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Original Research

Practices and Challenges of Preprimary Schools: A Comparative Study between Public and Private Schools

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Abstract

Pre-primary education plays a critical role in promoting children's growth as compassionate individuals and ethically responsible members of society. To address this concern, the current study aimed to investigate the practices and challenges of both public and private pre-primary schools. This study employed a mixed-methods research approach with a convergent parallel design. The main sources of data for this study were teachers, school principals, and experts from the local education office. Six public and six private pre-primary schools were selected from three towns in different zones. A questionnaire was used to obtain the necessary information from 87 teachers, including 31 from public schools and 56 from private schools. In addition, six experts from the education office and twelve principals were interviewed. More information was gathered through observations of the classrooms and school grounds. The collected data were examined using narrative statements, descriptive statistics, and visual representations. The study's findings show that, despite the use of similar curriculum materials in public schools, there is no consistent use of curriculum materials between public and private pre-primary schools. Teachers in both public and private preschools lack the necessary education to effectively fulfil their responsibilities. In both types of schools, teacher-dominated instruction and continuous testing (not continuous assessment) were common practices. Insufficient indoor and outdoor teaching and recreational facilities were available in both types of schools, which is a significant issue in public schools. The study further revealed that there were unclear policies and curriculum frameworks, a lack of training for school leaders, inadequate textbooks, a shortage of teaching materials, and insufficient support from the government. Public schools have been observed to provide students with classroom supplies beyond the standard. In general, schools were found to not receive the necessary attention from either the government or the community. Thus, the Oromia Education Bureau is expected to play a leading role in designing the curriculum framework and coordinating with all stakeholders to strengthen pre-primary schools. Wallaga University can make a significant contribution by enhancing the skills and capabilities of teachers and leaders in these schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-primary education plays a pivotal role in imparting fundamental learning skills to children and enhancing their prospects of

achieving success within the educational system. It has been empirically demonstrated that providing education to young children

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holds greater significance compared to educating them at a later stage in life. It is expected that by adequately preparing children for school, there will be a decrease in the occurrence of grade repetition and lower dropout rates during the early years of primary education. Consequently, the implementation of this approach is expected to improve the internal efficiency of primary education (Tamiru, 2013).

A preprimary school requires sufficient human and physical resources to achieve its objectives. Among the diverse range of human resources, the utmost importance is placed on the quality of preschool teachers. Preschool educators play a vital role in creating a conducive and nurturing environment that fosters the comprehensive development of young children, encompassing their mental, emotional, and cognitive growth (Tadesse, 2016). Teachers' qualifications and experience in the field of early childhood education are fundamental requirements for instructing in preschool environments. To establish effective communication with preschool children and promote appropriate behaviour, it is crucial to possess qualifications and expertise in the field of early childhood education and development. This citation highlights the recognition that educators can meet the needs of children by establishing a high-quality preschool environment (Ackerman, 2005). In the realm of preschool education, teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to provide exceptional services through a combination of formal education, prior work experiences with children, and ongoing professional development and training in the fields of child development and education. Pre-primary

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education is crucial because it teaches children fundamental learning skills and increases their chances of success in the educational system. It has been shown that educating young children is more important than educating them later in life. It is expected that if children are better prepared for school, the incidence of repetition and dropout in lower grades of primary school will be reduced, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of primary education (Tamiru, 2013).

Thus, Ethiopian teachers and assistant teachers who are responsible for supporting the learning and development of children in preschool must possess the following qualities: comprehensive knowledge and skills in child development; the ability to work harmoniously with children, parents, and others in the preschool environment; a commitment to empowering the development of young children; a nurturing approach towards all children, regardless of their culture, ethnicity, family beliefs and practices, or any other differences; and being advocates for the rights and protection of the child (MoE et al., 2010). The minimum requirement for preschool teachers is the completion of 10th grade and a nine-month preschool teacher training course.

Programmes for early childhood education are based on physical infrastructure. Children may really feel it. In order to promote children's social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development, it is essential to offer appropriate tools and resources for a variety of activities. Gross motor materials, such as balls, pull toys, and riding toys; manipulative materials, such as building sets, markers, pencils, and scissors; construction materials,

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such as blocks, building sets, and woodworking materials; and self-expression materials are some of the main categories of materials, according to Susanna (2005). To make room for these and other types of equipment, indoor and outdoor preschool facilities are divided into two sections.

Indoor facilities: It is important for children in a classroom to feel a sense of belonging. The surroundings should communicate to young people, "We care about you. According to Fiene (2002), a classroom's interior physical environment has a significant impact on each kid, the class as a whole, and other people. Preschoolers are best served by disciplines including art, science, blocks, reading, dramatic play, sensory materials, music, carpentry, and manipulative toys and games, according to Haile (2010), who referenced *The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*. The classroom atmosphere also includes computers, cookery, sand and water play, libraries, and exploration. To create an optimal learning environment, classrooms should have abundant natural light and adequate ventilation. Additionally, the walls should have a smooth finish that is suitable for the height of the children. The chairs and tables must be child-appropriate, and each child must have his or her own chair. The minimum standard is one table per four children (MoE et al., 2010).

Jackman (2001) lists a number of playthings as outdoor amenities, including sturdy wooden crates and barrels, permanent and detachable climbing structures, railroad ties surrounding the sandbox, tyre swings with drainage holes, slides, inner tubes, a balance beam, tricycles, waggons, other wheeled toys,

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plastic hoops, chimneys, rubber balls of various sizes, a mounted steering wheel, and sturdy cardboard boxes. These characteristics could be used in preschool settings. Outdoor play structures must be maintained, hygienic, and developmentally suitable for children, according to the MoE (2010). This might provide a lot of opportunities for creativity and the development of various skills. According to Fiene (2002), outdoor play equipment, including climbing frames, swings, slides, seesaws, and merry-go-rounds, has to be positioned on a concrete foundation that is the right depth in order to assist the physical development of preschoolers. The availability of outdoor equipment enhances the physical, social, and emotional development of young children as they interact with their peers during play. The guidelines of the Ministry of Education (MoE) advise that the equipment must be well-maintained and age-appropriate. It should also provide abundant opportunities for creativity, social skills, and other developmental skills. Additionally, the equipment should be arranged in an organised manner to ensure a safe play environment for children.

