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Original Research

Practices and Challenges of O-Class Education in Primary Schools of Gida Ayana District

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Abstract

This research aimed to analyze O-class education practices in primary schools in the Gida Ayana area of Wollega Zone. The study focused on community engagement, school infrastructure, curriculum execution, teacher professional competency, and classroom instruction. A descriptive survey was conducted with 18 elementary schools, including 134 educators, principals, cluster supervisors, district education specialist, and parent-teacher association members. Results showed that most O-class primary schools lacked essential components like qualified teachers, sufficient learning materials, training, and community engagement. Since each student is unique in their interests and level of development, it is imperative that the Oromia regional state create, adapt, and disseminate educational materials accordingly. Through partnerships with local colleges and universities, preschool teachers in the area will presumably get professional development opportunities to hone their craft. Field investors may be enticed to construct buildings that could serve as O-class structures because to the location. District offices of education should collaborate with schools and other interested parties to bolster small businesses that provide goods for indoor and outdoor use. In addition to raising awareness among relevant stakeholders, coordinated efforts should be made to provide cooperative training, seminars, and workshops.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychologists and philosophers contend that the establishment of good growth patterns in early life is a prerequisite for a child's and their society's ability to reach its greatest potential. The early years of life are a period of rapid human development, according to them. Piaget (1971), for instance, described the period from conception to age six as being crucial for the whole development of a child's health, cognitive, psychomotor, personality, and social skills.

Numerous terms are used to refer to early childhood education both internationally and within specific countries, and different stakeholders may use different language. For this reason, it's also known as preschool education, early childhood education, early childhood care (ECC), or early childhood education (ECE). Various intervention

components pertaining to education, health, and the children's overall personality are included in these variations. However, early childhood education (ECE) is chosen by educational authorities or individuals who view early childhood intervention from an educational viewpoint, as indicated by the United Nations Education and Science Organisation (UNESCO), a highly recognised organisation (UNESCO, 2002).

The Ministry of Education in Ethiopia (MoE) is the source of inspiration for five medium-term Education Sector Development Programmes (ESDPs). Consequently, the topic of preschool education has been covered in each of the five series of the programme, even though the ESDPs' emphasis on it varies from term to term. ESDP V, the country's fifth medium-term plan, has effectively addressed preschool education and is currently serving as the main strategy document for educational development in the country. Preschool education concepts and a strategic operating plan were created by ESDP V to achieve this. The ministry provides additional explanations of the three preschool education modalities—kindergarten, O-class, and child-to-child (C-to-C) programs—as well as the strategic operating plan and preschool education guidelines (MoE, 2015). In light of this information, the researcher then investigated the processes and challenges related to O-class schooling.

Statement of the problem

In order to facilitate the implementation of preschool education, the Ethiopian government created a strategic operational plan and guidelines and invited private investors, faith-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to become involved in the preschool education delivery system. The government did not directly increase preschool education during the implementation of the first four ESDPs, particularly ESDP III. In response, the country's education minister made it clear that, "for this sub-sector, government policy is not to establish and run preschools in the next five years" (MoE, 2005:39).

The Oromia regional state passed the education and training policy in 1994, which acts as a cornerstone for determining the essential subjects that the preschool curriculum in the region should include. The preschool programme must follow the minimal requirements defined by the Oromia Education Bureau Planning and Project Service (OEBPPS) in order to achieve the targeted regional goals and profiles outlined in the policy (OEBPPS, 2003).

An important source of data and direction for future situational improvement will be the analysis of the preschool education practices and barriers in the area, with a particular emphasis on the East Wollega zone of Gida Ayana District. In this way, although there are a lot of studies available on preschool education, none of them are specifically focused on the area or the population that the researcher would be examining in this study. For this reason, the researcher is interested in investigating the preschool education methods and challenges that are currently in place at the research location.

Research Questions

The study answered the following basic research questions:

1. *What was the status of O-class education in primary schools in Gida Ayana district?*
2. *To what extent do O-Class teachers qualify for the professional competency standard set by MoE?*
3. *How much of the O-Class curriculum was being implemented in the primary schools of District?*
4. *How far the physical environment of the O-class education was centres suitable for the implementation of the programme?*
5. *What are the challenges in practicing O-class education in the Gida Ayana district?*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main objective of this study was to assess the strategies and challenges related to O-class instruction in the Gida Ayana district. The research methodology used in this study was a cross-sectional and descriptive survey design. The design was chosen by the researcher because it would enable them to collect and describe a variety of data through survey research. Furthermore, the study would use qualitative information to support quantitative information gathered through surveys.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

As of the time this research was done, the district had 60 elementary schools, according to information gathered from the Gida Ayana district education office. Consequently, the researcher used the lottery approach to select the study's sample, listing each of the district's sixty primary schools' names on an equal-sized sheet of paper. To ensure that every primary school in the district had an equal chance of being chosen as a sample, the primary schools in the district were chosen at random. Assuming that sufficient data could be obtained from the 18 primary schools in the district, 18 of the 60 schools in the district were chosen at random to be primary schools. The investigator reasoned that 30% of the district's total primary schools, or the sampled schools, adequately represented the population. Given Kotrlik and Higgins (2001), assumption that 10% to 20% of sample responses can accurately represent the population, this is acceptable.

The researcher first identified and defined the population in order to obtain a sample O class from the chosen primary schools. Next, in order to ascertain the proper sample size, the researcher identified the subgroups (strata) for whom the researcher wishes to ensure appropriate and equal representation. Therefore, the researcher employed the sampling that was available to administrators in order to offer subgroups—primary schools—equal odds. Out of all 60 primary schools in the district, these 18 primary schools with O-class were chosen specifically for observation.

