underweight, and wasting respectively standing at 38%, 24%, and 10%. On top of poor health or under nutrition, the problem has been compounded by children's lack of inadequate sensitive and responsive care, feeding, stimulation, and safety/security; possibly exposing an estimated 59% of children under five to the risk of suboptimal development (MoH, 2019).

With respect to pre-primary education in particular, Ethiopia had significantly progressed towards realizing the Millennium Development Goals (MoFED & UNDP, 2012). Several attempts were also made to reverse the serious ECDE quality concerns widely reported in Ethiopia (e.g., see Belay et al., 2020, 2022), including, among others, boosting pedagogical competency of teachers through different on the job trainings<sup>6</sup>. Despite these encouraging initiatives to empower school readiness programs to incorporate modern pedagogy as well as their high prospect of scalability (Belay and Belay, 2015) slightly contributing to improved ECDE outcomes (MoE, 2024), there are as yet incongruences of efforts with set objectives. For example, a sample of 265 upper grade preschool children (mean age 6.2 years) were exposed to literacy and health

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<sup>6</sup> *The most recent national and comprehensive short-term in-service training included a total of about 17,000 O-class teachers to familiarize them with child-friendly pedagogies and play-based learning in particular (MoE, 2024).*

intervention program in Addis Ababa through various tools and materials and trained teachers using these materials for about a year<sup>7</sup>. School readiness was measured with the locally adapted Measure of Early Learning Quality and Outcomes (MELQO) and findings suggested that large proportion of children (80%) in targeted preschools seemed to have generally exhibited an intermediate to proficient level in almost all components of MELQO, but one; i.e. backward digit span. However, in very pragmatic terms, a substantial level (nearly one in five) was below basic implying that they were still prepared to be left behind in primary school (Belay & Belay, 2020).

Years later, MELQO national assessment for groups without such intervention has shown that the overall mean score performance of O-class children in all the four basic domains (literacy, numeracy, executive functions and fine motor skills) was as substantially low as 48.9% (EAES), 2023a). This would contribute to high rate of learning poverty in Ethiopia in which 90 % of children were found unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of 10 (World Bank Group, 2022b). The overall performance of Grade 2 and 3 students in Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA, 2023) was alarmingly low; though has shown a slight improvement as compared to EGRA 2021. Students who were able to achieve a functional reading level<sup>8</sup> were only 20% (EAES, 2023b).

An often overlooked disabler in ECDE is the presence of behavioral/mental problems in the child (Gleason et al., 2016), caregiver (Honda et al., 2023), and educator (Stein et al., 2022). Studies in Ethiopia have shown that 3% (Ashenafi et al., 2001) to

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<sup>7</sup>The project was implemented by Whizkids Workshop, Addis Ababa, in nine public preschools selected from three sub cities of Addis Ababa.

<sup>8</sup> Functional reading level involves reading with increasing fluency and comprehension, and reading fluently with full comprehension.

17% (Tadesse et al., 1999) of children suffer from behavioral/mental problems. While the majority of the country's population is in the child age range, mental/ behavioral health services for children are extremely scarce in Ethiopia. On the other hand, preschool teachers trained on common behavior/mental disorders were found to be statistically significantly better than untrained controls to identify and support children with problems (Desta et al., 2017). The finding indicates the necessity for task sharing where teachers can be easily trained to identify early children with serious problems and make appropriate referral to nearby health facilities. Higher education planners also need to consider addressing common behavioral/mental disablers and how to tackle them in their preservice teachings.

### **Policy and Leadership Coherence**

Global experiences with ECDE policy making indicate that many policies address only one aspect of the system and disregards the various other systems of educational change (Knapp, 1997). This may be an instance of partial policy alignment; since greater system coherence demands better alignment, for instance, among national and state educational tools<sup>9</sup> and enforcements (Herman & Webb, 2007; Knapp, 1997).

#### ***a) Policy Alignment with International Trends: Global Coherence***

National ECDE systems are expected to align themselves with emerging global trends that uphold the need for integrated, holistic, and multisectoral ECD programs. In this regard, both the old ECCE (MoE, MoWCYA & MoH, 2010) and the new ECDE (MoE, MoWSA & MoH, 2023) policies promote holistic child development and learning starting from prenatal development till age six/ eight. In both of them, this goal

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<sup>9</sup> Educational tools include policies, standards, curriculum, and assessments.

is to be realized through comprehensive and participatory approaches as well as the inter-sectoral and integrated coordination of three relevant ministries working on child care, rights, health, education and development. Both policies promised to offer a coherent admin structure of coordination of services by the three line ministries; with a national task force established from stakeholders to coordinate, review and monitor program delivery. Hence, national goals, approaches and proposed coordination systems seem to broadly align with international trends; but the coordination aspect lacks clarity, adherence to international instruments, and, as shown later, attunes minimally to local realities.

