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Article

Quality of Pre-School Teacher Education in Ethiopia and its Implications for Quality Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

This study looks at the quality of preschool teacher education in Ethiopia in view of three basic components: curriculum relevance, profiles of teacher educators, and the selection and recruitment of candidates. The study adopted a case study design guided by competency-based teacher development theory and collected data through documentary analysis (the curriculum and recruitment guideline), and interviews of five professionals. The findings showed that the preschool teacher education curriculum has alignment gaps in four major aspects: (a) the preschool teacher education curriculum focused on subject area contents rather than on holistic child development, (b) the preschool teacher education curriculum overlooked motor skills as well as socio-emotional development categories, and (c) languages of instructions at preschool teacher education and preschool level are different (English and mother tongue respectively). Besides, invited professionals from other departments offer 36 of the

42 courses but lacked appropriate professional orientation and experiences to prepare the less capable candidates admitted to the program. Accordingly, policy intervention to make appropriate amendments in the curriculum, staff profiles and practicum components, and further research on views of graduates and relevant stakeholders were identified as areas of further endeavors.

Keywords: Quality education, preschool teachers, teacher education, learning outcomes

Introduction

There is growing evidence of the importance of preschool education for both personal and national well-being and development. In recent years, a shift in attitude, more investment by the government and increased women's participation in the labor market created a conducive environment to the expansion of preschool education, there are more programmatic reasons for its growing recognition. First, evidence shows that group interaction (than individual experience) contributes better to overall child development. Second, preschool experience has a far-reaching effect on enhanced readiness for primary education and upper grades. Third, preschool education improves education system efficiency (reduces rates of repetition and dropout). Last, preschool education enhances the development of learning skills such as literacy and numeracy (Kamerman, 2006).

Despite such understandings and evidence, governmental investment in and attention towards early childhood education in Ethiopia, one aspect of ECCE, remains low (MoE, 2019). Historically, preschool school education in Ethiopia[1] (aka kindergarten) started around 1900, eight years before the introduction of government-sponsored formal secular education. However, the scope remains limited, an urban phenomenon, and run by private investors, NGOs, and communities (Abraha, 2018; Rossiter, 2016). It is only after 2010, the establishment of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) national framework and strategy (MoE et al., 2010a; 2010b), that the modality is diversified, and enrolment rates showed an encouraging increase. For instance, when 'O' class (one year preparatory for grade1) was introduced for six-year-old children, preschool Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) jumped from 5.2% in 2010/11 to 40.7% (though net enrolment was at 23.9%) in 2018/19 (MoE, 2012; 2016; 2019).

Obviously, preschool education expansion calls for parallel developments in teacher education. Without qualified teachers, it is hardly possible to ensure learning gains because of mere practices (mainly stimulation and school readiness capacity development) (MoE et al., 2010a, 2010b). In other words,

[1] Preschool and kindergarten are interchangeably used in Ethiopia and hence in this paper.

bringing children to school is only the first step and effective learning is something that is to be carried out by well-trained teachers in the classroom. Materials and other supplementary resources are useful only when the teacher is able to make them relevant for the realization of the desired learning goals (Barnett, 2003; Biggs, 1999; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Wenglinsky, 2000). Basically, "Teacher quality depends not only on observable and stable indicators but also on the quality of training they receive" (Ankomah et al., 2005, p. 9).

Preschool teacher education in Ethiopia started in 1972 at Debrezeit as a program that runs for a few months. It was only upgraded to a one-year certificate program when Kotebe College of Teacher Education hosted the program in 2003 (Biniam, 2014; Hoot et al., 2004). Currently, many teacher education colleges (e.g., Hawassa, Adwa, Nekemte) and universities (e.g., Addis Ababa University, Jigjiga University) have preschool teacher-training units (programs). As preschool teacher education in Ethiopia grows, there is still a lack of studies that examine the effects of teacher education with regard to learning outcomes. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to investigate the relevance of teacher education endeavor (curriculum, teacher educators' qualification, candidate selection and recruitment criteria) to preschool learning outcomes by closely looking at the program of a selected teacher education college in Ethiopia.

There is consensus in Ethiopia regarding the challenges to the quality of education in general (Abraha, 2015; American Institute for Research, 2018; Benjamin, 2010; MoE, 2004; 2008; 2013; USAID, 2019). Research on preschool education shows a low level of educational quality including limitations on school readiness competence indicators (Dowd et al., 2016; Fantahun, 2016; Mulugeta, 2015; Rossiter, 2016; Woodhead et al., 2017). However, evidence on the link between teacher preparation endeavors and preschool quality challenges in Ethiopia is nonexistent. Available research so far is limited to professional capacity limitations of deployed preschool teachers as practitioners (Ahmad, 2013; Workneh & Tassew, 2013). This research, therefore, critically examines the quality of preschool teacher education and its implications for the quality of preschool learning outcomes by using one Teacher Education Institution as a case. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following basic questions:

1. To what extent does the preschool teacher education curriculum align with the preschool curriculum suggestions?
2. Do preschool teacher educators have an appropriate educational qualification?
3. What are the selection and recruitment criteria for preschool teacher education candidates?