Although it is known that human and physical resources play an indispensable role in children's education in pre-primary schools, the practice of early childhood care and education in Ethiopia is associated with numerous challenges. Teachers are not adequately educated in preschool education, and they do not collaborate with families or other professionals, which is an obstacle (MOE, 2009). Most preschools are located in unsafe areas or are ill-equipped to provide appropriate preschool education due to

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inadequate facilities that do not meet the health and developmental requirements of young children. Since the majority of schools are located in buildings that were not originally designed for educational purposes, many of them are environmentally unsuitable due to a lack of space for both play and learning. Many schools are environmentally inadequate due to a lack of space for play and learning because most of them operate in buildings that were not originally constructed for educational purposes. There is a lack of children's books, toys, and other relevant educational materials in some preschools. There is a lack of uniformity in the curriculum followed by preschools for early childhood education. Kebele and publicly owned preschools follow the curriculum set by the Ministry of Education, while private preschools have their own curriculum. This has led to wide variation among preschools. There is a lack of consistency in the language of instruction among preschools. Some preschools consider the acquisition of a foreign language, particularly English, to be a significant objective of preschool education.

Regarding the connections between preschool and primary education, there are not enough precise evaluations and recommendations. The absence of a specific framework in the federal and local education bureaus is perhaps the biggest problem. This has made it more difficult to coordinate efforts, acquire accurate data, and conduct coordinated strategic planning at the national level. The country's early childhood care and educational initiatives are poorly recorded.

According to UNICEF (2019), the National Policy Framework for Early Childhood Care

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July-Sept 2020, 9(3), 46-70 and Education, which emphasises the widespread availability of one year of pre-primary education for children, has led to an increase in pre-primary school enrollment in Ethiopia. Despite the dedication and expansion of pre-primary education, which has increased gross enrollment from less than 2% in 2000 to more than 45% in 2017, more than half of the children of pre-primary age remain excluded nationwide. The Oromia region accounts for the largest share of this exclusion. The fact that most children do not have access to pre-primary education suggests that this area of education needs to be prioritized. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the current state of pre-primary education in Wallaga Zones and identify its challenges.

Statement of the problem

The main problems facing Ethiopia's current pre-primary schools include high tuition fees, a lack of a standardised curriculum, guidelines, and culturally appropriate storybooks, limited access to early childhood education for the majority of children, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, a lack of understanding of the significance and nature of care and education, and misconceptions about children's learning (MoE, 2002). Nevertheless, the Ministry of Education finally developed a curriculum that prioritises student engagement above teacher instruction. The curriculum framework largely focuses on instructional strategies, learning resources, and assessment strategies. The preprimary education programme in Ethiopia, however, is currently insufficient to meet the demands of the country's expanding

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preprimary school enrollment, and it predominantly favours wealthier families (Teshome, 1979; Dereje, 1994).

Pre-primary education in the country faces numerous challenges. Typical problems include administration and coordination. Consequently, they do not have a strong decision-making body, such as a board of directors. Kindergartens are unable to implement comprehensive policy guidelines for the roles of pre-primary schools. There was a shortage of trained personnel and high employee turnover. Teachers do not have opportunities for training, and they suffer from low salaries. Generally, the system lacks government support (Tsegaye, 2014).

According to another study (Tirusew, 2005), pre-primary education faces various challenges, including limited access for children from low-income households in both rural and urban areas. It has struggled with issues such as a shortage of skilled human resources, inadequate indoor and outdoor materials, insufficient instructional tools, limited parental and community involvement, inadequate supervision, and a lack of support from stakeholders. In addition, pre-primary school teachers face various challenges in implementing the curriculum. The lack of physical facilities, difficulties with evaluation procedures, difficulty planning lessons and organising kid-friendly activities, issues with the teaching-learning process, problems with the social environment, difficulty setting goals and objectives, content, a lack of administrative support, and issues with parental involvement are just a few of these difficulties (Dietz, 2002).

The aforementioned challenges indicate that there is a significant gap in the

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implementation of pre-primary education in the country. It is at this point that researchers are prompted to determine whether the aforementioned national problem is evident in the current study area. However, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, they could not find a study with the same title and methodology in the study area. Hence, the researchers decided to investigate the practices and challenges of both private and public pre-primary schools in three zonal towns in Wallaga.

Research questions

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. Are the curriculum materials of public and private pre-primary schools relevant to the developmental needs of children?
2. To what extent are public and private pre-primary schools providing teachers of the necessary quality?
3. To what extent are the teaching, learning, and assessment methods appropriate for the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of pre-primary school children?
4. To what extent are indoor and outdoor facilities in public and private pre-primary schools available for children's learning, following the national standards set by the Ministry of Education (MoE)?

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5. What are the practical challenges of pre-primary education in both public and private schools?

Review of literature

Early childhood education, often known as preschool education, has a substantial influence on a child's entire development. Early childhood education refers to educational activities and initiatives for children aged three to five before they attend formal schools. This period is regarded as significant because it establishes the framework for a child's future academic success, social skills, and emotional well-being. A survey of the literature on strategies and issues in early childhood education is offered.

Practices of pre-primary Education:

Play is an important component of pre-primary schooling. It gives children the chance to discover, show, and improve their cognitive, physical, and social skills. Play-based learning improves imagination and problem-solving skills and creates a love for learning. According to a study by Pellegrini and Smith (1998), play-based learning boosts language development, helps social relationships, and improves self-regulation skills among young children. Additionally, a study by Bodrova and Leong (2007) shows that play-based methods improve the development of brain processes such as attention control and working memory.

Pre-primary education should be structured to meet the growth needs of young children. Developmentally appropriate methods rely on

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individual teaching, hands-on learning situations, and active involvement. Teachers create a caring environment that supports children's physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and verbal growth. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports the value of utilising developmentally appropriate methods in early childhood education. According to their suggestions (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), teachers should evaluate children's hobbies, skills, and ethnic backgrounds and present a well-rounded programme that covers all areas of growth.

The child-centred approach is another widely used strategy in pre-primary education. Understanding each child's specific needs, interests, and abilities is a method used by teachers to create a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that promotes the overall development of children (Waldorf, 2017). Children's teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities are all promoted by this method (Thomas, 2017). Children may apply what they have learned in meaningful ways when teachers design age-appropriate projects that are relevant to their lives.