***b) Policy Coherence with Local Practices (Ecological Coherence/ Indigenization within Globalization)***

Policy making needs to be aligned with admin structures to translate policies into actions, duties and responsibilities of the respective actors, national challenges and opportunities of the educational system, and how partners function for system improvement (Fazekas and Burns, 2012). Hence, policy coherence can be defined as (OECD, 2014b):

...the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policy actions across government departments and agencies creating synergies towards achieving the agreed objectives. Within national governments, policy coherence issues arise between different types of public policies, between different levels of government, between different stakeholders and at an international level. (p. 7).

In a way, policy coherence is about ecological adherence. Ecological coherence refers to the extent to which ECDE designs and deliveries, approaches and methods, materials and resources, tasks and activities, and roles and responsibilities resonate with

typical real world conditions, situations and contexts to which ECDE systems and programs are to be installed. In this regard, ECDE indigenization can be considered as an approach to ensure harmony and synergy among ECDE systems and sub-systems (goals, contents, methods, resources) with local realities. To begin with programs, ECDE programs in Ethiopia are common practices with a recorded history of attuning to the needs of the children at large. Belay and Belay (2015) have in particular examined the practices, contributions and challenges of the School Readiness Programs (O-class and Child-to-Child Initiatives) in Ethiopia and argued that both approaches have high prospect of scalability and feasibility in the Ethiopian soil; despite some implementation problems. Evidences have also underscored that the traditional and community-based school readiness programs- Priest Schools (Belay & Belay, 2017) and Madrassas (Yigzaw et al., 2022; Zeyadet al., 2022)- contain the viability of delivering Early Childhood Education; though they, too, retain some limitations in implementation.

Despite such program coherence and emerging consciousness about the importance of ensuring indigenization of early childhood services, several evidences suggest that goals and expectations, curriculum and textbooks, materials and resources, and indoor and outdoor games were not found to adequately incorporate local contexts and cultures in Ethiopia (Belay & Belay, 2016; Belay, 2018; Belay, 2020; Belay & Teka, 2015).

### ***c) Intergovernmental Coherence***

There are two intergovernmental relations (IGR) that are commonly described as vertical and horizontal levels (Cameron, 1999). Vertical relations are the ones that prevail between the federal and local governments, while horizontal relations refer to

inter-state or inter-local relations (Wright, 1974) that embrace negotiation, non-hierarchical communication and cooperation between the two government levels (Nigussie, 2015). Referring to the Ethiopian case, there are no enough provisions in the Constitution for regulating IGR (Solomon cited in Nigussie, 2015) and this has created gaps in intergovernmental cooperation as well as rifts in the regularity, continuity and effectiveness of communications (Solomon cited in Nigussie, 2015).

ECDE being intersectoral, a range of sectoral offices need to partake in ECDE design and delivery. Hence, from the (horizontal) intersectoral coherence perspective, ECDE policy framework provides government actors to assume a leading role in ensuring coordination among key government and non-government actors in ECDE programing. However, the efforts and initiatives for sustainable multisectoral coordination among stakeholders have generally been ineffective. Government ECD actors initiate collaboration with specific NGOs or establish coordination mechanisms with various actors when a need arises for technical and financial support from partners in policy and strategy development or revision, and implementation (DDRC, 2022).

However, joint planning and operation, shared plan and understanding, formal channels of information exchange, and alignment and operation of work with others have still a lot to progress; as each of them mind business as an independent entity. Each of them has their own separate strategies, separate national task force, and independent yearly plans and the alignments are seldom checked. In fact, they contracted divisions of responsibilities (MoE on pre-primary education, MoWSA on child protection and MoH on health and nutrition) that call for independent action than collaborative and aligned moves. Thus, the major, consistent and functional



coordination and collaboration opportunities which existed between government ministries and CSOs have been very few (DDRC, 2022).