Theoretical framework

Preschool education in Ethiopia has two streams: (a) preschool/kindergarten education (4-6^{+}years), and (b) non-formal school readiness (MoE et al., 2010a; 2010b). Thus, preschool (aka kindergarten and preprimary in Ethiopia) teacher education in Ethiopia stands for programs that prepare teachers for the preschool institutions.

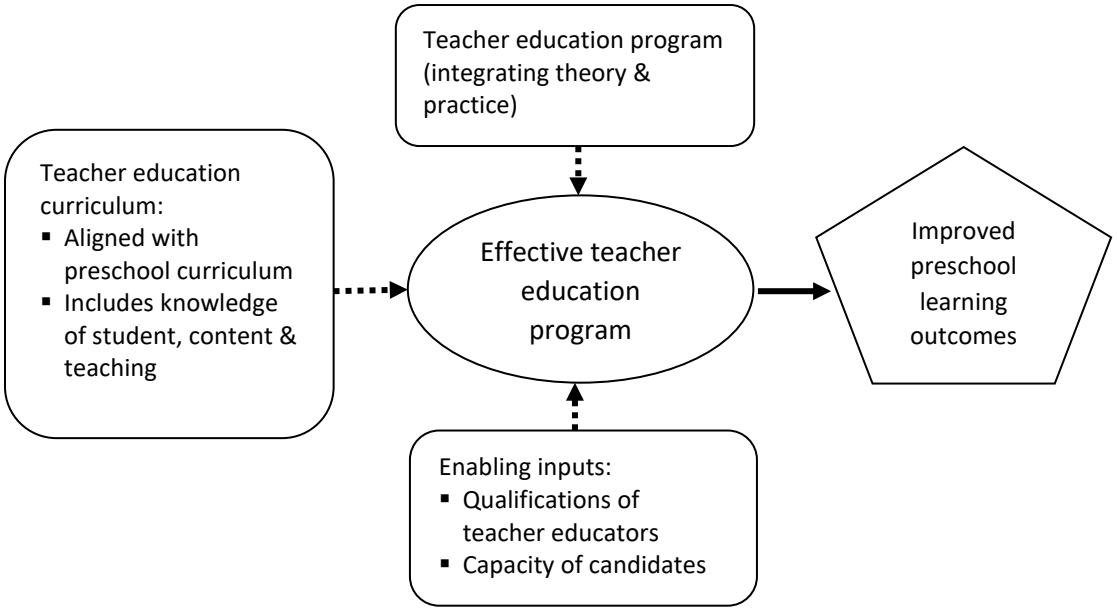
Teacher effectiveness is closely linked to training, and this is well summarized by Barnett (2003): "Better-educated preschool teachers with specialized training are more effective" (p. 2). Darling-Hammond (2000) too, after critical analysis of evidence in the area, concluded that teaching success and confidence of teachers increase with better teacher education opportunities. This notion reminds us that mere certification is not all about teacher effectiveness. Practical professional competence calls for meaningful tailoring of training or education to the nature of the level teachers are going to teach and the tasks they are going to be engaged in. Studies also show that teacher education experiences transcend to better student learning in preschools. Level of qualification is evidently linked to student achievements and developmental indicators (social, psychological, physical, emotional, and academic) (Barnett, 2003) and, specifically, meta-analysis research by Fukkink and Lont (2006) indicated that children from centers (preschool) with better-educated teachers are likely to show higher language skill, social competence and school readiness associated with limited behavior problems.

Wang et al. (2011) also identified three possible perspectives of viewing teacher effectiveness. The first perspective focuses on demonstrated graduation achievements; the second equates teacher effectiveness with qualifications (degrees obtained); and the third refers to teachers' knowledge, skill, and dispositions. This last option tallies with the idea of a competency-based teacher education development policy adopted by the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Education. For example, the Education Sector Development Porgramme VI (ESDP VI), designed for the period ranging from 2020/21-2024/25, asserted that a competency-based approach transforms teaching into a profession of choice and is critical in improving the quality of education (Federal Ministry of Education, Ethiopia, 2021).

According to Tiana et al. (2011), competency implies the integration of knowledge, skill, and values to carry out an action (in this case, teaching and learning) effectively. In other words, teacher education not only develops the level of competency on the part of teacher candidates but also improves their ability to influence student learning in their respective classrooms (Wang et al., 2011). Accordingly, this study adopted the competency-based theory of teacher development and Figure 1 shows its three main

attributes and the possible interaction lines: (a) the knowledge base of teacher education curriculum, (b) program organization or arrangement, and (c) enabling inputs.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study



Note: While broken lines show ongoing investigation, the solid line indicates a theoretical assumption.