Many instructors are integrating technological tools and resources into their classroom practices because of the growing accessibility of technology in early childhood settings. Technology may make learning more enjoyable for children and provide them with new opportunities to explore their creativity, make discoveries, and actively participate in their education (Coughlan & Cotter, 2016). Involving parents in pre-primary education is important for a child's overall growth. Collaborative ties between parents and

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teachers create a helpful learning setting and improve children's educational experiences. Parental involvement can take various forms, such as helping in the classroom, having parent-teacher talks, and participating in home-based activities that support learning. A study by Epstein (2001) shows the positive effect of family presence on children's academic progress, social skills, and general well-being. It suggests that when parents actively participate in their child's education, it leads to better school readiness and long-term academic success.

Regarding pre-primary education practices in Ethiopia, curricula are created with an emphasis on child-centred activities that support mental, social, emotional, and physical growth. Language, arithmetic, environmental sciences, music, and art are among the areas included in the curriculum (Alemu et al., 2017). Ethiopian pre-primary school teachers use a range of instructional strategies, including play-based learning, storytelling, and practical exercises. These techniques aim to involve children in engaging and rewarding learning activities (Tesfaye & Alemu, 2015). Ethiopian pre-primary education assessment is primarily based on classroom participation and observation. These evaluations are used by teachers to track the development of their students and modify their education as necessary (Alemu et al., 2017). Ethiopian preschools often lack the necessary facilities, including furniture, equipment, and classrooms. According to Tesfaye and Alemu (2015), this may compromise the quality of education and create difficulties for both instructors and students.

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Challenges of Pre-Primary Education:

Providing access and equity for all children in pre-primary education is a fundamental priority. Pre-primary education is not equally accessible, affordable, or of high quality in all areas of the world and across all socioeconomic categories. When trying to enrol in high-quality early learning programmes, children from underprivileged areas often face obstacles. To ensure accessible and equitable pre-primary education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) emphasises the need to lessen these differences (UNESCO, 2019). All children, regardless of their socioeconomic status or geographic location, should be given the same opportunities.

The effectiveness of pre-primary education largely depends on qualified and capable teachers. However, there are challenges in this field that affect education, training, and career advancement. Many early childhood educators may lack access to appropriate training programmes or opportunities for ongoing professional development. The need for thorough teacher training programmes that include early childhood development, curriculum planning, evaluation methods, and effective teaching techniques is highlighted by research by Phillips et al. (2016). Additionally, ongoing professional development is necessary to maintain instructors' knowledge of the most recent research-based methods.

The curriculum and assessment practices in pre-primary education are also challenges. Many countries still rely on traditional,

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content-focused curricula that do not adequately prepare children for the complex demands of the 21st century (Pence & MacNeil, 2018). Additionally, the emphasis on standardised testing and accountability measures can lead to a narrow focus on academic achievement, neglecting other important aspects of children's development.

Concerning Ethiopia, pre-primary education is still quite difficult to get into, particularly in rural areas. Many kids, particularly girls, are denied access to pre-primary education for many reasons, such as poverty, cultural norms, and ignorance (Alemu et al., 2017). Pre-primary school teachers in Ethiopia often get insufficient support and preparation. The quality of teaching may suffer as a result of a lack of understanding of pedagogy and child development (Tsfaye & Alemu, 2015). Preschools in Ethiopia often lack resources, including books, materials, and technology. The results might be less effective teaching and learning processes (Alemu et al., 2017). In Ethiopia, elementary education often lacks adequate governance structures, which may result in a lack of accountability and oversight. Tsfaye and Alemu (2015) assert that this might result in corruption and inefficiencies that reduce the quality of education.

Pre-primary education plays a crucial role in shaping a child's future success. Play-based learning, developmentally appropriate practices, and parental involvement are key components of effective early childhood education. However, challenges related to access and equity, teacher preparation, and assessment need to be addressed to ensure

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high-quality early childhood programs. By understanding these practices and challenges, policymakers, educators, and parents can collaborate to establish an inclusive and supportive environment for the learning and development of young children.

Research design

This study employed a mixed research approach with a convergent parallel design. On the one hand, a mixed research design is instrumental in collecting, analysing, and combining quantitative and qualitative research methods in a single study to gain a comprehensive understanding of a research problem (Creswell, 2003). The design was selected because relying solely on one type of research (qualitative or quantitative) was insufficient to address the research problem or answer the research questions. On the other hand, the convergent parallel mixed research design was selected because it allowed for the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data. This design also involved analysing the two datasets separately and then combining them during data analysis (Creswell, 2003; Gay et al., 2012). This approach effectively addresses the current research problem.

Sources of data

The main sources for this study were teachers, school principals, and experts from the education offices of the three towns. In addition, data from the study was collected through observations in classrooms and school compounds. Information from curriculum frameworks, textbooks, and instructional plans was used as the data source.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Techniques

This study was conducted in three Wallagga Zonal towns: Gimbi, Nakamte, and Shambu. There were 24 public and 51 private pre-primary schools in

the study area. The details are presented in the table below.

Table 1

Population and sample of the study

Zonal towns	School types	Number of Preprimary schools	Number of Preprimary teachers	Sample preprimary schools	Sample preprimary teachers
Gimbi	Public	9	28	2	8
	Private	12	87	2	4
Nekemte	Public	10	42	2	20
	Private	30	89	2	48
Shambu	Public	5	5	2	3
	Private	9	9	2	4
Total public		24	75	6	31
Total Private		51	186	6	56

As shown in Table 1, two public and two private pre-primary schools were selected from each zonal town, resulting in a sample of 12 pre-primary schools. Eighty-seven teachers participated in the study. Furthermore, two experts from each town's administration education office, one expert from each zonal educational office, and all principals of the sample schools were interviewed.

Data collection instruments

Three methods were used to collect data for the study: a questionnaire, structured interviews, and observations. The questionnaire consisted of four sections: background information, practices of pre-primary schools, availability of indoor and outdoor facilities, and practical challenges. It

was developed based on a research problem and a literature review. A structured interview was used to obtain detailed data from experts at the district educational office. Observational data were collected through classroom observations, both inside and outside of the classroom. This provides valuable information on instructional methods, activities, and the availability of necessary indoor and outdoor facilities. Finally, the curricula, assessment records, and lesson plans of the sample schools were reviewed to gather additional information.

