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A Comparative Review of the Performances and Challenges of Early Childhood Education across the Regional States of Ethiopia (2017/18-2020/21)

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ABSTRACT

This particular study was conducted to make a comparative analysis on the relative performances of the regional states of Ethiopia. To attain these objectives the study employed concurrent mixed method. Based on the analysis, it was found that the regions with predominantly pastoralist communities left far behind the others in expanding the ECE. Moreover, the problems like inequity, lack of separate and sufficient budget, lack of curriculum standardization, poor facilities and large pupils- teacher ratio were found the challenges fettering the ECE in the country as whole. To redress these challenges and adequately reach-out all children, it was recommended that the government should establish separate ECE training colleges to produce teachers and separate centers out of the primary schools in all villages and the private sector should be empowered to take part in ECE teachers training.

keywords: early childhood care and education, regions, review, challenges, ethiopia

1. Background of the Study

The concept of early childhood care and education (ECCE) refers to the holistic development of the children from their birth to the schooling age (UNESCO 2006:15). This period is taken seriously into consideration in the development phases of the children due to its association to the fast neural developments and which needs to be supplemented by the combined impact of education, care, health, nutrition, protection and stimulation (Srivastava, 2020:1). Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is thus services that support young children's development, through a variety of program modalities including but not limited to school-based pre-primary education, community-based pre-primary education, and parenting support programs.(Raikes et al., 2021)

Universal pre-primary education of fine quality will bring enormous benefits to children, families, education systems and society at large. Quality pre-primary education sets foundation for successful transition of the children's education ladder of the long run time as successful students go through the education system and which successively reduces the prices for corrective efforts for missed learning (Naudeau Sophie, et al.,2010) as cited in (UNICEF, 2019). Beyond preparation for elementary school, it addresses the holistic development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs from birth to the beginning of primary school (Raikes et al., 2021)

Moreover, the pre-primary education also supports country's' goals for economic process. Children's participation in pre-primary education offers mothers and other caregivers opportunities to participate within the workforce and increase their earnings, facilitating the upward mobility of two generations. Eventually, the early childhood care and education will enhance the labor force productivity decreasing the social costs of crime and health care (Jorge L. Garcia et al. 2016). Considering this, Kaga (2007: 53) as cited in (UNESCO-UNCIEF2011:4) advocates that ECCE constitutes an "…effective way to construct a just and sustainable world (through supporting the development of) knowledge, skills and values – like empathy, sharing, respect for others …"

Accordingly, there's compelling evidences on the critical importance of early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children's learning and wellbeing and for achieving societal goals, like gender equality, inclusion and economic development (Marope and Kaga, 2015; Naudeau, et al., 2011). To these ends, many countries are working to handle the requirements of the ECCE sector to make sure that each child is supplied with the best support to begin the process of lifelong learning (Richter, et al., 2017).

Despite those blessings and unanimous recognition of it, the standard, access, relevance and equity problems with the ECCE remained the unsettled question. There's improvements in coverage in childhood education however its accessibility still has been in visible disparity among the countries of the world and even within the countries (Maki Hayashikawa 2015:1).

Globally, about 175 million boys and girls don't seem to be enrolled in pre-primary education during these vital years of their lives. Desperately, it's just one in 5 children has access to pre-primary education in low income countries. The difference in access isn't only among the nations or regions; rather it's noticeable between the poor and rich families. Consequently, this contains a detrimental effect on ensuring social equity as access to pre-primary education is simply available to comparatively well-off families, it will widen the gap in opportunities between children from the poorest and wealthiest households (Jorge L. Garcia et al. 2016).

On the side of this, expanding access and ensuring the standard of ECCE must go hand-in-hand to maximize the advantages of ECCE for youngsters and also the society (UNESCO, 2020:4). This is often mainly because of the very fact that the quality of early childhood care and education will in future influence their learning positively or negatively. With this understanding many countries are unanimously backing the investment in early childhood as a productive project. However, the outcomes of such investments are inevitably influenced by the standards of quality of the services provided at this level (Raikes et al., 2021:3). Unfortunately, (UNESCO, 2004) states that the attentions given for the quality of ECCE has not yet been equated with the universality of recognition to ECCE among the countries around the world. Evidently, early childhood services of poor quality thus will never positively contribute to the development of kids and rather it has detrimental impacts.

In Ethiopia early childhood Care and Education/ECCE has become one among the priorities for the education sector because it'll be one among the potential inputs to the improvement of quality of education and reduction of drop out and repetition rates in later stages of formal schooling and since it results in higher enrolments, particularly of girls (MOE, 2010). However, the matter of poor quality and inequity remain unresolved. Accordingly, the government admitted that the worries over quality raise made it questionable that the role played in this aspect is yet insignificant (MOE, ibid).