Knowledge base of teacher education curriculum

According to Darling-Hammond (2006), teacher professionalism in this changing world is a result of the interaction among three critical constituents: students, content, and teaching. It is customary to view knowledge of content as the most important factor that defines a teacher (especially in the lower grades). However, competencies in both knowing who the learners are (including developmental and contextual issues), and how to teach or facilitate learning (pedagogy, diversity, classroom management, assessment, etc.) are equally critical for teacher effectiveness. In fact, as summarized by Darling-Hammond (2000), research confirms that while the contribution of content knowledge to teaching effectiveness curves down after a certain level of qualification, the influences of knowledge of teaching (pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, etc.) and learning (the child, the context, child development, etc.) are basically stronger than that of subject matter knowledge. In short, teacher education aimed at teacher effectiveness puts students' learning at the center and integrates the specific content that is

being taught with both appropriate instructional methods (strategies) and profiles of target children (Byrne, 1983).

Teacher education program organization

The balance between theory and practice is always a point of debate in shaping teacher education curriculum or program. Though knowledge-based curriculum enjoyed public acceptance for so long, current trends show a shift toward an integrated approach where neither takes the pecking order but nurtures each as appropriate (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Korthagen, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). In this discourse, teachers' understanding of teaching, students and subject matter is shaped by how the instructional process took place in the classrooms. Conversely, practical experiences help teachers to select knowledge relevant for practicing teaching effectively as well as shaping their understanding of teaching and its constituent parts (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Accordingly, integrated design is enjoying wider acceptance because of its relevance to tackle the three challenges of teacher education of our time listed by Darling-Hammond (2006):

(i) Integrated design helps teachers to view professional success from the point of view of learning rather than from the standpoint of teaching or personal experience as students (Darling-Hammond, 2000; 2006; Lortie, 1975);
(ii) Effective teaching requires both theoretical competence as well as adeptly performing teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Darling- Hammond, 2006; Kennedy, 1999); and
(iii) Integrated approach develops the ability to solve problems creatively for practical problems are not necessarily theoretical reflections (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Enabling inputs

Instruction brings together teachers and students for curriculum-based interactions with the hope that the systematic approach will lead to the realization of required outcomes. This definitional perspective of instruction guided the scope of this research with a focus on teacher education curriculum, and teacher educator and trainees' profiles. It is discussed in detail above what the content of 'learning to teach' or teacher education should be and how it should be organized. The focus here is on the actors. Qualification, specialization, and experiences are important factors of quality of teaching (especially in learning for teaching programs) at least as much as educational facilities (technologies) and the human relationship in and around the school do contribute (Workneh & Tassew, 2013). A study by Obidike

(2016) also shows that, in addition to poor teacher preparation or qualification, insufficient classrooms, inappropriate learning environment for teaching and learning processes, inadequate classroom sizes, delays in teacher pay and shortage of facilities obstruct the teaching effectiveness of teachers and learning possibility of students. Another factor for effective teacher preparation is the capability of candidates. Though there seem no agreed-upon criteria for teacher candidate selection, many countries use prior academic achievements as one predictor of success in teacher education and teaching effectiveness in classrooms. Prior experiences, personality (especially ethics), interview results, and sex may also be reconsidered in the process of selection of candidates (Arend, 1973; guidelines, 1980; MoE, 2011b). In Ethiopia, though clear and articulated selection or recruitment criteria for preschool teacher education are not yet available, graduates are expected to teach the five subject areas of preschool curriculum, i.e., Environment, developing literacy, developing numeracy, relating with others, and taking care of oneself (MoE, 2010). Theoretically, this curriculum framework gives context to the curriculum of teacher education of respective levels.

Research Methodology

This section deals with the research approach and design adopted, data sources consulted, and data collection tools and analysis techniques employed.

Research approach and design

This research made use of a qualitative approach to identify context-specific and experience-based findings from analysis of data obtained through interviews and documentary analysis. Specifically, a case study design was adopted to make an in-depth analysis of data, connect practices in the specific area to established norms in the literature and identify implications for the quality of education.

Data sources, data collection tools and procedures of data collection

The data sources for this study were documents (preschool teacher education curriculum and candidate recruitment guidelines) and five key informants working in the area: the former dean (CD1) and the current dean (CD2) of the college, the head of the department of preschool teacher education (T1), and two preschool educators (T2 & T3). Each of the data collection tools (documentary analysis and interview guides) had a specific focus. The document review process formats covered the following questions: (1) What courses does the preschool teacher education include? (2) Which courses focus on

content knowledge, teaching and understanding children? (3) To what extent area are practicum courses integrated? (4) What are the recruitment criteria for preschool teacher education candidates? The interview guides, on the other hand, were employed to extract meaning from the experiences of the participants regarding the practical issue in preschool teacher education, including recruitment, academic backgrounds of educators, resources available, challenges and their implications for quality.

The data collection for this study took place at two different times. An interview was conducted with the then Dean (CD1) of the teacher education institution in June 2017 with the objective of shaping the final research focus and its study procedures. The preliminary findings of the key informant data were presented and discussed at an international seminar taking place in Ethiopia. This study, therefore, made use of lessons of experience from the first pilot-type investigation.