**d) *Leadership Coherence***

Coherence needs to be internalized into the minds and actions of system members. This allows coherence making an ongoing conundrum; it is never-ending (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Keeping this in view, Fullan and Quinn (2016) consider the role of leadership to assume a critically important function as the glue connecting and integrating the components of the coherence framework such that they are meant to ensure internalization of the coherence framework in the minds and actions of system members because people come and go and circumstances change, and yet coherence making is never-ending (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). While the leadership is entrusted with these unwritten mandates in the job description, an area of notable gap that makes ECDE in Ethiopia to be substantially fragile is the absence of any accountable leadership from the top echelon of the three line ministries to the lowest levels. There was time in which ECDE focal persons were appointed at the federal MoE level and following this as an example focal persons were appointed at regional levels and below; but these focal persons were assigned to these responsibilities as a supplement to other responsibilities. At the moment even this structure is now where to be seen. Hence, let alone working to deepen the social alignments by bringing forth to the same platform for envisioning ECDE, the leadership is missing to ensure the ordinary system alignments at large.

## **Institutional and Organizational Coherence**

### ***a) Institutional Coherence***

ECDE institutional incoherence appears common in Ethiopia. Home-preschool alignments are minimal as communities and families are less involved in preschool; the child is detached from home the moment he/she joins preschool because curriculum doesn't value home education and care. Families are made irrelevant in the ECDE process because preschools don't value tradition, home background, parental experience etc. In the same way, there is incoherence between pre-primary teacher education and preschool education system in the country. In a study conducted in three colleges in Ethiopia (Belay et al, 2024), it was found that the general contribution of the training program offered in the three colleges for preparing preschool teachers was minimal as it lacks relevance, appropriateness, and usefulness; in fact, there is a misalignment of pre-primary education and teacher training program for the level.

In fact, a more comprehensive education sector analysis conducted to formulate Ethiopia's fifteen years education roadmap (Tirussew et al., 2018) has indicated that the PP teacher education system retains several challenges. According to this study, there is a new initiative of opening pre-primary teacher education programs at some higher education institutions at certificate, diploma, bachelors and master's degree levels. This is an encouraging step which improves qualification and profile of early childhood education teachers which also boost the quality of pre-primary education on the ground. However, the early childhood education system is restrained by several drawbacks that

include problems related to curriculum content and pedagogy, teachers' profile, governance, setting, resources and finances. With respect to teachers' qualification and benefits, it was found that, despite the fact that preprimary teachers' recruitment, training, professional development and salary and benefits are important elements of preschool education quality, they were not given attention. Many of the early childhood education teachers are not trained or less trained to execute their role.

### ***Organizational coherence***

Combined organizational practices have more power to promote coherence than strength in any one area (Bryk et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2017). Holistic and integrated childcare and development requires a social and collaborative exercise in which a number of actors join hands rearing up children. Although it may be difficult and time consuming to create a more enabling and productive program with clear design, structure and content for stakeholders (Zundans-Fraser & Bain, 2016), the participation of important stakeholders is a defining feature of competent and optimal practice, and failure to do so is negligence and malpractice (Lawson, 2004). Stakeholder engagements in designing, implementing, and assessing ECDE programs is critical especially in resource scarce countries; it increases demand for and foster accountability, reduces costs through resource mobilization, provides opportunities to learn from one another and ensures efficiency in ECCE services (Ionescu et al., 2015). It also enhances opportunities to exchange knowledge and improve functionality, problem-solving skills, and diversity and creativity (Campos et al., 2013).

In Ethiopia, there has not been strong networking and partnership among parents, teachers, communities and international partners; despite the fact that this has been stipulated in the ECDE policy. Lack of awareness among implementers and parents were some of the reasons (Mengistu et al, 2020). For instance, CSOs have embarked on community-based ECE pilot programs in different regions of Ethiopia to support the government in improving access, quality and equity of services for children the rural communities but communities didn't own the centers and instead of taking care of the resources, people in the community were found dismantling the resources and take them home (Belay & Teka, 2020). Such initiatives didn't seem to have a good start as they were challenging the community values, practices and resources. This raised concerns about their scalability and sustainability concerns (Belay & Teka, 2020).

The community-based early childhood education programs instituted in rural Ethiopia quite earlier in the 1990s also failed mainly due to the lack of community understanding about the importance of sustaining the programs, administrative problems, and lack of regular follow up during the implementation of the programs (Demissie, 1996). In fact, even currently, community and parental involvement is low in Somali (Beide et al., 2022), Tigray (Mengistu et al., 2020), Gondar (Belay & Teka, 2015), Addis Ababa (Fiseha, 2022), and Harar (Tadesse, 2022). The practice of pre-primary teacher-parent communication is low, there is absence of planned activities to communicate with parents; there is low trust of parents on the schools activities, and unwillingness to participate on their children's learning (Tadesse, 2022).