Second, using the availability sampling approach, the relevant district education office expert in O-class education was chosen from the district (i.e., the person in charge of O-class education at the district level) and interviewed. Thirdly, using the availability sampling method, 18 school principals from the chosen main preschool were included as respondents. Fourth, a focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with the PTA and four cluster supervisors, representing 24 percent of

their respective populations, were selected at random as respondents.

Data collection instruments

This study used a descriptive research approach, and questionnaires, observations, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were used to gather data.

Methods of data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods were used in this investigation. The information gathered via the survey was displayed using percentages and frequency distributions. Additionally, to examine the variations and parallels amongst schools, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 application programme was utilised. Conversely, information gathered from focus groups, interviews, document analysis, and observation was arranged, refined, arranged into tables, and summarised narratively. Creswell (2014) asserts that in order to further improve and enrich the information gathered, the qualitative and quantitative data would merge.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Professional Competency and Adequacy of Teachers in the O-Class

Training of teachers

With regard to the opportunity for pre-service and in-service training of teachers, respondent teachers were administered various questions

Table 1

Teacher's Training

No.	Items	Response	f	%
1	Have you been trained in O class education?	Yes	18	11.7
		No	136	88.3
		Total	154	100
2	If your response for question number 1 is "Yes", how long have you been trained?	3 months		
		6 months		
		10 months	18	11.7
		Total		
3	Do you believe that the course you took is adequate to your all round task in the preschool?	Yes	18	11.7
		No		
		Total	18	11.7
4	Do you frequently get in-service training or refreshment?	Yes		
		No	18	11.7
		Total	18	
5	If your answer for Q 4 is yes for how many days did you get trainings?	<10 days		
		10-20 days		
		20-30 days		
		Total		

As indicated in Table 1, most of the respondents, 136 (88.3%), did not get pre-service training for O-class education. The remaining few respondents—18 (11.7%)—had the training. This reveals that most of the teachers in the studied primary school O-classes were not trained as teachers in O-class education. Further, to identify the adequacy of the training for those few respondents who took it, the duration of the training was asked.

Teachers who responded that they got pre-service training indicated the duration of their training period was ten months. As indicated in Table 1, out of the 18 teachers who got training for ten months, which is the proper duration of training, Though almost all of the trained teachers were not assigned to teach in O-classes due to a shortage of teachers in the primary schools studied,.

Moreover, many of the respondents commented that the importance of short-term training, such as three or six months of training, was to equip them with professional knowledge, skills, attitudes, and expertise that permit them to be proficient and successful in the mission of O-class education instead of confusing the children. Additionally, as to the interviewed expert, the picture of the insufficiency of teacher training was more complicated by the present over-all shortage of teachers and increasing demand for services for young children. The district education expert said concerning the short-term trainings, "I took short-term training conducted by the Oromia Education Bureau in Nekemte College of Education on the guideline of O-class education, but I could not train the primary school O-class teachers due to a shortage of finance and logistics." The researcher confirmed that the practices of O-class education are at a nominal level.

Regarding teacher preparation, the Education and Training Policy of 1994's Article 3.4 and Sub article 3.4.5 mandate that teachers complete pre-service and in-service training to obtain the teaching credentials and media competence required for instruction, beginning in kindergarten and continuing through higher education (TGE, 1994).

Education experts have emphasised in recent years how vital it is to assign O-class students to qualified teachers and how sufficient general and professional education is a requirement. Because the availability of qualified teachers with O-class education training is a major factor in determining the quality of O-class programs, The success of a programme is contingent upon the instructors who carry it out, their level of interest in the issues facing students, and the solutions they come up with. Furthermore, early childhood educators are the best people to give kids the support they need to develop physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Miller et al., 2015; Woodsfield, 2004). Therefore, a dedication to providing pre-service teachers with fundamental information, attitudes, abilities, and expertise is a sign of effective practice in an O classroom. Therefore, it stands to reason that teachers in the early grades should be well qualified. It goes without saying that teachers must possess a strong educational background both personally and professionally to fulfil their demanding duties, which call for a high standard of competence in a variety of areas.

In contrast, in the studied O classes, although there is a regionally accepted

minimum professional requirement for O class teachers, it was found that the majority of the teachers had either no training or trained for a short duration. This indicates that teachers were not better trained, equipped, and experienced enough to provide adequate services for O-class children. Therefore, based on the results, it could be said that the training of teachers in most of the O classes was inadequate. This might limit the competence of teachers to carry out a sound programme of O class education, which in turn might affect the whole development of children in the studied O classes.

Regarding the adequacy of the courses teachers attended during pre-service training, respondent teachers who took pre-service training were asked to judge the adequacy of the courses. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondent teachers, 18 (11.7%), replied that the courses they had taken during their training were adequate for all-round tasks in the O classes. This indicates the inadequacy of courses attended by teachers for the all-round task of O-class education.

Besides, the respondents were asked to support their choice with justifications. Accordingly, many respondents commented that the allotted time for the courses was short due to a lack of practical experience during training and a lack of depth in the courses offered. As a result, they found it difficult to successfully accomplish their duties and responsibilities in the O classes. As one of the respondents expressed, she had a certificate in preschool education teaching. "Most of the subject contents I have learned were more theoretical and direct translations of foreign curriculum, which do not coincide with the real context of culture and status in society." The researcher observed that during the field trip in the study primary schools, the teachers were forced to teach literacy and numeracy orally.

With respect to teachers' education, many evidences witness that teachers of young children need to be well-versed in all facets of human development as it affects their early life experiences. The experiences should cover the following topics: the nature of teaching and learning; curriculum and methods; handling of interpersonal and intergroup relations with children, patents, specialists, and colleagues; human growth and development with a major emphasis on the early years of life; and understanding of the philosophical, psychological, and sociological foundations of early childhood education. Along with having thorough planning, assessment, and record-keeping skills, the teacher should also know how to prepare and use resources and equipment and arrange the classroom and outdoor spaces with care (Ahmad, 2014; Miller et al., 2015).