In the second phase of data collection, a review of the program curriculum preceded the main field data collection to identify inputs for designing the key informant interview guides. Based on the interview results, therefore, a review of the recruitment document was found necessary to get additional information for the triangulation of findings. In summary, while the documentary analysis focused on the program curriculum and recruitment guidelines, key informant interviews included the new dean (CD2) of the teacher education institution, the head of the department of preschool teacher education (T1), and two teacher educators (T2 & T3) working for the department. Had it not been for the disclosure of the first COVID-19 pandemic case in Ethiopia in early March 2020, the final field data collection conducted in February 2020, could have included views of employment agencies and graduates.

Data analysis techniques

The data organization pattern and analysis followed the focuses of the data collection tools. First, the data obtained through a review of the program curriculum was organized and analyzed qualitatively in view of three themes: knowledge category covered, relevance to teaching at the preschool level, and integration of theory and practice. The second set of data was the interview data. In this case, the nature of program courses, profiles of teacher educators, recruitment of preschool teacher education candidates, and practicum activities were the organizing themes of the presentation and analysis of the interview data. Finally, implications of effective learning to teach and the quality of preschool education were discussed through triangulation of findings and in view of current knowledge in preschool teacher education.

Ethical considerations

The ethical issues in this study included first the provision of adequate information about the study for the interviewees to make an informed consent of participation. Second, ensuring that information collected was obtained only for the purpose of this research. Third, we have worked to contain the confidentiality of the teacher education institution and interviewees by only revealing relevant information such as a 'teacher education institution' and positions of the interviewees in this institution. Other background information about the interviewees, such as gender, age, and educational background, are not considered relevant for this study. Finally, in using data obtained, care was taken to avoid misrepresentation or bias in processing data and identifying findings.

Data presentation and analysis

This section focused on the presentation and analysis of documentary analysis data followed by interview results to identify major findings. In terms of focus, both documentary analysis results and interview data are organized using corresponding themes to the basic questions.

The preschool teacher education curriculum

Based on the interview data with the Dean (CD2) and Preschool Teacher Education Department Head (T1), and analysis of the curriculum document provided by the department, the preschool teacher education department uses the national curriculum prepared by the Federal Ministry of Education. Thus, this study made use of this same document for the documentary analysis purpose. The results identified are presented below.

The teacher education institution is implementing the national preschool curriculum prepared under the guidance of the Federal Ministry of Education entitled "Syllabus for Preschool Pre-service Teacher Education Program" (MoE, 2014). The preschool teacher education program is a three-year diploma program and the curriculum covers about 42 courses and 113 credit hours (about 188 ECTS) in total[2]. The major courses of the curriculum are drawn from eight different areas: Mother tongue language, English language, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Environmental science, pedagogy and

[2] Handwriting in English and in MT language are two courses, each having two credit hours. However, students attend one of the two and not both.

child development, and others such as ICT. Table 1 shows the list of courses and credit hours under each category.

Table 1. Courses list and corresponding credit hours by course of study

Major Category	List of courses	Total credit hours
Mother Tongue (MT) language	Basic MT, Structure of MT, MT language development, MT handwriting, MT reading and writing, MT children's literature, and teaching MT for preschool.	17
English language	Basic English I, basic English II, structure of English, children's literature, spoken English, Handwriting, and teaching English in preschools	17
Mathematics	Basic Math I, Basic Math II, Plane and solid geometry, introduction to statistics, and teaching math in preschool	15
Natural science	Natural science	3
Social science	Basic Social science	2
Environmental sciences	Environmental science and teaching environmental science	7
Pedagogy and child development	Action research, seminar on action research, Assessment and evaluation of preschool children, Child play, Teaching and play material production, Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Development and learning, Practicum I-IV, and Health, Safety, and nutrition in ECE	32
Miscellaneous	ICT, Art and Craft, Music, Ethical and Civics education, Physical Education, Life skills and gender equity for preschools, Inclusive education, and Preschool management and improvement	20
	Total	**113**

Note: The curriculum indicates that MT courses are designed with Saban script in mind though many languages in Ethiopia (such as Afaan Oromo, Sidama Afu, Af Somali) use the Latin script.

In a nutshell, the preschool teacher education curriculum seemed to include the three aspects of professional development (knowledge of subject matter, teaching, and learning) as well as practicum components. However, the intention of the curriculum design, the nature of contents within each course, emphases in terms of both credit/contact hours and fields of study, and the course organization show limitations than strengths. The curriculum mainly assumed preschool teacher education as an upward continuation of secondary education or a secondary education knowledge deficit compensatory

program. There are enough examples to substantiate this assertion. First, with the exception of the teaching courses, the courses under Mother Tongue Language, English, Mathematics, Natural Science, Social Science, and environmental science categories focus on revising secondary school level knowledge or teaching higher-order knowledge that does not have any relation to the preschool curriculum functional at this time. For example, while the course description of Basic Mother Tongue Language (course code BMT 111) asserted that the course covers topics that are not properly covered or are missed in the secondary school curriculum, the syllabi for Basic Math I and II cover the first-year courses of degree programs such as logic, set theory, algebraic expression, equations and inequalities, sequence and series, yet fails to mention numeracy which is an important aspect of the preschool curriculum. Second, the credit hours allotted to those higher-order content courses amount to 55% of the entire program. Interestingly, courses on knowledge of teaching (teaching Mother tongue, English, Mathematics, and environmental science, as well as children's literature, and handwriting) are viewed as relevant as those courses cover 47 credit hours (41.5% of the total). This is categorically a time used for inapplicable courses in the field of preschool teaching.

