

## Preschool curriculum implementation in Ethiopia: The case of selected woredas preschools

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the practice of preschool curriculum implementation in selected woredas of South West Shoa Zone. For this study, descriptive survey research design was used. Data were gathered from 49 O-Class, 9 kindergartens, 192 teachers, 58 principals, 12 cluster supervisors and 4 woreda education experts. The findings of the study revealed that the objectives of the curriculum were unable to address all domains of children's development, the contents lack relevance to prepare children for life and learning ahead. In addition, appropriate instructional methods, materials, assessment and record keeping systems that guarantee the proper implementation of the curriculum were not employed. On the other hand, the major factors that can affect the implementation of preschool education in schools are generally related to lack of textbooks, teacher's guides, syllabuses, policy documents and manuals, and lack of uniformity on the implementation of the program.

**Key words:** Curriculum implementation, Ethiopia, practice, preschool.

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## 1. Introduction

The earliest years of life are pivotal in forming the foundations for healthy development and providing children and their societies the opportunity to reach their full potential. The earliest years of life considered as the period of rapid development in the human beings. For instance, Piaget (1971) described the periods from conception through age six as a very critical to the complete growth of children's health, cognitive, psychomotor, personality and social development of children.

A research conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2007) on children development revealed that early childhood interventions have lasting effects on their intellectual capacity, personality and social behaviour. Additionally, other research studies (Woodhead, Ames, Vennam, Abebe & Streuli, 2009) demonstrated that the earliest years of a child's life represent a crucial period of biological, neurological, psychological, social and emotional growth and change. This realisation has generated immense interest and creative thinking in the field of development and education. Thus, children need worthwhile skills and experience to become competent and responsible citizens that benefit themselves, their parents and the country at large. This diverse benefit calls for an organised and a meaningful education (Barnett, 2008; Knudsen, 2004).

In addition to the child development perspectives, the issue of early childhood development requires further consideration. Hence, from the human rights perspective, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child stipulated that the child's right to education shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talent and physical abilities to their fullest potential. Besides, the world conference on 'Education for All', that took place in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990, articulated the significance of the early years as the foundation for the life. This was strengthened further by the signing of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1990. Since then many countries considered the establishment and development of early childhood interventions (Wondemetegn, 2017).

In Ethiopia also there is no doubt on critical contribution of preschool education in developing and broadening the range of children's life experiences. However, as described in Temesgen (2006), adequate studies did not support the exact introduction period of preschool in the country. The limited available ones indicate that, preschool education, largely traditional has been offered in religious schools with a focus on reading and recitation.

Like other education level, prior to the introduction of the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP), due attention was not given to preschool education too. Following the introduction of the current ETP due attention is given to this level of education. Nowadays, preschool education is geared towards the development of the child's mental capabilities and physical growth. This can be realised from the government's emphasis in education and training policy which states, 'Kindergarten will focus on all round development of the child in preparation for formal schooling' (TGE, 1994, p. 14).

Moreover, the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE) had developed and has been implementing five mid-term Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs). Thus, although the emphasis given to preschool education varies from one term to another term of the ESDPs, in all the five series of the ESDPs, the issue of preschool education has been addressed. Particularly ESDP V, the fifth medium-term plan, which is currently serving as the central strategy document for educational development in the country has properly addressed the issue of preschool education. To this end, a strategic operational plan and guidelines for preschool education has been established during ESDP V. The ministry also explains the three modalities of preschool education as Kindergarten, O-class and Child-to-Child (C-to-C) programs and strategic operational plan and guidelines for preschool education (MoE, 2015).

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

For the realisation of the preschool education in Ethiopia, the government established a strategic operational plan and guidelines for preschool education. The strategy encourages private investors, faith-based organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations into the delivery of preschool education. During the implementation of the first four ESDPs, particularly, in ESDP III, the government had no direct involvement in the expansion of preschool education. In this regard, the MoE of the country explained that, 'government policy for this sub-sector is not to establish and run pre-schools in the next five years' (MoE, 2005, p. 39). However, recently, as described in ESDP V, the government is assumed to have a considerable role in various aspects of preschool education (MoE, 2015).