Questionnaire

Before developing the questionnaire, we conducted a thorough review of the relevant literature. Based on the information obtained

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from the literature, taking into account the study's location and research problem, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire consisted of 75 closed-ended items and five open-ended items. One month after developing the items, the research team reviewed and discussed them to ensure clarity, understandability, and proper addressing of the research problem among the three members. Consequently, 12 closed-ended items and one open-ended item that were found to be irrelevant, redundant, or unclear were removed. Fifteen items have been rephrased and modified. Later, a questionnaire consisting of 63 closed-ended and open-ended items was distributed to 50 preschool teachers in grades one through five. The purpose was to assess the effectiveness of the items in achieving their intended goals. Out of the 55 questionnaires distributed, 50 were found to be completely reliable.

According to Best and Khan (2006), the reliability estimation of the questionnaire improved to 0.82 after removing four items. This indicates that the measuring instrument has a satisfactory level of reliability. Furthermore, one open-ended item that created confusion among respondents was omitted. Finally, a questionnaire consisting of 59 closed-ended and three open-ended items was prepared for the final data collection for this research.

Interview and observation guides

Following the literature review, eight unstructured interview guide questions and ten observation guides were prepared. After one month, the research team discussed the questionnaire items to evaluate their suitability for collecting data related to the research problem. After thorough discussions, four

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interview questions and six observation guides were prepared and used for the final data collection.

The procedure for data collection

A letter specifying the objectives of the study was written and sent to obtain permission for data collection in three zonal towns: Gimbi, Nakamte, and Shambu educational offices. The selected schools were notified via a standardised letter. Experts from the relevant educational offices were then interviewed, and the necessary data were obtained. Subsequently, the directors of the participating schools were briefed on the study's objectives. Finally, permission was obtained from the respective schools to collect data for the study from the relevant departments and sections. This allowed the research team to collect the necessary data for the study.

Methods of Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were used to assess the data collected. The data collected through the questionnaire were presented in tables and systematically organised using descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, and standard deviations. This was done because combining both qualitative and quantitative data allows for a more thorough understanding of the problem or issue being studied (Creswell, 2003). The data obtained through the interviews and observations was carefully noted, classified, and grouped according to the research questions. The data was then qualitatively analysed using narrative statements. Finally,

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relevant photographs were presented as evidence to support this information.

Ethical considerations

First, the research proposal for this study was submitted to a college research coordinator. The proposal was then presented to the academic staff of the College of Education and Behavioural Sciences, who provided constructive comments on ethical issues. The research team then made the necessary revisions to the proposal and submitted it to secure permission and funding for conducting the study. Accordingly, care was taken in writing the study's instrument, collecting the data, and analysing the data. For general presentations, respondents' personal information is kept

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confidential. During data collection, respondents were instructed not to disclose their personal information and were advised to discontinue their participation in the questionnaire if they experienced any discomfort. These considerations were part of the efforts made to maintain ethical standards in this study.

Results

Demographic background of the respondents

This section presents the demographic information of the respondents, including variables such as gender, educational level, training, experience, and the type of school (public or private) in which the study participants were employed.

Table 2

Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Variables	Options	Frequency	Per cent
Sex	Male	6	6.9
	Female	81	93.1
	Total	87	100.0
Educational level	Diploma	51	58.6
	Degree	33	37.9
	MA/MSC	3	3.4
	Total	87	100.0
Training Status	Yes	65	74.7
	No	22	25.3
	Total	87	100.0
Work experience in preprimary teaching	1-3 years	39	44.8
	4-6 years	17	19.5
	7-9 years	13	14.9
	>10 years	18	20.7
	Total	87	100.0
Type of school	Public	41	47.1
	Private	46	52.9
	Total	87	100.0

As indicated in Table 2, six (6.9%) males and 81 (93.1%) females were included in the study.

Even though there were significantly more female participants than male teachers, for pedagogical

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reasons, it is still necessary to have only female teachers guiding students in pre-primary schools. Regarding qualifications, while the majority (51, 58.6%) had a diploma, only 3 (3.4%) held a second degree. The remaining 33 (37.3%) teacher participants reported having a first-degree certificate. As can be observed in the table above, 22 (25.3%) individuals were also involved in teaching preprimary schools without specific training at that level. However, it is important to note that teaching and managing pre-primary schools require special support from carers.

Concerning their teaching experience at the pre-primary school level, 39 (44.8%) respondents indicated that they had taught for less than three years. Eighteen (20.7%) teachers reported having over 18 years of teaching experience. The remaining 30 (35.5%) indicated that they had taught at the pre-primary level for about four to ten years, indicating a need to enhance the skills of pre-primary teachers. Table 2 indicates

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July-Sept 2020, 9(3), 46-70 that 41 respondents were from public schools, while 46 were from private pre-primary schools.

Practices of preprimary school education

To investigate practices related to preprimary school education, the study focused on several dimensions: the appropriateness of curriculum materials, the quality of teachers' training, teaching and assessment methods, and the availability of indoor and outdoor facilities. The results for each dimension are described as follows:

Relevance of preprimary school curriculum materials to children's development needs

Regarding the relevance of the preprimary school curriculum, the data obtained from the survey, interviews, and documents are presented as follows:

Table 3

The relevance of the preprimary school curriculum to the developmental needs of children

Items	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
The Curriculum of Preprimary School:				
-is adapted to the local context.	4.7	0.59	3.63	0.94
-incorporates all developmental activities of children	4.78	0.42	3.68	0.96
-emphasizes all aspects (physical, mental, and social developments).	4.83	0.44	3.9	0.97
-allows practising skills	4.72	0.54	3.71	0.96
-Is consistent with the MoE standard curriculum framework.	4.61	0.65	3.93	0.98
Total	4.73	0.27	3.77	0.68
Grand Total	M = 4.28, SD = 0.70			

The teachers in private pre-primary schools viewed the curriculum they were implementing as highly relevant in addressing the developmental needs of the children (M = 4.73, SD = 0.27), compared to teachers in public pre-primary schools (M = 3.77, SD = 0.68). Although there

were differences in responses, both groups of respondents (private, M = 4.61, SD = 0.5, and public, M = 3.93, SD = 0.98) judged that the pre-primary school curriculum met the standards set by the Ministry of Education. The grand mean indicated in Table 4 shows that teachers'

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assumptions about the relevance of the preprimary school curriculum were above average ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.70$). Overall, the private pre-primary school teachers rated the relevance and implementation of the curriculum as very strong practices ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.27$). Similarly, the public pre-primary school teachers also considered these practices to be strong ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.68$).