### **Goal Misalignment**

Systems of education in several LMICs pay attention to the education of the elite, at the cost of most students. This might be exacerbated by international benchmarking against privileged schools in other countries and by ambitious standards. Very ambitious curriculum content, assessment, and teaching learning materials are the practical result of this focus on the elite. However, if there is political will for education systemic change and directly addressing the education standards could be highly cost-effective (GEEAP, 2023). Schooling and massification of higher education has ostensibly been noted (Belay & Getnet, 2022).

### **Misalignments with International Instruments**

ECDE misalignments also pervade other domains including, for example, the realization of the popular UN declaration of “Education for All”. The Ethiopian government showed commitment to the MDGs and Education for All by ratifying different international conventions. However, the implementation of education of children with special educational needs was still low. Analysis by Belay et al. (2015) revealed that the proper implementation of inclusive education is less likely to happen even in the years to come. Therefore, it was emphasized that rather than ambitiously planning “education for all”, it is better to effectively provide “education for some” through any existing educational mode. Reversing the top-down inclusive approach to a bottom-up initiative of a more innovative, culturally relevant, cost-effective, and community resource-based inclusive model school, which can successively be refined, and then gradually scale up lessons is also an alternative.

### **Education Policy/ Strategy- Practice Misalignment**

The construct of coherence in educational research is often attributed to lack of coherence across the educational system; the failure of policies to impact classroom practices (O'Day, 2002). Many countries globally have well-articulated policies but there is poor implementation<sup>10</sup>. In Ethiopia in particular, policy-practice misalignment and yet accountability failure appears to have come widespread today (Belay et al, 2020). While the past thirty years in Ethiopia seem to be a period of legislative and policy making with a number of documents produced; seemingly making the nation a basket of policies than breads now, the commitment of implementation of policies doesn't seem as solid as that of formulation of these instruments (Belay, Solomon and Daniel, 2020).

A snapshot at Ethiopia's education system shows consistent failures in realizing national goals. In Ethiopia, holistic education has been a slogan, yet the system is academic-focused, student centered-pedagogy has been a strategy in the policy yet teacher-centered classroom is in a strong hold in practice, continuous assessment in policy but testing of students in practice, assessment for learning in policy, but assessment of learning in practice, indigenous education recognized in policy, yet western curriculum and resources taking hold in practice (Belay & Getnet, 2022). According to Belay and Getnet (2022), the Ethiopian education policy and strategy documents incorporated a number of strengths containing the following that in fact didn't materialize:

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<sup>10</sup>*For example, the requirements for establishing a preschool center in a country may be very strict. In reality, however, only a minor proportion of operating centers may fulfill these requirements; such a discrepancy could indicate a problem with mechanisms to enforce compliance with standards or a problem with information and monitoring systems.*

- The continuous assessment strategy that would offer thick data and feedback about students that would help planning for the needs of the child.
- The free promotion policy for early grades that values the growth of children than premature initiation of assessment that hampers children's holistic development.
- Self-contained teaching that provides better care, emotional support, and understanding of the children.
- Cooperative learning that would create a platform for building collaborative and team work skills.
- Continuous professional development of teachers that would help improve capabilities for provision of effective service for the holistic development of children.
- School clubs that are to be established to help building the whole child learning.

### **Local ECDE Policy-Practice Misalignment**

Several other more specific misalignments also exist between government decree and practices in the country with particular reference to implementation of ECCE Policy. There are several MoE documents that articulate the need for using play-based learning and also guidelines for implementation; for example, preschool curriculum, 2009; preschool diploma teacher training Program, 2014; teacher guide for O-Class, 2018; in-service teacher training curriculum, 2019; teacher education curriculum, 2022; ECCE policy, 2010 and the revised ECDE Policy, 2022/23 and, more recently, the integrated preschool curriculum, 2021. This being the case, actual

classroom practices were shown to be lecture-based even in colleges of teacher education where play-based pedagogy course was found to be taught through lecture (e.g., see Belay, Fantahun and Fisseha, 2019).

Evidences have also shown that the implementation level of ECDE policy framework in Ethiopia has generally been low, particularly at regional and sub-regional levels (DDRC, 2022). The country has developed a comprehensive preschool curriculum and the materials were well designed. However, evidences have indicated that the national curriculum was not always followed by preschools of the private, or NGO/ faith-based organizations and there were multiple challenges limiting the implementation of the curriculum mainly in private and non-government owned KGs that had different objectives and procedures (Britto et al., 2012).