With regard to the situation of preschool education of the country, some research studies were conducted (Frost & Rolleston, 2013; UNICEF, 2013; Woodhead et al., 2009). In addition to this, Ethiopian MoE, in its annual abstract of the performance of 2015/2016 highlighted the situation of the preschool education (MoE, 2017). Similarly, other local researchers, such as Aregash (2005); Befekadu, Wudu and Worku (2017); Eshetu (2015); Sosina (2013); Tassew (2011); Temesgen (2006) conducted their research on preschool education but they conducted on Kindergarten. Therefore, the current research was different from these researches as it inclusively investigated the all modalities of preschool education.

Moreover, research studies that were conducted on the preschool education not only rely on one of the modalities, but also they did not include multiple variables that may provide deeper understanding of status of preschool education. Therefore, this research tried to investigate the implementation of preschool curriculum in selected woredas of South West Shoa zones. Therefore, the objectives of this study were:

1. To examine preschool curriculum implementation in the selected schools of the south West shoa zone.
2. To examine major factors that affects the preschool curriculum implementation.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research design**

The research design used for the study was the cross-sectional descriptive survey design. Since, the survey research would enable the researchers to collect and describe large variety of data. Besides, qualitative data were used in the study to support quantitative data gathered through questionnaires (Creswell, 2014).

### **2.2. Sample size and sampling procedures**

According to the data obtained from South West Shoa zone education office, there are 11 woredas in the zone. From these woredas, four woredas were selected by using simple random sampling technique. Then, by using stratified sampling technique sample preschool (both kindergarten and O-class) were selected.

Second, the total of four pertinent woreda education office experts were selected from the four woredas using purposive sampling technique (individuals who were in charge of preschool education at woreda level). Third, 58 school principals of the selected preschool centers and all preschool teachers of the sample school were included as respondents based on availability sampling technique. Fourth, 12 cluster supervisors who accounted for 24% of their respective population, were randomly taken as respondents. Table 1 shows a summary of study participants.

**Table 1. Summary of population and the number of samples**

Name of sample Woredas (districts)	Preschool centres			Teachers					
	Total number	Sample	%	Total number			Sample		
				M	F	T	M	F	T
Ameya	38	16	42	27	25	52	27	25	52
Wonchi	29	13	45	17	21	38	17	21	38
Woliso	28	12	43	23	26	49	23	26	49
Becho	38	17	45	24	29	53	24	29	53
Total	133	58	44	91	101	192	91	101	192

### 2.3. Data collection instruments

For this study, the following data collection instruments were used:

**Questionnaires:** The questionnaires (both closed ended and open ended), as the main tool of data collection, was administered for teachers, school principals and cluster supervisors. The questionnaires focus on curriculum implementation and factors affecting preschool education. To ease the work of filling of the questionnaire, those questionnaires were translated in to local language by expert.

**Observations:** Observation was used to find additional data for the study. Hence, direct classroom observation was conducted while the teachers are teaching. Consequently, in the classrooms, the use of teaching methods, number of children in each section and interactions between students and teachers as well as among students was observed. One class of each sample preschool centres was randomly selected and observed by using semi-structured observation checklist.

**Interview:** A semi-structured type of interview guide was employed to collect data from the experts of the woreda education office. The interview was used in the study to support quantitative data collected using questionnaires. Again, the interview guide was translated in to local language to reduce difficulties of communication.

**Document analysis:** Relevant national and regional education policy documents were used as a source of data for the study. Hence, the document analysis as a source of data were documents indicating the availability of curriculum materials, such as syllabus and related sources, number of children in each classrooms as well as the whole number of children in each of the sampled preschools.

### 2.4. Validity and reliability of the research instruments

To maintain the validity of the instruments of data collection, the questionnaires were given to language expert and educational expert so that they would check grammatical clarity and validity of instrument respectively. Finally, a considerable comment and correction was made and the instruments were distributed for the pilot test. A pilot test was carried out in randomly selected KG and O-class. The schools which were involved in the pilot test were not included in the sample of the study.