It is definitely desirable that O-class teachers be well-oriented academically and professionally towards educating O-class children. The practical experiences, the depth and breadth of courses, and the time available were all inadequate to develop the valuable skills and expertise necessary for the profession. Therefore, based on the responses, it would be possible to deduce that the courses teachers had during their training were inadequate to build the firm theoretical and practical foundations required in O-class education. This might limit the competencies of teachers to cope with the complexities of

their careers and to tackle their duties and responsibilities in the best possible way in the O classes studied.

Concerning the in-service training, teacher respondents were asked to identify the availability of the in-service training and refreshment courses. Accordingly, all 154 respondents (100%) declared the absence of an opportunity for in-service training. One of the respondents stated, "At the beginning, I competed for teaching preschool education, but in-service training in the summer programme led me to join the diploma programme, which is quite different from its objective in Afan Oromo for grades 1 to 4, and now I am teaching Afan Oromo grade 3." On account of this fact, in most of the sampled primary schools, the assigned O-class teachers were those who had personnel problems and medical boards, which might be a risk to the health of the children.

Moreover, the interviewed district education expert witnessed the shortage of in-service training for teachers, either by a sponsoring body or a government body. According to the words of these interviewees, this circumstance has led to low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy in their line of work. Regarding this matter, numerous pieces of evidence demonstrate that in-service training is a crucial component of the ongoing efforts to improve O-class education. Teachers, both certified and unqualified, must have access to current material so they are always aware of the requirements that must be met. Teachers must periodically take refresher courses, workshops, seminars, and conferences to stay up-to-date on current trends and how they apply to understanding children and developing curricula. It is important to consider in-service training as more than just a means of updating teachers while training will provide more than that. It will enable educators to examine themselves critically (Ababa, 2014).

With regard to in-service training for Ethiopian preschool teachers, it is explained in ESDP V that it is to provide orientation and at least 30 days of in-service training annually to pre-primary teachers and facilitators to teach child readiness programmes within O-class, kindergarten, or child-to-child programmes (MoE, 2015).

Number of students in classrooms

The number of students in a classroom can influence the implementation of the curriculum in O-class. With regard to this issue, respondent teachers were supplied with questions related to it. The result is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Students in the Classrooms

No.	Items	Responses	F	%
1	Is the number of children in your small to assist each according to his/her ability? Classroom enough	Yes	0	0.00%
		No	154	100%
		Total	154	100%

As indicated in Table 2, respondent teachers were asked to judge whether the number of children in the classroom is small enough to provide assistance to each child according to his or her abilities, interests, and maturity level. Therefore, all of the respondents, 154 (100%), judged that the number of students was not small enough to provide individual help for each child. The results revealed that in all of the studied O-classes, the group size was not small enough to provide individual help in each class per teacher available.

Additionally, the interviewed district education expert explained that adequate teachers were not assigned in most O-class schools in their respective districts. The interviewee said that "most of the O-classes do not have teachers; primary school teachers voluntarily facilitate the condition when they are free; when teachers are occupied, children simply ran here and there the whole day."

Regarding classroom size, a number of studies demonstrate that O-class education programmes are more effective when there are fewer students in the class and enough teachers to fully respond to each child. A high teacher-to-child ratio may make it impossible for the instructor to provide each student with the time and attention they require. While the ideal group size and teacher-to-child ratio may change depending on the age range of the students, it is generally better for the five and six-year-olds to have no more than twenty students in each group and significantly fewer for the three and four-year-olds. In addition, the kids should always be under the supervision of two teachers at the very least (Chowdhury and Choudhury, 2002; Fitzgerald, 2004). Comparably, the standard setting that the area has chosen (MoE, 2003 E.C.) suggests that a group of forty children be taught by one teacher and one assistant teacher, both of whom should have received training in preschool education.

On the contrary, in most of the O-class centres studied, teachers were inadequate. There was no assistance from the teachers assigned. One teacher was assigned to one group, whose average group size ranges from 33 to 50. However, the fact remains that, on the one hand, the number of children guided by one teacher has much to do to optimise children's learning. Thus, in a small group, a teacher can be sure of their security and self-importance and keep them in sympathy. On the other hand, teachers need above all to learn to accept themselves as teachers of young children, and they can be free to accept children.

Depending on the results, it would be possible to infer that there was a critical shortage of teachers for the group of children attending the O-classes. Besides, many of the teachers lacked a strong sense of responsibility, commitments, and a high personal investment of energy to work with the group of children in a constructive and creative manner. The shortage plus the attitudes of O-class teachers might limit children's learning opportunities, engagement in tasks, social interactions, safety, and the achievement of the intended objectives of education in the studied O-classes. Research findings also revealed that the existing teachers in preschools were inadequate. Additionally, according to these studies, assistant teachers were not available in most

of the preschools (Mulugeta, 2015; Temesgen, 2006).

Professional competence of teachers with respect to the five dimensions

With regard to the professional competence of teachers, the respondents were asked to indicate the level of teaching competency, management competency, communication competency, professional development competency, and protection and care of children competency of teachers by rating them under the five dimensions. The results are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3

Teachers' Competence

Items	Very high		High		Medium		Low		Very low	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Teaching competency			124	80.5	30	19.5				
Management competency			16	10.4	113	73.4	25	16.2		
Communication	5	3.2	129	83.8	20	13				
Professional development competency			147	95.5	7	4.5				
Protection and care of children competency			150	97.4	4	2.6				

As indicated in Table 3, a large number of respondents, 124 (80.5%), judged the teaching competency of teachers as high. Some respondents, 30 (19.5%), responded to the teaching competency of teachers as medium. Based on the responses obtained, the teaching competency of teachers in most preschools was high.