Additionally, to the quality issue the ECCE in Ethiopia fettered by the poor governance, the problem of standardization, teachers' qualification and benefits preschool issues, issue of unity within diversity, poor facilities' and space and insufficient budget(MOE,2018). Despite

these concerns, the studies conducted on the trends of the ECCE programs are rarely available. So, this particular study attempts to assess the extent access and equity, teacher-pupils' ratio, and also the extent of students out of the school in last four years and the challenges fettering the ECCE development comparatively across the regions of Ethiopia (2017/18-2020/21).

2. Objectives of the Study

- Examining the relative performance of regions in early childhood care and education
- Tracing out the challenges facing the performances of the nation in ECCE.

3. The purpose of the Study

The study will give a clue to examine the extent upon which the ECCE has been accessed equitably across the regions of the country in the move of achieving the goal of Education for all 2030. The study will give an insight to the policy makers and government bodies facilitating the implementation of the program about comparative status and give them the sprite of competitiveness. Moreover, the study will serve as a basis for the researchers who might conduct the comparative studies in this area.

4. The Scope of the Study

Scope of this research work was delimited to comparing the performances and challenges of ECCE modalities across the regions of Ethiopia between 2017/18-2020/21.

5. Methodology of the Study

5.1. Research Method

This study was undertaken to examine the relative performance of the regional states of Ethiopia in early childhood care and education (ECCE) and to trace out the challenges facing the performances of the nation in ECCE. The study was purely relied on the secondary data collected from the websites, articles; books and government reports such as the Educational Sector Academic Abstracts (2017/18-2020/21) and Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPIII-ESDP VI). The quantitative reports of MOE were aggregated to compare the changes of the performance across the regions over the time. In addition to this, numerical data about the enrolment, GPI, and teachers' number were analyzed quantitatively being substantiated by the qualitative literature reviews. As the data were collected through online sources, both the qualitative and quantitative were data concurrently collected at the same time. Thus, the research method that employed for the study under consideration was concurrent mixed method.

5.2. Data Sources and Collection Data Collection

Data collects is an important aspect of conducting the studies since it decides how effectively the research questions are analyzed. For this study the ESAA reports produced by ministry of education from 2017/18 to 2020/21 used as the main sources of the study. In addition to this, other related literatures were reviewed as supportive secondary sources of the study. Accordingly, the data stored in the website of Ministry of education (https://moe.gov.et/EduStat) were downloaded and used for the study under consideration. The data on the site was seen as authentic as the Ministry of Education welcomes

Stakeholders in education, such as researchers, publishers, legislative bodies, and development to use the information contained in this education statistical annual abstract in their endeavors to improve the delivery of education and training in the country(ESAA, 2017/18, 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21)

5.3. Data Analysis

The data collected that collected using a given instrument should be analyzed to make inferences of it. Thus, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods combined with creative and logical manner in order to capture full information to address research question. The data taken from the related literature used to support the quantitative analysis of the data from the Ministry of education. Thus, the data related with the equity, access, pupil-teacher ratio, students out of school and the like were analyzed quantitatively using tables, and graphic representations. Moreover, the data related with the challenges of ECCE were analyzed descriptively in statements.

5.4. Ethical Considerations

It is well known that the research work demands higher caution with regard to taking ethical considerations in to account. This study is exclusively relying on the secondary data. Thus, here it comes understand how the literatures to be cited represented and used. Thus, while conducting the study the researcher gave a curious attention to avoid falsifications, misrepresentation, not citing and complete plagiarism without paraphrasing the others work as his own.

6. Results and Discussion

This particular desk research was missioned to compare the performances of the regional states of Ethiopia in ECCE. The study used the secondary data existing in different online sources particularly on the website of the ministry of education in last four consecutive years. In addition, different literatures were referred to get insight into the issue at the hand. Based on the data gathered from the relative performances of the regions in ECCE were assessed taking the gross enrollment rates, Net enrollment Rates, Gender Parity Index, the enrollment of the students with special needs and learning difficulties and the average numbers of the children out of the school in these years.

Accordingly, the relative performances of the regions in their average capacity intake the children with or without official age to ECCE were assessed as follows to make an inference about the status ECCE across the regions and the children out of the school in the programs despite their ages permits them to do so.