To decide the reliability of the questionnaires and that of the observation checklist, the researchers calculated the coefficient of alpha and the inter-rater reliability, respectively. Thus, a test of reliability was conducted on the scales used in the questionnaire and the result was found to be 0.894 which is considered as highly reliable as a coefficient was above 0.70 is accepted (Jackson, 2009).

### 2.5. Data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques were employed. The data collected through questionnaire were presented through frequency distributions and percentage. On the other hand, data from observation, interviews and documents analysis were presented in a narrative form. According to Creswell (2014), the qualitative data would intertwine with the quantitative data to further enrich and enhance the information collected.

### 2.6. Ethical consideration

The purpose of the study was explained to the participants and they have asked their consent to answer questions in the questionnaire or interview guide. The participants were also informed that the information they have provided will not be given to a third party. Accordingly, the information that the participants provided was used only for the study purpose. In addition, the researcher ensured confidentiality by making the participants anonymous.

## 3. Result

In this section, the major results on preschool curriculum implementation and factors that affect are presented.

### 3.1. Curriculum implementation in preschool education

Curriculum implementation is a central issue in this paper. To identify the extent of curriculum implementation in the studied preschools, various relevant issues, such as objectives of preschool education, contents relevance and its relation to the life of the learner, teaching method, teaching materials and assessment techniques in preschool education, will be presented.

First respondents were asked the main objective of preschool education and their response is presented in Figure 1.

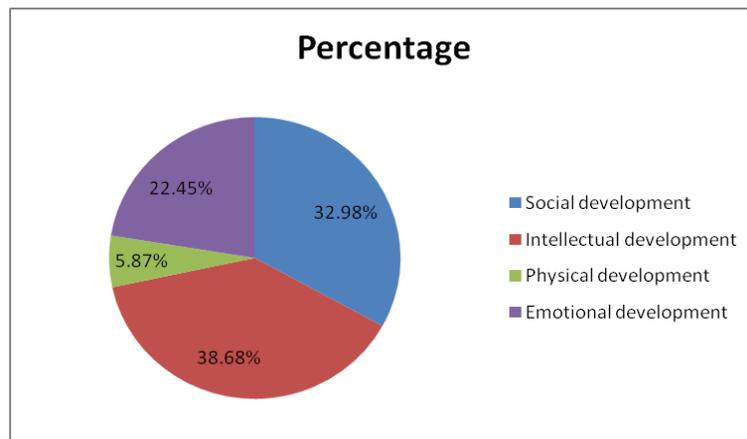


Figure 1. Objectives of preschool education

As it is seen in Figure 1, respondents were given a chance to select one or more objectives from options provided (social, intellectual, physical and emotional development). Hence, the majority of respondents, 74 (38.68%), selected intellectual development followed by social development, 63 (32.98%). This shows that intellectual and social development were more targeted in most preschools; whereas, physical and emotional developments of children were least emphasised.

The relevance of contents of the preschool curriculum and its relation with the realities of the children’s environment is another issue investigated in this study. Respondents were asked to confirm whether or not the contents are relevant and related to the life of the child and their response is summarised in Table 2.

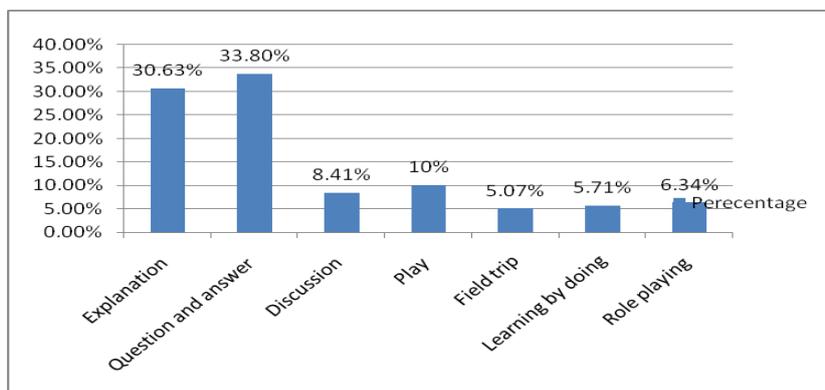
**Table 2. Relevance and relation of the curriculum content to the life of the child**