According to Britto and colleagues (2012), there were no supervisors to ensure delivery and implementation of the preschool curriculum, and also that there were no explicit mechanisms to conduct process evaluations or ways to strengthen the implementation of the curriculum based on prior experiences. Implementation of ECDE programs at regional and district levels faced various other challenges related to lack of appropriate organizational structure for ECDE, shortage of qualified and trained teachers, caregivers and supervisors at health facility, preschool and daycare centers, limited number of institutions that produce qualified teachers in ECCE, facilities and budget constraints to procure and avail supplies, facilities, equipment and inputs that are required to implement play-based early learning programs and provide essential health, nutrition and protection services to children, low level of awareness on importance of ECDE at all levels within the government structure as well as at community levels (DDRC, 2022; Ministry of Health (MoH), 2022). In a study



conducted to assess implementation of the ECCE policy, a small scale research has shown that the ECCE policy was only on the paper. There was no adequate basic facility in the majority of pre-primary schools and the schools are not safe, and indoor and outdoor space is not enough. There is lack of budget, co-operation with stakeholders, materials and facilities, skilled human power and parental involvement. Finally, it is recommended that the government needs to focus on rural areas, enough budgets should be allocated at all levels, the woreda education offices (WEO), and regional education bureaus (REB) need to enable the training for all preschool teachers, and stakeholders need to work in partnership. Furthermore, the REB is advised to establish a continuous professional development center that is prepared for the teachers to regularly share their experiences (Shumetu, 2020).

A situational analysis conducted to examine the ECD intervention activities on the health sector (MoH, 2019) revealed that the health sector in the country has addressed only some components of the nurturing care intervention (NCI) for early childhood development. To facilitate the implementation of ECD programs in Ethiopia, there was no strategic plan, program, and guidelines. The limited awareness and understanding on ECD are additional challenges hindering health professionals from delivering nurturing care to young children and their parents/caregivers (MoH, 2019).

### **Resource Alignment**

Many countries globally have well-crafted policies, but they are poorly implemented, due to resource limitations, weak service provision and/or a lack of quality control mechanisms (World Bank, 2013). The effective execution of a centrally designed reform depends on the capability and the resources available to reform the

goals and put them into practice. The amount and quality of connections between system elements likewise impacts a system's ability to adapt (Trombly, 2014). In Sub-Saharan Africa, 61% of all children are living in poverty or stunted, or both and the level of access to pre-primary school is 17% (World Bank, 2013) suggesting the need for budget priority to reverse this problem. Yet, investments are elsewhere than in this critical sector for reversing poverty. While investing in the early years has the highest return, government investment today is inversely linked to this idea; the upper the education ladder, the higher the budget apportioning. Furthermore, investment on disadvantaged children brings more return compared to the privileged group; but ECCE in Ethiopia is more accessible to those in the urban middle class group than to the urban poor and rural children.

In a recent study by the World Bank Group, it was found that public spending on education in Ethiopia was disproportionately benefiting higher-income households. Students from lower-income groups consistently receive a lower share of public funding than their share of enrolment. The gap between the poor and the rich is widening in Ethiopia, as can be seen by the decreasing share of out-of-pocket expenses on education incurred by the poorest families (World Bank Group, 2022a). Furthermore, the public spending in the education sector heavily favours higher education<sup>11</sup>, personnel spending is the key cost driver (for primary, secondary, and TVET education) where wages and salaries account for 78% of all budgeted funds across regions (World Bank Group, 2022b).

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<sup>11</sup>Approximately 23 percent of public funding is dedicated to primary education (grades 1 through 6), even though this level accounts for 63 percent of all students. In contrast, tertiary education receives 40 percent of all public funding but serves only 3 percent of all students.

## **Coherences in other Areas**

### ***Social Coherence***

Coherence has also a subjective dimension that Looney (2011) calls it “social alignment” to signify that coherence doesn’t rely on slick strategic plans; rather, it is a subjective experience that exists in the minds of people, and must be developed across given groups through focused interaction among members of the organization working on a common agenda, identifying and consolidating what works and making meaning over time (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Although alignment is good and misalignment hurts in many ways, there is no system that achieves flawless alignment. Looney suggests that rather than thinking of alignment literally, it may be more suitable to approach it as a matter of balance and coherence. The discussion addresses both the technical and social dimensions of alignment (Looney, 2011).