The other issue displayed in Table 3 is the management competency of teachers. In this regard, a large number of the respondents, 113 (73.4%), responded that the management competency of teachers was medium. Some respondents, 16 (10.4%), judged the teaching competency of teachers as high, and 25 (16.2%) said the teaching competency of teachers was low. Based on the responses obtained, the management competency of teachers in most preschools was medium.

Moreover, as revealed in Table 3, a large number of the respondents, 129 (83.8%), responded that the communication competency of teachers was high. Some respondents (20%) judged the communication competency of teachers as medium. Only a small number of respondents (5.2%) said the communication competency of teachers was very high. Based on the responses obtained, the communication competency of teachers in most preschools was high. Furthermore, regarding the professional development competency of teachers, 147 (95.7%) of the respondents judged it as high. A small number of respondents (4.5%) judged the teaching competency of teachers to be medium. Based

on the responses obtained, the professional development competency of teachers in most preschools was medium.

Last but not least, concerning the protection and care of children, a large amount of the respondents, 150 (97.4%), said that the teachers' competency in this regard was very high, and 4 respondents (2.6%) judged it as high.

To obtain additional evidence, a district education office expert was interviewed. . The expert confirmed that teachers' protection and care of children's competency is better than that of the other four dimensions of teachers' competency. Again, the interviewee underlined that if inputs like training and refreshment courses are facilitated, teachers will be best in these dimensions of competencies. The researcher confirmed that almost all of the assigned O class teachers were female and that they showed maternal care for the children.

Curriculum implementation in preschool education

Curriculum implementation refers to how the planned or officially designed course of study is translated by the teacher into syllabuses, schemes of work, and lessons to be delivered to students. To identify the extent of curriculum implementation in the studied elementary schools of O class, various relevant questions such as relevance, objectives, and content relation of the curriculum were administered to the respondents.

Table 4

Teachers' response on objectives and contents of preschool curriculum

No	Items	Response	F	%
1	The relevance of the content of the curriculum to prepare children for learning ahead is:	Low	133	86.4
		Medium	21	13.6
		High		
2	Which of the following is the main objective of the preschool curriculum?	Social development	56	36.4
		Intellectual	50	32.5
		Physical development	20	13
		Emotional development	28	18.1
3	The degree to which the content of the curriculum is related to the realities of the children's environment is:	Low	61	39.6
		Medium	93	60.4
		High		

As depicted in Table 4, most of the respondents perceived the relevance of the contents of the curriculum to prepare children for learning ahead as low. As a result, a large percentage of respondents, 133 (86.4%), said the relevance was low. Only a small number

of respondents, 21 (13.3%), said the relevance was medium. Based on the responses obtained, the relevance of the contents to prepare children for learning ahead in most preschools was low.

The district education office expert was interviewed, and they held the same view as additional information. They responded that "regional education did not provide any curriculum to all classes in the region, and teachers teach the children based on their experience, which is supplemented with what they have learned from short-term training." Besides, the expert expressed the lack of uniformity and focus of the contents on problems, interests, abilities, and developmental levels of children.

According to studies, the curriculum's material serves as a vehicle for stimulating a child's natural tendencies and providing focused guidance towards activities that would best prepare the learner for living an efficient life. For the child, relevant content has meaning. It enhances one's current interests while opening doors to new ones. It meets the educational needs of kids by offering them enriching learning opportunities that improve their overall development. It is current, suitable for all ages, meaningful, beneficial to culture, and ecologically friendly. Additionally, it gives educators the ability to direct students' learning within an organic framework of curiosity and deliberate participation (Miller & McDowelle, 1993; New Jersey, 2014).

Likewise, in Oromia, the standard setting adopted (MoE, 2003) recommends the contents of the curriculum that respond well to children's age, abilities, and problems. All activities and experiences need to be appropriate to the children's level of development and abilities.

The lack of relevance in the contents of the curriculum in the studied primary schools, the O class, might be viewed first from its static nature. The curriculum should not be static. Relevant contents change continually with the progress of society and the dynamic nature of time. It meets the emerging needs of both learners and society. Second, it also lacks a sound basis to consider the problems, interests, abilities, and developmental level of the children so that the intended learning outcomes are not achieved. If the content is irrelevant or inappropriate, it will be difficult to expect the attainment of the objectives intended. Therefore, based on the responses obtained, it would be possible to conclude that the relevance of the contents to meet the growing needs of children so that they get prepared for learning ahead was found to be low in the studied primary schools in O class.

Respondents were given the opportunity to choose one or more curriculum objectives (social, intellectual, physical, and emotional development) from the list of possibilities. For this reason, Table 4 shows that the majority of respondents (56, or 36.4%) chose social development, which was followed by intellectual development (50, or 32.5%) and physical development (28, or 18.1%). Only 20 (13%) of the respondents had emotional development. This demonstrates that, in the majority of O-class elementary schools, a child's physical and emotional development received less attention than their academic and social development.

Conversely, there's a growing awareness that preschool education provides children with experiences that are both physical and emotional and that they are crucial to their development. We will need to invest much more money in correcting our mistakes if children are not instilled with the physical and emotional dispositions that they desire from a young age. The goal of a well-designed preschool curriculum is the development of competent, well-balanced personalities. Youngsters whose development has been balanced in all areas will endeavour to acquire the knowledge required to lead fulfilling lives (Butler, 2001; New Jersey, 2014; Tassoni, 2002).

According to the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994), preschool instruction would prioritise a child's whole development as a means of preparing them for formal education. The goals of kindergarten education in the area are to promote children's performance in the primary grades and their whole development, as stated in the policy standard that Oromia established in 2003 (MoE, 2003). The relevance of preschool programmes, which address the needs of the whole child, becomes clear when one recognises the relationships and interdependencies between a child's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. It's also necessary to establish positive social attitudes and behaviours, engage in healthy group activities, make adjustments, and are considerate of the rights and privileges of others. Early on, it's important to help the youngster express, comprehend, and accept his feelings in order to further instill emotional maturity.