No	Items	Response	#	%
1	Relevance of the content of the curriculum	Low	102	53.1
		Medium	56	29.0
		High	34	17.9
2	Curriculum content relation to the realities of the children’s environment	Low	149	77.5
		Medium	35	18.3
		High	8	4.2

The four woreda education office experts were interviewed and they held the similar view. For instance, one of the experts said this *‘the regional education did not provide any curriculum to all O-classes in the region, and teachers teach the children based on their experience that is supplemented with what they have got from short term training’*. Besides, the interviewee added there is a lack of uniformity and focus of the contents on the interest, abilities and developmental level of children.

The other issue revealed in Table 2 is the degree of relations of contents of preschool curriculum to the children’s environment. In line with this, most of the respondents 149 (77.5%) responded the degree to which the contents were based on the realities of children’s environment as low. Additionally, significant numbers of respondents commented the lack of syllabus as evidence for lack of contents to base on the realities of children environment.

Another curriculum element investigated was the methods of teaching used by preschool teachers to teach preschool students. Respondents were given a list of commonly used methods and they rate the common methods they used and the result is summarised in the Figure 2.



**Figure 2. The common methods of teaching**

To investigate the most commonly used teaching methods in preschools, respondents were asked to indicate the most commonly used ones to effectively implement the curriculum. They were provided with the lists of teaching methods and allowed to indicate one or more. As indicated in the Figure 2, the majority of respondents 65 (33.80%), indicated question and answer, followed by explanation 59 (30.63 %). Some respondents, play 19 (10%) indicated question and answer, while the rest are rated by few respondents. This shows that question and explanation were the most commonly used teaching and learning methods in the preschools, whereas the rest methods were rarely used.

Moreover, the researchers conducted observation to support the responses obtained through questionnaires. Accordingly, the researchers witnessed that in most classrooms more direct teaching and specific academic instruction with emphasis on telling, reading, showing and asking were being implemented. Besides, questions flow only from the direction of teachers. In most of the observed preschools, children were simply passive recipients than asking or participating in the process. Children were rarely included in activities to the best of their abilities. The use of techniques, such as play, field trip, role playing and learning by doing which foster motivation and engagement were less observed.

The uses of real objects and specimens have great value to make the lesson more concrete and interesting for children. To see to what extent preschool teachers prepare instructional materials and use it in their lesson respondents were requested to respond a questionnaire and their response is summarised in the Table 3.

**Table 3. Instructional material preparation**

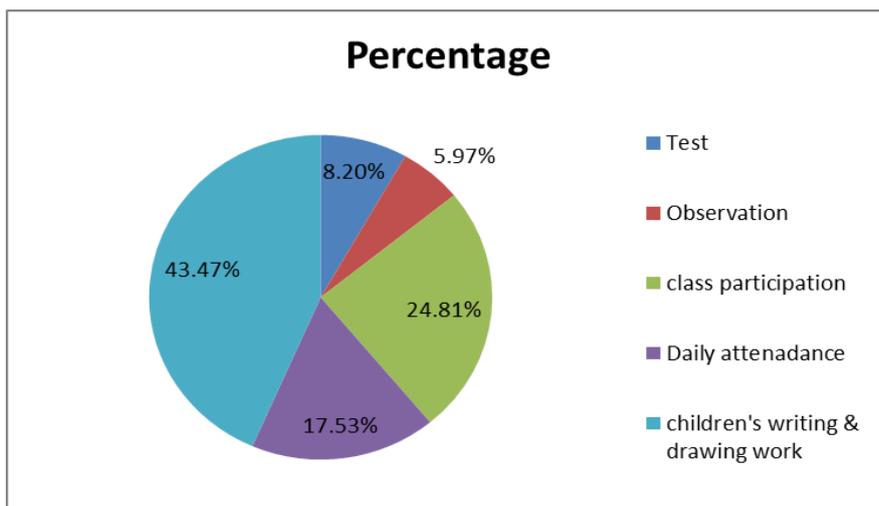
No	Items	Response	#	%
1	Preparation instructional materials	Low	111	58
		Medium	48	24.8
		High	33	17.2
2	Utilisation of instructional materials	Low	49	25.6
		Medium	119	61.8
		High	24	12.6