The social aspect of alignment is often overlooked in discussions regarding standards-based systems. In systems that are socially aligned, institutions and actors work together to define challenges and to consider alternative courses of action. This alignment is vital for system learning and improvement and ensures shared goals, shared meaning, repeated patterns, complementary functions, conserve energy, reduce internal tension, and improve internal and external adaptation (HSDI, 2022). ECDE system in Ethiopia is known to generate these shared goals, shared meaning, and approaches; instead, different actors have different notions, in some forms contradicting, in other forms diverging, yet not complementing or feeding one another.

O’Day (2002) proposes that the structure and norms of many schools, where teachers work in independent and isolated classrooms, buffers individuals and schools against change and prevents mutual learning (p. 8). Sloppy connection throughout the networks and layers of education strengthens this isolation. Systems limit opportunities

for learning and adaptation when they limit interaction and interdependence across layers. Schools and teachers also face a progressively complex set of demands (organization for the economic cooperation and development (OECD), 2005b). The question for national and regional policy makers, then, is how to best balance external, bureaucratic controls, which are vital for ensuring quality, equity and accountability across education systems, and support for internal, professional controls, with schools and teachers taking collective responsibility for student learning (O'Day, 2002).

In Ethiopia, each of the three governments ECD actors have been developing their respective strategic and operational plan to facilitate ECD implementation at national level following the revision of the multi-sectoral policy framework. However, the coordination mechanisms also has limitations with regard to lack of shared vision, inconsistent participation of members, lack of developing and enforcing a clear system for accountability for members involved, low ownership and commitment of coordinating government actors and limited efforts to ensure harmonization and alignment of resources and funds for better ECD outcomes among members, ECD partners and stakeholders. Lack of collective outcomes and lack of shared vision among the ECD actors: Each local and international NGO has its own program interest and priority, which is usually driven by donors, thus generating collective outcomes that enhance ECD outcome at national level may be difficult to achieve through common multisectoral coordination efforts (DDRC, 2022).

### ***Time Coherence (Maintenance and Sustainability of Systems)***

The second issue then relates to the defining markers of effective coherence that it is cumulative and ongoing. Things are changing. Some members leave and others come, policies change, the environment shifts, new ideas are floated, and so on.

Coherence makers work to reduce or eliminate unnecessary distractions and achieve about 80 percent coherence, defined as shared depth of understanding (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Time coherence is then about the stability and change in the ECDE system, on the one hand, change is inevitable as ECDE is dynamic and needs to attune to historical artefacts. On the other hand, there is a need to provide continuity and sustainability of good ECDE initiatives. Effective ECDE coherence is the one that ensures balance between continuity and discontinuity, change and stability, rigidity and flexibility.

ECDE is not just inter-sectoral alone. It is also dynamic. Just in ways the fetus, infant, young child and school student experiences multiple transformations during their early years, so, too, policy and programming must be sensitive to changing needs and priorities at different ages and stages. However, until recently policy and programmatic interventions were not dynamically attuned to this intra-individual and intergroup dynamics (Woodhead et al., 2014) and this is more so in Ethiopia where, for example, the government allocates considerable budget for higher education compared to the negligible spending at the pre-primary education level (World Bank Group, 2022a); nursery care has not even been a point of concern until few years ago.

In Ethiopia, intergenerational incoherencies also characterize the system. For instance, although early childhood education and care has a long history, this tradition of care, child rearing methods and time immemorial early education system were gradually set aside mainly with the advent of the European type of education and care introduced in the country. Alike other institutional and ideological discontinuities that occur following regime changes in the country, the same trend characterizes ECDE (Belay, 2018; 2020); discontinuities in interest, focus/ purpose, approach, methods,

resources etc. (Belay, 2018; Belay & Belay, 2017). This has been a barrier to sustain best practices honoured at one historical time into another. Hence, while Ethiopia is historic in many ways, but the ensuing discontinuities had debunked its historical assets.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The ECDE system in the strictest sense of the term is only in the making; it is searching for an identity and, therefore, fragile in many parameters. Coherence is in fact the bottom-line that dynamic and evolving systems need to keep closer to their heart to thrive. This paper attempted to review early trends in the Ethiopian ECDE system so that it is possible to reorient its course before things immensely get off track. Hence, it is more of informing practice than conducting a premature critique on a system that is in its infancy. Accordingly, it is suggested that an independent, integrated and multisectoral unit be established to deliberate, lead and monitor the ECDE system coherence both in its subjective and objective forms.

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