Another lesson learned was the structure of the curriculum. The courses are categorized by fields of study – Mother Tongue language (seven courses), English (seven courses), Mathematics (five courses), social science (one course), environmental science, etc. (See Annex 1). There are critical issues of quality at this point. First, the cover page of the curriculum (syllabus as per the title of the document) indicates that the document is owned and approved by the Federal Ministry of Education. However, the courses are designated as prepared by individual experts in the different fields of study. Besides, the curriculum is: (a) more of a sum of courses and not a holistic document aimed at preparing preschool teachers (competent in teaching children rather than subjects); and (b) does not have a comprehensive introduction, nor show clear connecting themes. Such a practice is likely to influence teacher educators to own the courses rather than the trainees.

Second, the preschool curriculum focuses on growth and physical strength, making accepted relationships (socialization), language development, mathematical activities, and the environment. The preschool curriculum may not be perfectly designed but clearly indicates the competence dimensions of a preschool teacher. However, the preschool teacher education curriculum did not make overt recommendations on teaching fine and gross motors, supporting emotional and social development, general pedagogy (as a prerequisite to subject area teaching methods), and even there seems no course on preschool curriculum and ECCE policy in Ethiopia (the context). Higher-order knowledge in each field

and general knowledge courses such as ICT, preschool management, ethical and civics education, etc. might be important but cannot substitute courses instrumental to developing the competence required for being an effective preschool teacher. Third, the literature supports an integrated approach to teacher education curriculum. Analysis of the curriculum at hand shows a loss of integration between theoretical and experiential (practicum) courses. Practicums I, II, III & IV are provided in four semesters starting year one, semester one, and constitute one, two, three and six credit hours respectively. Surprisingly, the practicum courses do not have course descriptions and it is not clear what is to be covered each time and how lessons of practical experience shape the classroom instruction.

Fourth, Ethiopia is a multilingual country and the use of mother tongue language in preschool education is a constitutional and an educational policy provision. In literary practices, some languages use Sabean (e.g., Tigrigna, Amharic, and Harari) and others use Latin scripts (e.g., Afaan Oromo, Sidamu Afo, Wolayttato, Haddiysa, and Aff Somali). This script variation has important instructional implications in early years education due to differences in the number of letters (fidels). While the Sabean script has about 231 symbols (33 families times seven each), Latin scripted languages use, without considering supra-segmental sounds, 26 basic symbols. One implication is that Sabean scripted languages need more time for letter identification and once letters are mastered word formation is automatic. The reverse is true regarding the Latin scripted languages: word-formation takes time as compared to letter identification. Despite such instructional differences, the MT language course descriptions indicated that the curriculum was developed with Sabean script in mind.

The other focus of the documentary analysis technique was the preschool teacher candidate recruitment guideline of the college. Thus, since there is no national recruitment document specific for preschool teacher trainees so far, it was learned that the teacher education institution uses a recruitment guideline provided by the Education Bureau in the region (in 2016) and was analyzed for the purpose of this study. The guideline articulates four basic recruitment and selection criteria indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Preschool teacher candidate selection and recruitment criteria

No	Criteria	Description
1	Academic competence	A GPA of 2:00 or above in Ethiopian General Secondary Education (grade 10) Certificate Examination (EGSECE), and a minimum of 'D' achievements in Math and English subjects.
2	Grades 9-12 average classroom achievements	On average 50% or above
3	Age and health conditions	Height 1.45 cm; 16-35 years old; free of disorders and speech and movement disorder, and other transmitted diseases such as tuberculosis
4	Personality and ethics	This includes being willing to serve as a teacher in remote and rural areas, free of any addiction and crime records.

As presented in Table 2, the criteria are comprehensive and cover the basic issues to be considered. However, this document serves for the recruitment of primary teachers as well and these are only the main points worth considering in the analysis. Besides, disadvantaged groups, female candidates, and persons with disabilities get 5% encouragement points to enhance competitiveness.

The selection criteria, thus, share the systemic problem of the education system in Ethiopia. Specifically, high achievers in grade 10 national examination used to be admitted to the university preparatory programs or other Technical and Vocation Education and Training (TVET) institutions. And, from an employment point of view, those who do not qualify for other training join the teaching profession and hence the recruitment criteria are very relaxed to include all who finish grade 10 general education or failed to join university education because of low achievement at grade 12. In fact, the document does not have any different or special attention criteria for preschool education teacher nomination except the intention to attract more females to the field.