As shown in Table 3, respondents were given options (high, medium and low), from which to decide. Hence, most of the respondents 111 (58%) decide the extent of instructional materials preparation by teachers from locally available raw materials was low. The remaining small number of respondents 33 (17.2%), and 48 (24.8%) decided as high and medium, respectively. This implies the majority of the teachers did not prepare instructional materials from locally available materials.

Additionally, the observation made by the researchers in the schools also verified that the practice to collect and use real objects which are locally available seems minimum. Besides, woreda educational expert confirmed the low degree of teachers' participation in preparation of instructional materials.

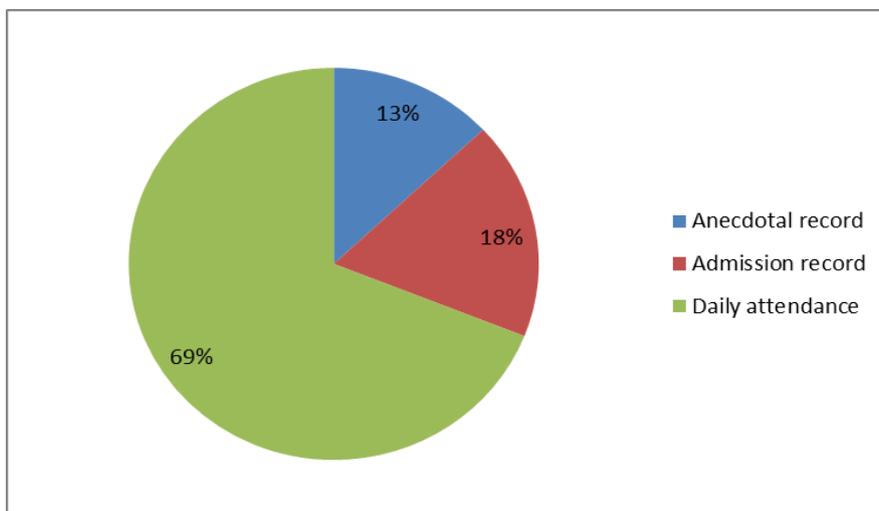
Regarding the utilisation of instructional materials, most of the respondents 119 (61.8 %), replied the degree of instructional materials utilisation was medium, whereas the rest respondents 24 (12.6%), and 49 (25.6 %) said high and low, respectively. This shows the degree of instructional materials utilisation in most of the studied kindergarten was moderate.

Nevertheless, the researcher's observation of teachers classroom revealed that there is the shortage of materials and teachers' dependency on picture reading, sound-letter association, and letter naming and word discrimination from books, written on the sheet of papers or blackboard. In addition, essential curricular materials that serve as a foundation to guide children's education were scarcely available in most kindergartens. The lack of essential curricular materials might make teachers to rely on personal whim in formulating objectives, selection of contents, methods and assessment procedures.



**Figure 3. Assessment techniques used by preschool teachers**

With regards to the assessment technique most of the respondents 83(43.47%), replied that children’s writing and drawing work as the most commonly used assessment techniques followed by class participation, 48(24.81%). The rest options were selected by 34(17.53%), 16 (8.2%) and 11 (5.97%) respondents as daily attendanace, test and observation, respectively. This result indicates that writing and drawing work was the most commonly used assessment techniques followed by class participation and daily attendanace. In contrast, test and particularly observation were the least used techniques of assessment in most of the studied preschools.



**Figure 4. Record keeping system in preschools**

So as to identify the most commonly used children’s record keeping system in the preschools, all groups of respondents were asked to specify from the lists (anecdotal, admission and daily attendance). Hence, most of the respondents 132 (69%) indicated the use of daily attendance. The rest respondents 35(18%) and 25 (13%), indicated that admission record and anecdotal record used, respectively. This shows that daily attendance was the main record keeping system mostly used in the studied preschools.