Thus, it would be fair to conclude from the data that the curriculum's objectives do not place enough emphasis on the physical and emotional development of young students. Children's personalities may not grow harmoniously in the examined elementary schools in O class if there is an imbalance in the way that the physical and emotional needs of the students are addressed. While there is much dispute over the nature of balance, many early childhood educators rightly emphasise the holistic aspect of young children's development.

The degree to which the preschool curriculum's contents relate to the children's surroundings is the other issue that Table 4 makes clear. The majority of respondents (93, or 60.4%) said in this section how much the contents were based on the actual circumstances of children's environments as a medium. Only 61 respondents, or 39.6%, indicated low. Furthermore, a sizable portion of respondents expressed disapproval of the use of the absence of a syllabus as proof of the absence of content based on the actual environments of children.

In this regard, numerous pieces of evidence have demonstrated that a child's growth is the culmination of his or her responses to the environment in which they live. The O class experiences should be based on the kid's environment to become members of society, and the school for children becomes a community in order to help the child make a full transition in life. Since they are tangible and real to youngsters, materials chosen from their surroundings are probably more relevant to their lives (New Jersey, 2014; Tassoni, 2002).

However, in the studied primary schools of preschools, the lack of exposure to the realities of children's surroundings and everyday experiences would seriously impair children's ability, initiative, and chances to deal with difficulties in their individual and community, as well as the challenges of living ahead of them. Therefore, it could be concluded from the responses that the degree to which the contents were deemed to be based on the realities of children's environments to prepare them for life after childhood.

The suitability of the physical environment of O-class centres

So as to identify the adequacy of classroom and outdoor spaces, materials, and equipment, as well as its organisation in preschools, respondents were requested to judge the adequacy. Accordingly, they were given related items with options from which to judge (adequate, inadequate, or not existing). Thus, the results of the response are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Classroom Spaces, Materials and its organization

S.No	Items	Respondents			
		Not Adequate No	%	Not exist No	%
1	Space provided per child	137	89	17	11
2	Organization of activity centers	19	12.3	135	87.7
3	Supply of materials in the centers	21	13.6	133	86.4
4	Arrangement of materials	11	7	143	93
5	Availability of child sized tables	5	3.2	149	96.8
6	Availability of child sized chairs	3	1.9	151	98.1
7	Availability of child sized benches	1	0.6	153	99.4

The first item in Table 5 shows the amount of classroom space allotted to each child. The majority of respondents, or 137 people, or 89%, said that the amount of classroom space allotted for each child was insufficient. 17 responders, or 11% of the total, replied that they did not exist. This demonstrates how most preschools do not provide enough space in the classroom for each child. Besides, as observed by the researcher, the problem of the classroom space was different as to its location. In most of the O-class schools, the class room space provided to the children is worse (33–50) on average, and the child is forced to sit on the floor or in a very dirty and dusty class, not only in rural areas but also in towns.

According to a number of studies on classroom space, children who are in crowded classrooms experience constant discomfort and a lack of choice in all of their activities. It impedes freedom of movement and the

efficient use of time and resources. Young children should have access to and guidance from learning centres and tools that encourage creating, experimenting, and teamwork with peers in their school. Enough room promotes social connection between students and teachers, increases learning possibilities, eases tensions, and lessens social hostility (Garrick, 2004). Furthermore, according to the regional norm (MoE, 2003), a classroom should have 63 square metres for forty (40) students and 1.55 square metres for each student. On the contrary, the little amount of space allotted to each kid in the O-classes of the preschools under study led to crowded classrooms, either as a result of having more students in each class than is typical or because the classrooms were too small to fit all the students.

As a result, it is clear that the classroom environment in which teachers and students work has a significant impact on the programme's goals. According to the responses received, the majority of the preschools under investigation were also unable to provide a suitable classroom setting for the children enrolled. This may prevent kids from participating fully in assignments and create conflict that prevents both teachers and kids from getting the job done well. This has an impact on how well the programme's objectives are met in the preschools under study.

The other issue that has been addressed in Table 5 is the organisation of activity centres in the classrooms. Regarding this, it is revealed that the great majority of respondents, 135 (87.7%), judged the organisation of activity centres to not exist. The rest of the respondents, 19 (12.3%), judged it as not adequate. In the same manner, the activity centres in a considerable number of preschool centres did not exist at all. This reveals that the organisation of activity centres in all of the O-class was nonexistent in a considerable number of preschool centres.

Related to the organisation of the activity centres, Table 5 also depicts the inadequacies of the supply materials in the centres; the majority of the respondents, 133 (86.4%), judged the supply to not exist. Only a small number of respondents, 21 (13.6%), were judged as not adequate. This indicates the non-existence of a supply of materials in all of the activity centres in the preschools.

In this case, the investigator additionally observed that a majority of the preschools lacked clearly defined activity centers. There was a dearth of materials of all kinds, including manipulative, literary, artistic, creative, and natural things. The only resources on hand were a small number of charts and mounted photos that could be hung up or pinned on the wall. There was little to no practice of gathering readily accessible natural objects from the surrounding area. An expert from the district education office was also interviewed, and she responded to questions about the lack of funding for the necessary supplies as well as the instructors' lack of enthusiasm and organisational skills.

It is evident that activity centres are crucial components of classrooms for young children. For young children, it offers a range of experiences and educational opportunities. The centres provide a space to explore experiment, learn, solve issues, and use a variety of tools and materials. They are also

the origin of a great deal of imaginative play. Particular curricular subjects must be connected to specific classroom areas (Herman & Kerrie, 2010).

Likewise, different activity centers for science, social science, language, math, music, art, and craft are recommended by the regional standard (MoE, 2003). It is anticipated that these centres will be furnished with an extensive array of indoor playthings, reading materials, construction blocks, artwork, music, and natural artefacts that can offer numerous chances for kids to participate actively in their education.