Contrary to the survey findings, interviews and our observations revealed that there was no uniformity in the use of curriculum among schools. Private schools, in particular, often borrowed or purchased textbooks that were not suitable in terms of context and age appropriateness. Furthermore, upon observation, it became apparent that schools were implementing different numbers of subjects. Private schools taught five to seven subjects, whereas the government "O" grade level taught three to four subjects. Some private schools use foreign curricula. These results confirm the findings of previous studies (Addisu & Wudu, 2019; Haile & Mohammed, 2017; Mulugeta, 2015) that criticised the utilisation of foreign textbooks and the inclusion of numerous subjects in preprimary schools in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, upon closer examination of the students' exercise books, it becomes evident that the content they are learning lacks relevance. What was written in the learners' notebooks was not at an age-appropriate level. In light of the observations made, the curriculum framework for Ethiopian education (KG to Grade 12) emphasises the significance of guiding children to participate in sports, dance, music, visual arts, and role play (MoE, 2009) as integral components of their learning process. In addition, an interviewee stated that there is no clear policy or curriculum for pre-primary education. The school decides which subjects to teach based on the demands of the children's families rather than considering the developmental needs of the children. (S3P7D04/04/22).

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Quality of teachers in preprimary education

The teachers in private pre-primary schools viewed the curriculum they were implementing as highly relevant in addressing the developmental needs of the children ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.27$), in contrast to teachers in public pre-primary schools ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.68$). Although there were differences in responses, both groups of respondents (private, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.5$, and public, $M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.98$) judged that the pre-primary school curriculum met the standards set by the Ministry of Education. The grand mean indicated in Table 4 shows that teachers' assumptions about the relevance of the preprimary school curriculum were above average ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.70$). Overall, the private pre-primary school teachers rated the relevance and implementation of the curriculum as very strong practices ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.27$). Similarly, the public pre-primary school teachers also considered these practices to be strong ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.68$). Contrary to the survey findings, interviews and our observations revealed that there was no uniformity in the use of curriculum among schools. Private schools, in particular, often borrowed or purchased textbooks that were not suitable in terms of content or age appropriateness. Furthermore, upon observation, it became apparent that schools were implementing different numbers of subjects. Private schools taught five to seven subjects, whereas the government "O" grade level taught three to four subjects. Some private schools use foreign curricula. These results confirm the findings of previous studies (Addisu & Wudu, 2019; Haile & Mohammed, 2017; Mulugeta, 2015) that criticised the use of foreign textbooks and the inclusion of multiple subjects in pre-primary schools in Ethiopia.

In this section, we present an evaluation of teacher quality. The data were obtained from a questionnaire (as indicated in the background section), observations, and interviews. Concerning the quality of teachers' training, the survey results

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indicated that the majority (74.7%) of the teachers had received training in teaching at the preprimary level. However, the findings obtained from the interviews and document analysis contradicts the results of the survey. In the interview, a teacher from Gimbi Town reported having a degree in accounting but being assigned to teach without receiving any training. Even though the majority of the teachers had a teaching diploma, they reported that they had not received training to effectively teach at the pre-primary school level. To address this issue, an expert from the education office explained the problem during the interview as:

We do not have qualified pre-primary school teachers because there are no private or public institutions that offer training programmes for this level of education. A government institute is mandated to train teachers at this level. In particular, the government's attention to pre-

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primary school education is very limited. Private schools are investing their efforts despite various limitations. Since two or three years ago, the government has been preparing to work on this level of education. Consequently, in every primary school, the so-called "O" class opened without the required teachers. (S5P2D04/08/22).

This finding is similar to previous studies (Tigistu, 2013; Frost & Little, 2014; Mulugeta, 2015). They found that a significant number of teachers and school administrators in both public and private schools were not qualified to teach in pre-primary education. They further mentioned that Ethiopian preschool teachers have limited training skills beyond grade 10. Preprimary school teachers have degrees in various fields, but not specifically in preprimary-level teaching. Adam (2020) stated that preschool education in Ethiopia has not received as much attention from the government as primary or secondary education.

The teaching practices

The teaching practice at preprimary schools is presented in the following section.

Table 4

The appropriateness of the teaching-learning: Cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development

Items	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
Teaching and learning practice:				
is child-centred	4.83	0.44	4.12	1.03
uses appropriate teaching materials	4.30	0.73	3.27	1.14
allows exploring and using different materials	4.39	1.04	3.34	1.06
gives children the freedom to choose their learning styles.	4.43	0.72	3.90	1.04
Use your mother tongue.	3.93	1.45	4.85	0.42
invites adult support	4.52	0.84	3.88	1.31
allows social interaction.	4.83	0.44	4.17	0.89
Total	4.46	0.51	3.93	0.63
Grand Total	M = 4.21, SD = 0.63			

Table 5 presents the teaching and learning practices in preprimary schools. In this regard, the private preprimary school teachers rated the practices of the child-centred teaching method, the use of suitable teaching materials, the opportunity

for children to explore and utilise various materials, the freedom for children to choose their learning styles, the availability of adult support, and the opportunity for social interaction as highly favourable (M = 4.39 to 4.83; SD = 0.44 to 1.04).

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It was only through the use of the mother tongue that public pre-primary school teachers rated it as a highly effective practice. The public pre-primary school teachers reported moderate levels of using appropriate teaching materials ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.14$) and the opportunity to explore and utilise different materials in teaching-learning practices ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.06$). In addition, the public pre-primary school teachers agreed that the child-centred teaching method, the opportunity for social interaction, the freedom to choose a learning style, and the support from adults in the teaching-learning process were highly valued ($M = 3.90$ – 4.17 , $SD = 0.89$ – 1.317). In general, the teaching-learning practice was found to be very strong among private school teachers ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.51$), while it was weak among public school teachers ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.63$). When responses from private and public pre-primary school teachers were combined, it was found that the practice of teaching and learning at the pre-primary school level was strong ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.63$).