Interview data analysis and findings

Results from the interview data showed that the preschool teacher education started the diploma program in 2014/15 academic year and has regular, extension and summer (kiremt) program students. In the academic years ending in 2016 - 2020, a total of 674 (all female except one) completed and were awarded the diploma as preschool teachers. There is growing attention from the government on resource provision and supporting the training, increased number of applicants, and the job opportunity for graduates. One of the participants has said this:

> There is no problem reported regarding the employment opportunity of our graduates though we did not conduct a tracer study on the relevance of the preschool teacher preparation program so far. We know there are also challenges affecting the quality of education and thereby the preparation of effective preschool teachers (CD2, interviewed on 25 February 2020).

When it comes to the details, five themes were used as organizing elements of analysis: general perception about preschool education, curriculum and teaching, recruitment of candidates, the profile of teacher educators and practicum. The interviewees believed preschool education is not yet understood well (by stakeholders such as the regional education bureau) on its own peculiar nature as a multifaceted and complex profession that deals with the formative stage of human development. One of the interviewee teachers (T2, interviewed on 27 February 2020) said:

> The program is neglected due to low regard and negative attitude, and hence no due attention is given by partners in the education structure, even some partners want to influence the recruitment process, and getting facilities and space is not easy. It should not have been left as 'no man's land.'

Another participant also tried to show how people wrongly understood preschool education by saying this:

> The attitude of all partners towards the scheme is not positive, the right candidates are not selected, and there is a lack of facility and space. In general, there is low regard for the preschool teacher education program; we have a shortage of trained professionals for the courses in the curriculum. If we want to grow a big tree, we must properly nurture the seedling (CD2, interviewed on 25 February 2020).

A challenge indicated regarding assigning professionals from sister academic units to teach courses in the preschool teacher education department was self-identification. Teacher educators from subject-based departments such as mathematics identify themselves with subject area content knowledge rather than with teaching-learning professional skills appropriate to the level under discussion.

Regarding the preschool teacher education curriculum, participants believed that the source document is the teacher education curriculum for primary school teacher preparation in the region. In other words, the current preschool curriculum functional at the teacher education institution is basically the curriculum of the primary teacher education program with slight modification. Another challenge learned from the interview data supports the findings of the documentary analysis in the sense that the preschool teacher education curriculum included "courses from different disciplines that do not have a direct link with early childhood education" (CD1, interviewed on 20 June 2017).

There seems a consensus among the interviewees on the fact that the department of preschool teacher education owns the early childhood education-specific courses only. The other courses in the curriculum

are offered by employees in other sister departments within the teacher education institution. Borrowing examples cited by one of the participants, the situation can be described as follows:

> Basic English, Basic Math, etc. are handled by the respective departments and content packages prepared for the primary school teacher education are implemented in the preschool teacher education without major modifications. Accordingly, this preschool teacher education curriculum lacks focus and integration of activities; the content is too difficult and less adapted; classroom methodologies implemented do not really consider the special nature of early childhood education in context (T3, interviewed on 27 February 2020).

The preschool teacher education at the institution in this study is expected to serve the communities in the region. However, interview data analysis revealed that while the preschool medium of instruction is mother tongue (MT) language, the preschool teacher education offers courses in English while the MT courses mainly focus on the Amharic language (different from the local language at the grassroots levels especially in rural areas). This indicates a mismatch in media of instructions in the teacher education and the preschools at the grassroots level which might create limitations on the effectiveness of graduates.

The other issue of concern was the profile and number of teacher educators in the department. During the interview, the participants agreed that the current head of the department (T1) and the two interviewed teachers (T2 & T3) are the only permanent staff members of the department. Thus, these teachers were asked which courses they teach. It was learned that each of them offers three courses: one teaches Early Childhood Education (ECE 201), Preschool management and improvement (PMI 201) and Action Research (ACR 222), other one covers Child Play and learning (CPL 231), Introduction to child development and learning (ECDL 211), and Health, Safety and Nutrition (HSNU 311). The rest (36 of the 42 courses) are offered by professionals from sister departments in the college, originally hired for primary-level teacher preparation. Therefore, the preschool teacher education department seems to have little effect on determining the nature of program outcomes.

The interviewees understand that preschool education is a multidisciplinary area of education. However, both the department head and the preschool teacher educators argue for the need to make it focused on the holistic development of the child, issues of school readiness and early stimulation. It was discussed that teachers deployed from the different disciplines such as departments of Mathematics, English, MT, Science and others teach the way they teach in their respective departments, they make no effort to adopt classroom methodology or course contents to the nature of preschool teacher education and competences expected of graduates.