Moreover, it was also witnessed during the document analysis and observation that in all the preschools daily attendance and admission record were the quite available records about the child.

Daily attendance was used for checking regular attendance of each child, while admission record was used for collecting monthly fee from each child particularly in the kindergartens.

### **3.2. Factors affecting the preschool education**

To examine factors that affect the preschool curriculum implementation data were extracted from the participants through different instruments of data collection. Accordingly, there are two major factors identified from ended response of the questions. These are (1) lack of textbooks, teacher's guides, syllabus, policy documents, manuals, and national legal directives prepared by government; and (2) lack of uniformity on the implementation of the program, access, equity, quality and standardisation problem were major challenges in the preschools.

Moreover, the interview results with woreda education expert confirm that there is shortage of curriculum materials. For instance, one participant described that, *'the region education bureau did not provide any curriculum to all 0-classes in the region, and teachers teach the children based on their experience supplemented with what they have got from short term training.'*

The other participants also added that, *'There is lack of preschool curriculum in the public school. It has created children not to be competent and acquire minimum requirement for a child in the preschool to accomplish'*.

## **4. Discussion**

In this section discussion are made on two main issues: practice of curriculum implementation and factors that affect the current practice of preschool curriculum implementation.

Contents students learn are one components of the curriculum. Students are interested to learn when the contents are relevant to their experience and their day to day activity. However, the findings of this study revealed that the relevance of the content of the curriculum to prepare children for learning and life ahead and its relation to children's environment was found to be low. On the other hand, studies maintain that the content of the curriculum is the means through which the natural tendencies of the child are given stimulation and selective direction toward the activity which will fit the learner to live his/her life in most effective ways. Relevant contents have meaning for the child. It opens the door to new interests and enriches the already existing one. It addresses the academic needs of children by providing learning experiences that enriches all round development of children. It is up-to-date, age appropriate, meaningful, culturally worthwhile, and environmentally sound. It also enables teachers to guide children's learning within natural framework of interest and purposeful engagement (Miller & McDowelle, 1993).

Regarding to the objectives of curriculum, the results of this study show that intellectual and social development were more targeted at preschools, whereas physical and emotional developments of children were least emphasised. On the contrary, there is an increasing realisation that the physical and emotional experiences which preschool education offers are considered to be very important to the development of children. Unless, the physical and emotional predispositions that children desire are inculcated early, we will spend even more resources remedying our mistakes. Carefully planned preschool curriculum aims at the development of well-balanced and competent personalities. Children whose all aspects have developed in a balanced way will strive to learn whatever is necessary to make their life a satisfactory one (Butler, 2001; Tassoni, 2002).

With regards to the methods of teaching teachers used to teach preschool students, the results of this study indicate that the most commonly used teaching and learning methods in the preschools are questioning and explanation, whereas the rest methods were rarely used. In addition, the observation results indicates that in most classrooms more direct teaching and specific academic instruction with emphasis on telling, reading, showing and asking were being implemented. However, several studies have shown that in implementing the preschool curriculum methods emphasising child directed

activities are more effective than those teachers directed instruction. It is on better understanding of what children can do. To adapt interesting activities to the need and abilities of each child, keeping him/her happy and helping him/her learn with satisfaction (Tassoni, 2002). In the same way, the standard adopted in the region (MoE, 2003), point out that play, work, and other child directed methods as the main medium of education for all round development of children in the preschool.

Preschool teachers are expected to use instructional materials in their teaching to make students learn more the contents. They have to use the available instructional media in school if there is or prepare their own if there is no media in the school by using locally available materials. The results of this study show that teachers practice of preparation and utilisation are considered as low. In addition, the observation results also confirm that the practice to collect and use real samples, which are locally available, seems minimum. Besides, woreda educational expert confirmed the low degree of teachers' participation in preparation of instructional materials. Furthermore, it is observed that there is a shortage of materials and teachers' dependency on picture reading, sound-letter association and letter naming and word discrimination from books, written on the sheet of papers or blackboard.