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Conversely, the results obtained from the qualitative dataset do not support the survey results. The teaching-learning practices observed in almost all private and public schools follow traditional approaches. This means that every teaching and learning activity is teacher-centred. From the observation, it was noted that in both private and public preprimary school classrooms, teachers relied on traditional methods of instruction, similar to those used in upper primary and secondary education. Specifically, teachers used chalk and a blackboard to dictate lessons to their students. In line with this, one informant identified himself.

Most of the time, we use lecture methods for teaching for two reasons. The first reason is that most of us did not receive adequate training at this level. The second reason is that the lecture method was inherited from our previous teachers (S6P2D04/08/22). The figure below presents the seating arrangement of students for the traditional classroom setup, which confirms information obtained from the interview.



Figure 1: *Classroom seating arrangement*

As can be observed, the classroom seating arrangement was such that the children were seated in a straight line next to the blackboard. The classroom seating arrangement indicates that the children were behaving seriously and maturely, as if they were adults attending a

formal meeting. In this context, Adam (2020) reported that teachers in pre-primary schools have utilised two teaching methods: lectures and visual aids. This suggests that the teaching methods practiced in the majority of private and public pre-primary schools may not be

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suitable for the optimal development of children.

In general, teachers in both private and public preprimary schools commonly rely on books and chalk as their primary teaching materials. This is largely due to the continued emphasis on the traditional teacher-centred method of teaching. This practice goes against the standard set by the Ministry of Education, which promotes a child-centred approach to kindergarten education. According to the Ministry, children should be able to learn through play in an informal environment at their own pace (MoE, 2009, p. 10).

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Opportunities were not provided for the children to explore and utilise the various materials. Children were not given the freedom to choose their learning styles. Even in one of the observed private schools, the children were not allowed to learn their native languages. This is also against the Ministry's standard, which requires schools at this level to use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The curriculum framework states that learning the mother tongue encourages children to develop basic communication skills, life skills, and social values (MoE, 2009, p. 10).

Table 5

Appropriateness of the assessment practices

Assessment practices:	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
The assessment focuses on all aspects of development.	4.70	0.55	4.10	0.83
Assessment is a continuous	4.89	0.31	4.54	0.71
The assessment focuses on children's learning progress.	4.87	0.45	4.37	0.73
The assessment helps to identify learning strengths and weaknesses.	4.83	0.38	4.66	0.62
Total	4.82	0.30	4.41	0.51
Grand Total	M = 4.63, SD = 0.56			

Table 5 displays the assessment practices of pre-primary schools. Private school teachers rated the four items presented to measure the assessment practices of private schools as very strong. Similarly, the public pre-primary school teachers also demonstrated very strong assessment practices, except for the item that inquired about the emphasis on the developmental aspects of the children (M = 4.10, SD = 0.83), which was rated as a weak practice. Thus, based on the responses

of the participants, there were very strong assessment practices in both private (M = 4.82, SD = 0.30) and public (M = 4.41, SD = 0.51) pre-primary schools. These practices focused on all aspects of children's development. They were seen as a continuous process aimed at monitoring children's learning progress and could identify both learning strengths and weaknesses. Likewise, the collective responses of the study sample (M = 4.63, SD = 0.56) indicated a significant emphasis

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on assessment in the preprimary schools included in the sample.

However, the data obtained through observations and interviews indicated that there was no standardised mechanism for assessing children's learning in either private or public pre-primary schools. Similar to teaching-learning activities, commonly used assessment practices often rely on traditional paper-and-pen methods. The responses obtained from the interview participants and the analysed documents showed that continuous testing was the primary method of assessment in most schools. However, the participants considered this continuous testing to be a form of continuous assessment, which was a misconception. Three respondents from three different schools described the assessment techniques as follows:

Tests, final examinations, homework, worksheets, and classwork were marked out of 20, 30, 30, 10, and 10, respectively (S5P2D04/08/22). Homework, classwork, reading, writing, oral questions, projects, worksheets, and assignments were all graded out of 10, and the final exam was graded out of 20 (S5P2D04/08/22). A written exam was out of 75, an oral exam was out of 25, a written exam was out of 50, a written exam was out of 50, a written exam was out of 75, and an oral exam was out of 25 for kindergartens 1, 2, and 3 (S5P2D04/08/22).

Hence, from the above discussion, it is clear that the assessment tasks did not focus on all aspects of children's development. However, it cannot identify children's learning strengths and weaknesses. As mentioned, the teaching, learning, and assessment methods used in both categories of pre-primary schools in the study area were traditional. These instructional strategies emphasise traditional lecture-style, followed by ongoing evaluation. In addition, the

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data obtained from classroom observations in both types of schools showed that the teacher's activities covered almost all of the sessions. Hence, the teacher is the one who is active and engaged in the teaching and learning process. By implication, unless children are actively engaged in the learning process, it is impossible to expect their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development to occur. One of the informants described this word-for-word as follows:

Truly, I did not worry about or even know whether the teaching methods and assessments I used were relevant to the holistic development of the child. I was curious about the commonly used school activities. Even though I was interested in trying something new, the overall situation at the school prevented me from doing so. (S5P2D04/08/22).

In addition to the interviews, critical analyses of a randomly selected document from the kindergarten two class of a specific preprimary school were conducted using common assessment practices involving pen and paper. The process is described below. From these documents, it is possible to determine whether these types of assessments are appropriate for five-year-old children. In general, the analysis of classroom observations, documents, and informant responses revealed that the teaching and assessment methods most commonly used were more aligned with the cognitive development of children. No significant differences were observed between public and private schools.

Indoor and outdoor facilities

According to the requirements established by the Ministry of Education, the survey questions were developed. The responses of the participants are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6*Availability of indoor facilities in private and public pre-primary schools*

Items	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
Building blocks made of clay, plastic, and wood are available.	3.00	1.05	1.85	0.85
Fabric and plastic toys are available.	2.93	0.88	1.83	0.86
Family corner cups, coffee pots, spoons, plates, and small toy beds are available.	1.89	0.99	1.54	0.84
Medical corner aprons, syringes, stethoscopes, bandages, drug bottles, and stretchers are available.	2.07	1.10	1.41	0.67
Shop corner scales, finished pen covers, finished match boxes, various kids' clothes, bottle tops, various household equipment, money notes, and cents are available.	2.13	1.02	1.22	0.61
Different science kits are available.	2.50	1.26	1.46	0.71
In the social corner, different pictures and local clothes are available.	2.20	1.13	1.34	0.57
Language and reading corner pictures, journals, and kids' books are available.	2.87	1.02	1.88	0.95
Mathematics corner tools for various numbers, counters, and signs are available.	2.74	1.14	1.90	0.94
Music corners with different local and traditional instruments are available.	2.39	1.18	1.88	1.05
Drawing corner pencils, papers, and ink are available.	3.65	0.64	2.24	1.14
Total	2.58	1.04	1.69	0.84
Grand Total	M = 2.13, SD = 0.94			

Responses were on a Likert scale of 1 = not available, 2 = slightly available, 3 = moderately available, and 4 is available as per MoE standard.