With no doubt, the setup of activity centres and the provision of sufficient supplies and equipment within the centres play a critical role in deciding how effective the preschool curriculum is. It offers many chances for kids to learn how to work with materials, explore and satisfy their creative and exploratory inclinations, and find and try out learning opportunities that help the programme achieve its goals. In fact, using activity centres in the classroom with well-chosen resources helps students achieve the programme's goals. Conversely, a lack of it, as in the preschools under study, can definitely impede or delay achieving the goals as advised.

Based on the findings, it is reasonable to assume that all preschools lack the necessary supplies and equipment, as well as an organised system for running activity centers. Given this, it is sad that most kids do not have many opportunities for hands-on learning, experimentation, exploration, and the use of multisensory approaches. It also restricts the roles that teachers and students can play, makes it more difficult to apply suitable teaching and evaluation strategies, and makes it more difficult to carry out the curriculum as intended.

Concerning the orderly arrangements of the available materials and equipment in the classroom, as shown in Table 5, most respondents, 143 (93%), judged the arrangement to not exist whereas the remaining 11 respondents (7%) judged it as not adequate. This shows that the available materials and equipment in all of the preschool classrooms studied were not arranged properly.

It was also observed by the researcher that the scarcely available literary materials and equipment were hardly arranged by types of activity, concepts, or sequentially. These were scattered here and there at various places in the classroom. Chairs, benches, and tables were not arranged in rows, which resulted in problems for free movement.

In addition to the problems of inadequacy of classroom materials and equipment observed, all of the studied preschools have been found to lack arrangements for the available materials. The limited available materials and equipment were hardly visible and unreachable to children for use and return unaided. This seems unhelpful, for children need easy access to materials and to choose and use them. Therefore, based on the responses obtained, it could be possible to realise that lack of arrangement of materials and inadequacy of the materials seem to have a negative influence on children’s attendance in the studied preschools.

Another issue worth considering in classroom organisation that is treated in Table 5 is the availability of child-sized tables in the

classrooms of preschools. Hence, a large number of respondents, 149 (96.8%), replied that availability does not exist. The remaining 5 respondents (3.2%) said the availability was not adequate. Furthermore, Table 4 portrays the availability of child-sized chairs. Accordingly, the majority of the respondents, 151 (98.1%), replied that the availability of child-sized chairs does not exist. The remaining three respondents (1.9%) said the availability was not adequate.

Last but not least, Table 5 illustrates the availability of child benches. Hence, nearly dare to say all of 153 (99.4%); respondents said a child-sized bench did not exist. The remaining respondents (0.6%) were inadequate. Moreover, it was observed by the researcher that in all of the O-class, no single bench was available. Besides, the absence of available benches was not appropriate in relation to the developmental level of children and was not comfortable for use.

Preschoolers should have access to tables, chairs, benches, and shelves that are the right height and weight, according to numerous studies. In order to encourage active participation from the students in the classroom, equipment should be sized according to the size of the children. The youngster should be able to sit in a relaxed and comfortable position on the seats or benches. Children should be able to work across from one another at tables so that they can converse and appreciate each other's efforts. Children can help themselves by using the materials on child-sized shelves (Herman & Kerrie, 2010; MoE, 2003 E.C.; NAEYC, 2008).

It is safe to state that providing for the needs of young children in preschools necessitates the use of certain equipment types that are vital to the operation of the program. The equipment must be adequate and appropriate for the age group of children using it. As in all the preschools under study, the absence of equipment frequently results in discomfort and exhaustion, which encourages kids to become disengaged from and less focused on their own education. Additionally, it would make room for misbehaviour and high dropout rates. Therefore, it would be feasible to say that not all preschools had benches, tables, and chairs that were suitable for children to sit at, based on the replies that were received. The absence of materials could make it more difficult for these preschools to meet the specified educational goals.

Regarding the playground and outdoor area, Table 6 shows that 139 respondents, or 90.3%, felt that they did not exist, while the remaining 15 respondents, or 9.7%, thought that the space was adequate. Regarding the playground's safety, the majority of respondents—140, or 90.9%—judged that it did not exist, while the remaining respondents—14, or 9.1%—judged that it was insufficient. To witness the existing situation in the schools, the researcher conducted an observation of the sampled preschools. As observed by the researcher, in all preschools, the available outdoor space was very limited. The safety conditions were also poor for the earsplitting sound of machines; broken parts; stones, end edges, and other unnecessary materials were found occupying here and there on the ground. Furthermore, the district education office expert was interviewed and explained that the reason for absences of

outdoor space was due to a lack of cooperation from the concerned body to provide them, and the problem of safety conditions was due to a lack of attention from the sponsoring body.

Numerous studies demonstrate the multitude of play opportunities that may be found in outdoor spaces and playgrounds. Children who play outside are more likely to share tools and ideas, be more creative, have better language and communication skills, and talk about their experiences in life. Playgrounds that are suitable and safe provide kids with more chances to run, jump, climb, roll, and swing—activities that support their physical, mental, and intellectual growth. On the other hand, an overcrowded, unsafe environment restricts learning possibilities, causes conflict and injuries, and encourages social hostility (Garrick, 2004; NAEYC, 2008). Likewise, the standard adopted in Oromia (MoE, 2003) indicates play as the main medium of educating preschool children and recommends adequate and safe areas to enhance the development of children in kindergarten.

Table 6

Outdoor Spaces, Materials and Its Organization

S.No	Items	Respondents			
		Not Adequate No	%	Not exist No	%
1	Outdoor space and play ground	15	9.7	139	90.3
2	Safety condition	14	9.1	140	90.9
3	Supply of play materials	7	4.5	147	95.5
4	Selection of play materials	12	7.8	142	92.2
5	Arrangement of equipment	21	13.6	133	86.4
6	Durability of the equipment	11	7.1	143	92.9

It is clear that playgrounds and outdoor areas, along with their safety, have been found to be highly effective in promoting children's play and development. Children's learning possibilities can be greatly impacted by the variety and attributes provided. Perfect tools and supplies are useless without a suitable playground, and if kids don't feel comfortable enough to explore and roam around without fear, Therefore, there should be lots of open space and playgrounds where kids can feel safe and secure, both physically and mentally. Children must, therefore, be kept safe from harm.