Concerning the assessment techniques, the most commonly used are writing and drawing work of children and class participation. While daily attendance, test and observation were the least used. However, with regard to this issue, evidences show that assessment of young children should be based on continuous observation both in the classroom and outdoor environments. It should be an on-going process rather than a single paper-pencil test. It should look at children's activities, attitudes and efforts than mere presence in the classroom. A multi-source and a multi-measure assessment will provide a more valid and comprehensive pictures of the child. It also provides continuous feedback between teachers, children and parents. Particularly, observation with a clear focus and purpose is more rewarding to identify particular needs, strengths and weaknesses of children (Neaum & Tallack, 1997).

Furthermore, the attendance keeping, and record system are also one component of assessing and following up of students' progress in performance. The results of this study revealed that record keeping system, daily attendance was the main record available for each child in almost all preschools, whereas admission record and anecdotal record, that could provide accurate and reliable information about the child's performance were the least used. Substantiating the above result research evidence shows that appropriate record keeping has an important part to play in maintaining the continuity of children's educational experiences. It serves as references to the pace of individual progress, evidences of the child's strengths and weakness and help teachers to assess teaching effectiveness. Thus, the use of anecdotal records with brief description of children's performance both indoor and outdoor, continuously recorded, from year to year provide valid information about the child (Herman & Kerrie, 2010).

The major factors that affect related to curriculum implementation of preschools, two major problems were emphasised these include textbooks, teacher's guides, syllabus, policy documents, manuals and national legal directives prepared by government are not available in most preschools, and lack of uniformity on the implementation of the program, access, equity, quality and standardisation problem were major challenges in the preschools. These factors have a great impact on successful implementation of the curriculum and as a result, it hampered the children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth.

## **5. Conclusions**

The quality of experiences in the early years, impacts the quality of later life. Thus, services for preschool children must meet and reflect the complexities of their lives to develop fully in all the aspects. Therefore, based on the major findings of the study the following conclusions were made:

The curriculum was not implemented in the preschools as recommended in the policy. Hence, the objectives of the curriculum were unable to address all domains of children's development. Besides,

the contents lack relevance and broad base of organising experiences in various areas of learning to prepare children for life and learning ahead. Additionally, appropriate instructional methods, materials, assessment and record keeping systems that guarantee the proper implementation of the curriculum were not employed.

Major factors that can affect the implementation of preschool education in schools are generally related to lack of textbooks, teacher's guides, syllabuses, policy documents and manuals, and lack of uniformity on the implementation of the program.

Generally, the policy claimed that formal education in the region begins at preschool level. However, successfully implementing the policy to meet the desired educational objectives remained a great challenge in study area preschools. Therefore, any program that is instituted on unsound basis bound to fail even if the original policy as excellent. Undoubtedly, preschool education in the study area had been a neglected branch of education. It had never been considered as an integral part of formal education. And, not yet received due attention and support it deserves. Unless, the prevailing problems were resolved, any gain that was expected from preschool education in the study area would be hardly obtained. Consequently, it would be difficult to meet the regional goals and profiles set in the policy.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the major findings and the conclusions made, the following recommendations are forwarded:

Qualified teachers are indispensable to a sound preschool program. Therefore, the pre-service training of teachers both should deserve thoughtful attention from regional education bureau. In addition, in-service training would go a long way in improving the professional competencies of teachers so as to effectively implement the curriculum. Hence, the sponsoring agencies and woreda education office should jointly organise on-going workshops, seminars, conferences, so as to broaden teachers' outlook and enable them to cope up with rapidly changing concepts, methods and assessment techniques of preschool education in recent years.

Curriculum revision and up-dating which aimed at improving the relevance of the curriculum to prepare children for learning and life ahead should be urgently made by regional education office.

Woreda education office should provide continuous technical advice and consultancy service to preschools to effectively run preschool education. Besides, a minimum of one kindergarten should be used as a model of good practice in each woreda. Furthermore, Woreda education office should collect, compile and disseminate worthwhile experiences and information using newspaper, pamphlet, etc. among the kindergartens to be adopted.

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