Table 6 presents the availability of different indoor play equipment. The materials were checked against the MoE standard. In comparison, drawing materials such as pencils, papers, and ink were more readily available in private preprimary schools (M = 3.65, SD = 0.64) and public preprimary schools (M = 2.24, SD = 1.14) compared to other indoor materials. On average,

indoor materials were slightly more available in private schools (M = 2.58, SD = 1.04), whereas they were almost unavailable in public schools (M = 1.69, SD = 0.94). The average ground rating score (M = 2.13, SD = 0.94) indicates a lack of indoor materials at the preprimary school level in the study area during the study period.

Table 7*Availability of outdoor facilities in private and public pre-primary schools*

Items	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
Balls (footballs, rugby balls, giant balls, and multipurpose balls) are available.	2.87	1.15	1.80	0.95
Car tires are available.	2.24	0.99	1.17	0.54
Swinging is available.	3.83	0.53	1.56	0.92
Balance is available.	3.57	0.86	2.05	1.16
Slides are available.	3.85	0.56	1.68	0.99
Merry-go-round is available.	3.46	1.07	1.61	0.92
Ladders are available.	3.87	0.40	1.83	1.12
Crawling tunnels are available.	3.57	0.83	1.27	0.67
Sandboxes are available.	2.70	1.07	1.37	0.70
Total	3.33	0.83	1.59	0.89
Grand Total	M = 2.46, SD = 0.86			

Responses were on a Likert scale of 1 = not available, 2 = slightly available, 3 = moderately available, and 4 is available as per MoE standard

Table 7 presents an evaluation of the availability of outdoor play materials in pre-primary schools. Private preprimary schools were found to have adequate materials such as ladders (M = 3.87, SD = 0.40), slides (M = 3.85, SD = 0.56), swings (M = 3.83, SD = 0.53), crawling tunnels (M = 3.57, SD = 0.83), and merry-go-rounds (M = 3.46, SD = 1.07). However, the materials in public pre-primary schools were insufficient. The average rating mean score indicates that private schools had a higher availability of outdoor materials (M = 3.33, SD = 0.83) compared to public pre-primary schools (M = 1.59, SD = 0.89). The average score for the ground rating (M = 2.46, SD = 0.86) indicates that there was a shortage of outdoor materials in the preprimary schools that were included in the study.

Furthermore, the photographs taken during the observation of schools confirm a significant lack of suitable teaching materials in preprimary schools. As evident from the photographs depicting schools (Figure 2 and Figure 3), it is apparent that the school premises were not suitable for pre-primary level education.



Figure 2. Public School Compound



Figure 3. Private School Compound

Challenges of Preprimary Education

Data on the challenges of preprimary education in private and public schools were obtained from teachers and school directors through a questionnaire and interviews, which are presented in the following sections.

Table 8

Challenges related to human and material resources

	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Human resource				
Shortage of trained teachers for preprimary school	2.74	1.16	2.61	1.51
Teacher turnover	2.78	1.19	1.95	1.18
Shortage of trained leadership for preprimary school	2.57	1.17	3.12	1.42
Total	2.7	0.87	2.56	0.8
Ground total	M = 2.63, SD = 0.84			
2. Material resource				
Inadequate textbooks	2.35	1.32	4.15	1.28
Shortage of teaching materials	2.89	1.39	3.8	1.54
Inadequate playing space	2.91	1.49	3.49	1.58
Inadequate playing equipment	2.91	1.3	3.17	1.58
Total	2.7	0.87	2.56	0.8
Ground total	M = 2.63, SD = .84			

Responses were on a Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4= agree, and 5= strongly agree.

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Table 8 illustrates the various human and material challenges encountered in preprimary education. An equal proportion of private (M = 2.78, SD = 1.16) and public (M = 2.61, SD = 1.51) pre-primary school teachers reported a lack of comprehensive training practices for teachers. Teacher turnover in private preprimary schools (M = 2.74, SD = 1.19) was found to be higher compared to that in public preprimary schools (M = 1.95, SD = 1.18). The study found that there was a higher prevalence of inadequately trained leadership in public preprimary schools (M = 3.12, SD = 1.42) compared to private preprimary schools (M = 2.57, SD = 1.17).

The challenges related to material resources include textbooks, teaching materials, space for activities, and playground

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equipment. The scarcity of material resources was more pronounced in public pre-primary schools compared to private schools. For instance, the study revealed that there was a higher scarcity of textbooks in public schools (M = 4.15, SD = 1.28) compared to private schools (M = 2.35, SD = 1.32). Similarly, the study found that there was a higher shortage of teaching materials (M = 3.80, SD = 1.54), playing spaces (M = 3.49, SD = 1.58), and playing equipment (M = 3.17, SD = 1.58) in public pre-primary schools compared to private pre-primary schools (M = 2.89 to 2.91, SD = 1.30 to 1.49). As indicated by the average mean scores shown in Table 8, there was a lack of material resources in both private (M = 2.70, SD = 0.87) and public (M = 2.56, SD = 0.80) pre-primary schools.

Table 9

Challenges related to a school environment

School environment	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
Not accommodate children with physical disabilities	2.59	1.45	2.80	1.49
The learning rooms are not free of noise.	2.30	1.50	2.54	1.43
Teachers and students can't move freely in the learning rooms.	2.89	1.32	2.44	1.38
The learning rooms are not inviting.	2.39	1.36	2.54	1.45
There are not enough playground facilities.	2.65	1.45	3.15	1.49
Classrooms are not furnished with the necessary indoor materials.	2.46	1.17	3.05	1.30
There is no adequate light and ventilation in the learning rooms.	2.41	1.39	2.51	1.61
The number of children in the classroom is above standard.	2.50	1.44	2.76	1.30
Total	2.53	0.90	2.72	0.62
Ground total	M = 2.62, SD = 0.79			

The mean rating scores for private (M = 2.53, SD = 0.90) and public (M = 2.76, SD = 0.62) preprimary schools indicate that the school environment in the study area was average.