The views of the key informants regarding candidate selection were also collected and discussed. The interviewees were aware of the recruitment guideline. For example, one of the participants said “the recruitment policy favors females more than males. In the process, district education offices announce for application and register applicants” (CD2, interviewed on 25 February 2020). The final nomination is, however, the responsibility of the department. A problem identified here was the applicants are those who could not pass to the next level or join other professions of their choice due to low academic achievements in national examinations or being less competitive to join other professions such as health and agricultural institutions. The last comment obtained in this connection was employment opportunity of the graduates probably as a factor of attracting relatively capable applicants to the training. Analysis of the interview showed that since preschools (both private and government) are flourishing these days and preschool teacher education is a recent phenomenon in the college and the area, employment opportunity is not a problem at this time.

How about reflections regarding effective practicum? The interviewees confirmed that practicum is done in accessible preschools, and the regional, zonal and district offices are aware of the field practice. Three main problems were identified from the analysis of the interview data. First, the preschool teachers are contract employees with no or short-term training and some who have completed grade 8 or 10 only. However, the practicum manual demands them to coach, support and assess the performances of the trainees and report to the department. Hence, it has been difficult to get constructive feedback to improve the practice of teacher education. Second, those focal persons for preschool at the different offices also lack relevant educational background to provide support and even to understand what the department should look like. Third, monitoring assigned teachers to coach the trainees during practicum and getting reports on time is very difficult since they are accountable to other departments.

Discussion and conclusions

The initiative to make preschool teacher education in the region of this case study follows the trends in the expansion of preschool education in the country. Besides, preschool education deals with formative ages and is fundamentally characterized by the formative stage of development as well as learning. As indicated in the literature, the establishment of preschool teacher education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for education quality enhancement, especially in Ethiopia. The theoretical framework assumes the appropriateness of the teacher education curriculum, profiles of teacher

educators and teacher candidates to the situational setting of the preschools. Without such a direct link, efforts at teacher education may not transform the learning situation of preschoolers. Based on the data collected and analyzed, therefore, we have identified three core results from our study.

First, findings indicated that the fit between teacher education and preschool curricula has basic gaps to develop the professional competencies of teachers. The alignment of teacher education and preschool curricula can have two main features. The first deals with the match in languages of instruction. The education and training policy clearly stated that teacher training intuitions should ensure correspondence of their programs with the educational level for which teachers are trained including language use, which should be the nationality language used in the area. This policy assertion goes with the current literature but not with the actual practice at the teacher education institution in our case study. While the medium of instruction was English, preschools use their mother tongue languages. The second feature refers to the nature and categories of courses. Results showed shortcomings and strengths. While the curriculum includes content, teaching and learning knowledge domains, and practicum component, the finding showed major limitations. First, content knowledge got the emphasis (in terms of both credit hours and the number of courses) compared to the teaching and learning aspects of the teachers' professional competence. Besides, the scientific content included was not relevant to teaching at a preschool level. Second, compared to the preschool curriculum of the country, courses related to fine and gross motor development, and socio-emotional skills are missing components in the teacher education curriculum. Third, the literature suggests that the preschool curriculum focuses on the whole child and a thematically integrated approach is more appropriate than a subject-oriented one. Curriculum subjects in preschool are broad and developmentally appropriate; children learn using organizing themes like the case in the Ethiopian preschool curriculum where environment, making relationships, etc. are the main curricular issues. The findings of this case study, however, suggested the teacher education curriculum was found to be subject-oriented with fragmented practice teaching components and schedules.

The second core finding relates to who teaches what in preschool teacher education. Many courses are taught by subject teachers from sister departments that have no adequate academic preparation as well as professional experience in preschool education. The department of preschool education at the teacher education institution in our study has only three teachers and manages only six (out of the 42) courses of the program. For the other courses, teachers are assigned from departments of primary teacher education like mathematics, English, Psychology, etc. who handle the courses as standalone

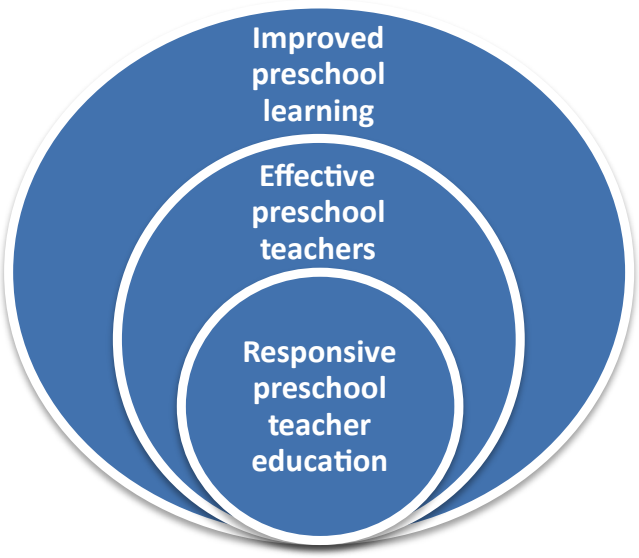
components rather than in an integrated or multidisciplinary approach. Literature showed that integration between courses, and between theory and practice fit better to the cultivation of effective teachers. More importantly, preschool education gives priority to holistic child development rather than to the preparation of subject area expertise. In addition to the lack of clear connecting themes (thread) within the preschool teacher education curriculum structure, assigning less oriented teacher educators to handle courses seems to contribute to the mismatch between profiles of graduates and preschool teacher professionalism expectations.