In light of this, children's abilities to examine and explore their surroundings, learn how to live with peers, and freely engage with materials and equipment are limited in all of the investigated O- classrooms due to a lack of suitable outside space and playgrounds, as well as concerns about safety. Hence, it is conceivable to conclude from the comments received that not all of the preschools under study have an outdoor area or playground, nor

is there evidence of their safety. Preschool education programmes primary objectives of allowing children to play, exercise, develop physical abilities, and acquire competence and self-confidence would all be compromised by this.

Similarly, Table 6 displays the assortment of outside playthings and apparatuses. As a result, 142 (92.2%) of the respondents, or the majority, thought that there was no selection of outdoor play materials and equipment, while 12 (7.8%) thought it was insufficient. In all situations, the answers showed that none of the preschool facilities under study had any kind of supply or variety of outside playthings or equipment.

In the same instance, the researcher's actual observations supported the dearth of play equipment in each preschool centre as well as its disappearance. The equipment choice was made in a comparable circumstance. There was not a single piece of minimally necessary equipment in every school. In schools where limited equipment was assumed to exist, equipment for minimum essentials like tricycles, crawling tunnels, and climbing frames did not totally exist. The only ones available in some cases were balance, swinging, merry-go-round, and slides, one from each kind to be used by all children attending school. Besides, the limited available equipment lacks suitability to be used by children due to their size in relation to their maturity level. In addition, the interviewed district education office admitted the acute shortage of outdoor play equipment but raised financial constraints as a factor and the unavailability of equipment in the area for selection to be made while buying.

It is evident that the equipment and materials used in O classes have a significant influence on children's learning. Children have greater opportunity for both solo and group play when they have access to appropriate and well-chosen materials and equipment. Children in kindergarten benefit greatly from play in their overall development. Therefore, it is important to give kids playthings and equipment that are appropriate in size and selection. The decision should be based on the children's requirements, interests, and maturity level. Given that the child serves as the standard by which all educational tools and resources are evaluated (NAEYC, 2008).

Similarly, the standard setting adopted for the organisation of outdoor space and play equipment in the region (MoE, 2003) outlines the minimum essential equipment in the kindergarten. These include swinging, merry-go-round, sliding, balance, sandboxes, crawling tunnels, climbing frames, balls, skipping ropes, toys, tricycles, small car tyres, etc. Thus, preschools are expected to be equipped with at least these minimum essentials.

On the contrary, in the studied preschools, the supply and selection of outdoor materials and equipment were found to be nonexistent in most of the schools, and in schools where limited equipment was realised, there was an acute inadequacy of the materials. Besides, there was a lack of intensive effort and a creative way of making available play materials and equipment. Equipment like balance, slide, climbing frame, etc. may seem expensive, but relatively cheap things like balls, small car tyres, skipping ropes, sandboxes, and others easily available either at

low cost or from a natural environment were not provided. In addition, the scarcely available ones were not conducive to being used by children due to their size.

It is generally feasible to draw the conclusion that the availability and choice of outdoor playthings and equipment in the preschools under study were insufficient or inappropriate in light of the feedback that was received. Children may thus find themselves in depressing circumstances where their play interests, both individual and group, are never satisfied. Children's chances to acquire a variety of social skills, physical coordination, mental discipline, and competence may be negatively impacted by this.

With respect to how the available outdoor play items and equipment are arranged, Table 5 shows that 133 respondents (86.4%) felt that the arrangement does not exist, while 21 respondents (13.6%) felt that it is insufficient. Similarly, Table 6 reveals that 143 (92.9%) of the respondents, or the majority, felt that the available outdoor play materials and equipment lacked durability. On the other hand, 11 other respondents, or 7.1%, thought it was insufficient.

The results showed that in all of the preschools under study, the outside play equipment's durability and organisation were both deficient. The researcher also noticed that the limited number of outdoor playthings and accessories were arranged in a way that precluded both solo and group play. The equipment's insufficient durability was also shown to be a result of its construction from incredibly delicate materials like rope and wood.

Play can be stimulated by the design and longevity of outdoor playthings and equipment. Children can use anything fearlessly for extended periods of time if it is durable. Proper placement of the equipment allows kids to play without getting in the way of other play groups. Furthermore, appropriate planning can enable the teacher to provide assistance when needed and to supervise students effectively. As a result, it may be able to be understood from the data that all of the O classes under study had insufficient outdoor play equipment and materials in terms of both durability and layout.

Factors affecting the O class education

In order to examine factors that affect preschool education, the researcher extracted various open-ended questions that had been raised across the four big variables of this research. Additionally, results from open-ended questions, interviews, observation, and the FGD were used as sources of data. Therefore, the results of the analysis are presented under separate sub-titles depending on the variables.

A. Preschool teachers' professional competency and adequacy

The results extracted from the open-ended questions and the interview show that a lack of professional competency and a shortage of teachers were among various factors that have an effect on preschool education. More specifically, as described in the open-ended questionnaires, factors related to teachers include:

1. Short training duration for teachers, along with a shortage of competent and experienced educators.

2. Teachers do not receive adequate on-the-job training in child development, care, and education.
3. O-class instructors and other staff lack access to an organised teacher training program.

Additionally, the result of the interview conducted with the expert also supports the presence of factors that influence preschools. The participant in the interview emphasised that, "according to my district, preschool education is obscured with various problems regarding teachers' competency and their adequacy; in the first step, the employed teachers are not adequate in relation to the number of children in schools." He added that "those who are assigned to the schools do not get training and refreshment courses so as to be equipped with the necessary skills and competence. As a result, most of them are not morally in a good position to discharge their duties."