The average rating score of the ground response confirms that the respondents had a positive perception of their school environment.

Table 10*Challenges related to behavioural problems and Relationship*

	Private		Public	
	M	SD	M	SD
1. Behavioural aspects				
The problem of handling children's behaviour	1.98	1.41	2.71	1.19
The problem with teachers' conduct	1.76	1.14	2.60	1.41
Total	1.87	1.14	2.65	1.08
Ground total	M = 2.24, SD = 1.17			
2. Relationship and Support				
The pre-primary school has no positive relationship with its stakeholders.	2.11	1.54	2.34	1.3
Parents don't know their obligation to assist children, which limits the relationship.	2.17	1.6	2.68	1.11
Inappropriate perception of community in the preprimary school	2.63	1.68	2.88	1.57
Inadequate government support for the preprimary school	3.04	1.46	2.93	1.42
Parents are compliant with the unfairness of tuition fees.	2.22	1.11	2.56	1.32
Parents' complaints about inappropriate child care and support	2.00	1.38	2.27	1.41
Total	2.36	0.96	2.61	0.81
Ground total	M = 2.48, SD = 0.90			

Responses: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4= Disagree and 5=. Strongly agree

Regarding the behavioural issues observed among children and staff, there was a difference in perspectives between private preprimary school teachers and public preprimary school respondents. The private preprimary school teachers expressed disagreement regarding the presence of behavioural problems (M = 1.87, SD = 1.14), while the respondents from public preprimary schools indicated an undecided stance (M = 2.65, SD = 1.08). Preprimary schools (M = 2.24, SD = 1.17) did not show any significant behavioural issues among children and staff.

The findings of the study indicate that private preprimary school teachers (M = 2.36, SD = 0.96) were perceived to have a positive relationship with other entities, while public preprimary school teachers (M = 2.61, SD = 0.81) reported a more strained relationship

between schools and other organizations. The average mean rating for the relationship issue provides insights into the perceived dynamics between various types of preprimary schools and external entities. The average rating for ground response (M = 2.48, SD = 0.90) suggests that schools generally do not face significant challenges in their interactions with relevant stakeholders.

Apart from the above information, the research team observed the following challenges in preprimary schools during the observation and interviews conducted: Pre-primary schools lack well-defined policies and curriculum frameworks. There is a shortage of properly trained teachers and leaders. There is a shortage of textbooks and teaching materials. The educational institutions were not designed to accommodate individuals with

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disabilities. There is a lack of sufficient government support, especially for private schools. In both types of educational institutions, there is a lack of playground facilities. In public schools, the student population is excessively large and difficult to manage.

The major findings of the study

From data gathered by interview participants and observations, this study has produced the following major findings:

- There was no consistent use of curriculum among private pre-primary schools.
- Most teachers did not have appropriate training for the pre-primary level of education in both private and public pre-primary schools.
- During the study period, teacher-dominated teaching activities and continuous testing were the most commonly practiced activities in both private and public pre-primary schools in the study area. Hence, these teaching and assessment practices are insufficient for the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of children.
- There was a lack of indoor and outdoor teaching and playing materials in the pre-primary schools where this study was conducted. The problem is too serious in public schools.

Some of the challenges faced by private and public pre-primary schools include:

The challenges of preprimary schools can be categorised into factors related to the school, teachers, parents, and the government. The findings support earlier reports (Gizachew & Chombe, 2020). In general, as can be seen

Sci. Technol. Arts Res. J., July-Sept 2020, 9(3), 46-70 above, the majority of the findings obtained from both quantitative and qualitative datasets contradict one another. The reason for this could be one of the disadvantages of using a questionnaire, which is the potential for respondents to be dishonest (Cohen et al., 2018).

- The absence of clear policy and curriculum frameworks.
- Shortage of trained teachers for preprimary schools.
- Shortage of trained leadership for preprimary schools.
- Inadequate textbooks.
- shortage of indoor and outdoor teaching materials.
- Difficulty in accommodating children with physical disabilities
- Inadequate government support for preprimary schools
- Insufficient playing ground
- Large class sizes, especially in public schools.

Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the practices and challenges of preprimary education in public and private schools in three Wallagga Zonal Towns. Though private and public pre-primary schools in Wallagga Zonal Towns tried to follow the guidelines prepared by the Ministry of Education (MoE), but they were observed to be using different curricula. The teaching-learning process followed a traditional teacher-dominated approach. The public preprimary schools faced a serious shortage of teaching materials compared to the public ones. Pre-primary education in the zone lacks skilled teachers and leaders. Most

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schools were not suitable for preschoolers. The schools were not receiving adequate support from their respective education offices. Thus, addressing the challenges facing pre-primary education will require a sustained effort from the government, civil society, and other stakeholders. By collaborating, it is possible to enhance the quality of pre-primary education in Ethiopia and equip all children with the necessary foundation to thrive in school and beyond.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been forwarded:

- The government (including the Ministry of Education, Oromia Education Bureau, Zone, and Woreda Education offices of the study area), in collaboration with Wallagga University, Nekemte, and Shambu CTEs, should prioritise the development of clear and standardised directions and curricula.
- The Oromia Education Bureau, in collaboration with Nekemte and Shambu CTEs, should provide high-quality teacher training at the pre-primary school level.
- Zone and Woreda Education offices in the study area, in collaboration with Nekemte and Shambu CTEs, should provide continuous professional training that focuses on a child-centred approach to teaching and assessment.
- Infrastructure and resources must be adequate to deliver the highest standard of basic education. This includes access to technology, age-

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appropriate learning materials, and well-equipped classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. To promote circumstances that are advantageous to learning for students, governments and educational institutions should prioritise expenditures on infrastructure development.

- Improving student outcomes through primary education can be achieved by involving parents and the wider community. Parents should actively engage in their child's education by participating in seminars and parent-teacher groups, maintaining regular communication, and taking advantage of volunteer opportunities. Partnerships with the community may also enable schools to access additional resources and support, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education.

Future researchers are advised to focus on differences in the performance of students who have attended private and public pre-primary schools.

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