The third core finding is related to the candidate recruitment criteria for the preschool teacher education program. A GPA of 2.00 or above in secondary education exit exam, on average 50% or above grades 9-12 classroom achievement, within the range of 16-35 years of age, health conditions and ethics are the major ones in this regard. In practice, however, candidates for the program are low achievers who failed to compete for positions in other professions such as health and agriculture. Thus, the problem is not on the criteria per se but on the availability of candidates with required profiles.

Implications

Breaking the quality vicious circle is feasible when there are possibilities to bring breakthroughs in the quality of teacher education. Shortages of resources can be alleviated when there are capable professionals that can understand the situation properly and act on solutions; available resources become assets when teachers are able to wisely use them. Besides, the capability of graduating teachers partly depends on the background profiles and academic readiness of the candidates admitted to the program. On the other side, teacher preparation effectiveness increases when the curriculum as a platform is appropriate and is implemented fittingly by teachers and educational leaders. This justifies the assertion in this study though findings showed otherwise: relevant teacher education curriculum, effective teacher educators, the capability of teacher candidates to learn to teach and supportive context has far-reaching effects on the quality of education. Figure 2 shows the interconnection.

Figure 2. Education quality chain in context



On the contrary, the findings of this study showed a mismatch between what is expected and what is functional in all the three issues: curriculum alignment, teacher educator profile and academic readiness of candidates. Therefore, it can safely be concluded that the practice of preschool teacher education at the institution in this study has quality challenges in preparing preschool teachers with appropriate graduation profiles and practical skills. Less effective teachers in turn affect the learning opportunities of their students, and the system of education remains in a vicious circle.

The findings also suggest research, policy, and practice implications. On one hand, this research did not show prevailing initiatives in other similar institutions to make the curriculum more responsive to its objectives. Besides, views on employing agencies, graduates and other stakeholders were not in the scope of this study. Hence, additional investigations in such areas, developing appropriate governing institutional policy on norms of practices, improving curriculum relevance, and working on teacher educators' and teacher candidates' profiles seem the priorities to start breaking the education quality vicious circle in the study area and similar contexts.

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Annex 1. The teacher education institution's preschool teacher education curriculum courses and semester loads (credit course ours in brackets)

No	Year I		Year II		Year III	
	Semester I	**Semester II**	**Semester I**	**Semester II**	**Semester I**	**Semester II**
1	Basic Math I Math 111 (3)*	Basic Math II Math 122 (3)	Early Childhood Dev't and Learning ECDL 211 (3)	Assessment & Evaluation of Preschool Children AEPC 202 (2)	Teaching English in Preschool TELPS 341 (3)	Life skills & Gender Equity for Preschool LGEP 302 (2)
2	Basic Natural Science BNSC 111 (3)	Basic English II Eng 122 (3)	Preschool Management & Improvement PMI 201 (3)	The Structure of English Eng 232 (3)	Teaching Mother Tongue in Preschool TMTPS 341 (3)	Mother Tongue Child Literature MTCL 302 (2)
3	Basic English I Eng 111 (3)	Environmental Science ENSC 112 (4)	Plane & Solid Geometry Math 201 (4)	Teaching & Play Material Production in Preschool TMPP 212 (3)	Teaching Environmental Science in preschool TESP 301 (3)	ICT for Preschool ICTE 302 (2)
4	Basic Mother Tongue BMT 111 (2)	Introduction to Ethics & Civic Education CEED 102 (2)	Spoken English Eng 221 (3)	Action Research ACR 222 (2)	Health, Safety & Nutrition HSNU 311 (3)	Seminar on Action Research SACR 322 (1)
5	Hand Writing (MT or English) MTHW 111 (2)	MT reading & writing MTRW 112 (3)	Child Play CPL 231 (3)	MT language Dev't MTLD 202 (2)	Children's Literature Eng 301 (2)	Practicum IV (6)
6	Preschool Art and Craft Kared 101 (3)	Preschool Music PMU 102 (3)	Structure of Mother Tongue SMT 201 (3)	Inclusive Education in Preschool Pre sch. SNIE 202 (3)		-
7	Basic Social Science BSST 111 (2)	Introduction to Statistics for Preschool Math 102 (2)	Practicum I (1)	Practicum II (2)	Practicum III (3)	Physical Education PHED 302 (2)
8			Early Childhood Education ECE 201 (3)		Teaching Math in Preschool TMPS 301 (3)	
Total	**18**	**20**	**23**	**17**	**20**	**15**

Source*:* MoE, Ethiopia (2014). *Syllabus for Preschool Pre-service Teacher Education Program.* Addis Ababa.