Concerning this issue, studies show that the effectiveness of the programme is dependent on the instructors who carry it out, their interest in the issues facing kids, and the solutions they come up with. Additionally, early childhood educators are best suited to give kids the tools they need to develop academically, socially, emotionally, and physically (Miller et al., 2015; Woodsfield, 2004). Furthermore, Mulugeta's (2015) recent study found that the majority of preschool teachers in use today are either unqualified or have very little training.

B. Curriculum implementation in preschools

With regard to factors related to the curriculum of preschools, two major problems were emphasised in the open-ended response of the questionnaire. These were:

1. Not all preschools have access to government-prepared textbooks, teacher's guides, syllabuses, policy documents, manuals, and national legal directives.
2. Access, equity, quality, standardisation, and programme implementation inconsistencies posed significant obstacles in preschools.

Moreover, according to the interview results, almost all the district education experts interviewed claimed a shortage of curriculum materials. And he emphasised that "regional education did not provide any curriculum to all classes in the region, and teachers teach the children based on their experience, which is supplemented with what they have learned from short-term training." Finally, the participant said that "the lack of preschool curriculum in the public school has created children not to be competent and acquire the minimum requirements for a child in the preschool to accomplish."

Recent research conducted by Mulugeta (2015) also revealed that there is a lack of uniformity in the curriculum of pre-school education that pre-school centres follow. According to his findings, Kebele and public-owned preschools use the curriculum of the Ministry of Education, whereas private preschools do not.

C. The physical environment of preschools

The physical environment of preschools greatly influences the effectiveness of schools,

particularly preschools where younger children are assumed to be physically and mentally protected and nurtured. The results compiled from open-ended questionnaires show the existence of a lot of problems in most of the preschools related to the physical environment. Some of them, which were repeatedly written in the response, include:

- Absence of a suitable structure or school established for O class,
- Lack of appropriate and adequate indoor and outdoor space,
- Absence of suitable and sufficient outside play equipment, a dining area, restrooms, water, a first aid station, and a kit.

During the focus group discussion, the participants gave emphasis to the shortage of outdoor games and the inadequacy of play grounds. One participant highlighted that "our school compound is not conducive to O-class education; it was initially built to serve as a primary school." The other participant added that, "Because of the inadequacy of playing ground space in our preschool compound, supply of playing material will not be possible unless we move the preschool compound that is shared with the primary school in the future."

In this line, studies have shown that the physical setting of schools has a significant influence on instruction and learning. It should foster socialisation and language development in addition to cognitive development and the development of other academic abilities. Children must have daily access to a variety of challenging and successful hands-on materials in order to achieve these goals, and every day in centres, time should be set aside for child-led activities. Play in centres helps youngsters absorb academic knowledge into their brain structures and dramatically enhances language and social development (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

D. Community participation in preschools

According to the results extracted from open-ended questionnaires, respondents stated there were various factors influencing preschool. Some of them, which were stated in almost all of the questionnaires, are:

- Parents are unaware of their failure to attend pre-school meetings on a regular basis.
- Parents' refusal to enrol their kids in preschool

Regarding this, the majority of FGD participants mentioned that they needed to take significant action to strengthen their collaboration with preschools. "I did not realise that parents and the community have something to do with the provision of preschool education," one FGD participant commented. "I thought that parents' role was limited in primary school education," he continued. A few people expressed that they do not send their kids, citing low income and their children's safety as the reasons.

In this way, the causes of parents' failure to enroll their kids in preschool were exposed by Küçükturan and Akbaba (2017). Accordingly, the main causes were mistrust of the transportation system, beliefs about the mother's role, concerns about school practices, economic conditions, and the belief that the child was too young. Furthermore, studies on

the community-school relationship attest to the advantages that collaboration between the two will bring to preschools, parents, and kids. Fostering parents' positive attitudes towards the school enables them to assist the institution's efforts in a variety of ways, including as decision-makers, fundraisers, resource persons, and implementers. This is one of the preschools' benefits. Furthermore, the standards that Oromia has adopted also stress the importance of a solid parent-preschool alliance for the child's benefit and the accomplishment of the goals of the region's preschool education (Powell, Son, File, & Juan, 2010; MoE, 2003).

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 aspects. Therefore, based on the major findings of the study, the following conclusions were drawn in Gida Ayana district preschools:

Teachers were inadequate and lacked the professional skills and competencies to implement a sound programme of O-class education. This is because most teachers had either no training or training for a short duration. Besides, most teachers lack experience working with young children in the O class. Further, opportunities for in-service training were very limited. As a result, teachers were neither adequate nor better trained and equipped to meet the regionally accepted minimum professional requirements.

The policy's suggested curriculum implementation for preschools was not followed. Because of this, the curriculum's goals were unable to cover all areas of a child's development. Additionally, the materials are not current or comprehensive enough to organise experiences in a variety of learning areas that will help kids learn ahead of time and get ready for life. Furthermore, insufficient use was made of the proper teaching strategies, resources, evaluation techniques, and documentation systems to ensure the curriculum is implemented correctly.

The classroom and outdoor spaces, materials, and equipment, as well as its organisations, were inadequate. Essential materials and equipment were very scarce. Play materials and equipment were neither adequate nor suitable to meet the requirements. Hence, it could never meet the minimum standards set by the region.

The degree to which parent-school relationships supported kids' learning was lacking. Moreover, the majority of kindergartens did not have a well-established policy for the use of efficient means to collaborate with parents. The preschools consequently fall short of encouraging fruitful parent-child partnerships as advised by the guidelines. Preschool effectiveness was influenced by a number of elements pertaining to the practice and difficulties of O-class education.

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DECLARATION

There is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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