6.1. GER and NER

According to (UNESCO, 2009:9) gross enrollment rate refers to the entire enrolment during a specific level of education, no matter age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a very given academic year. Most frequently it's used to show the general extent of involvement in a certain level of education or the capacity of the education system to enroll students of a specific cohort. A value with higher GRE refers the higher participation of children regardless of their age appropriateness to a given cohort. When the value of GRE is approaching to 100%, it roughly implies the country is forthcoming to universal education. To point out the entire participation of the kids in relevant age the net enrolment rate could be a key measure.

Thus, consistent with UNESCO (1997) NER in ECCE refers to the quantity of kids of official pre-primary school age who are enrolled in pre-primary education as a percentage of the overall children of the official school age population. Accordingly, the relative performances of the regions within their average capacity intake the kids with or without official age to ECCE were assessed as follows to create an inference about the status ECCE across the regions and also the children out of the school in the programs despite their ages permits them to try and do so.

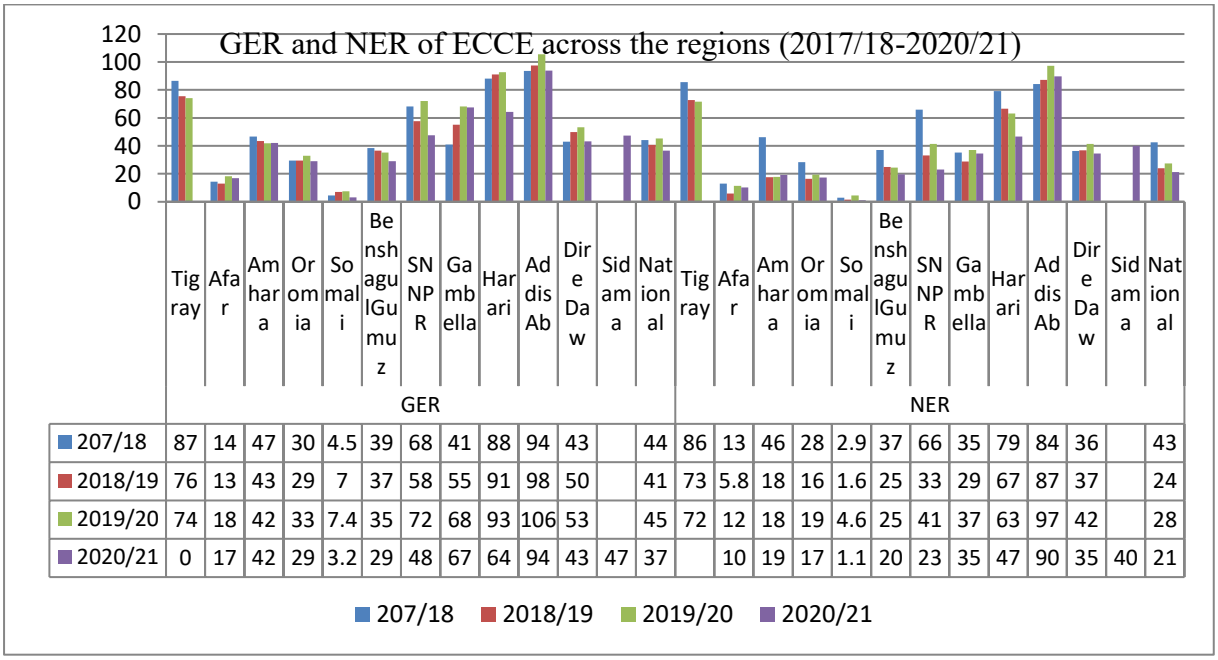


Figure 1. GER and NER of ECCE across the regions (2017/18-2020/21)
Source: ESAA 2017/18-2020/21

As it can be observed from the graph, in the regions like Addis Ababa (93.6%, 97.6%, 106% and 93.8) Harari (88.1%, 91.2, 92.7% and 64.4%) Tigray(86.6%,75.5%,74.1%) until 2020/21, SNNPR(68.2%,57.7%, 72.2 and 47.7% are the taking the lion share in the national general enrollment of this category. In these regions the general enrollments unremittingly registered above the national average. But this doesn't mean they are performing equally. However, it needs higher attention and work to improve the access to ECCE for the children of Somali and Afar where the enrollment consecutively registered very low.

Moreover the regions like Oromia and Amhara that account more than half of the national age group (4-6 years) are continuously recorded less than 50% in each year with slightly better performance of Amhara region.

As UNESCO (2009) confirms when the GER surpasses 90% for a specific level of education, the cumulative number of places for pupils is reaching the number required for universal access of the official age group. Thus, nationally, as the data shows more than half of the appropriate age children (55.8%, 59.3%, 54.6%, and 63.3%) were not enrolled in ECCE programs during each academic year from the earlier to later. Moreover, the targets for general enrollment in ECCE hadn't even succeeded during ESDP V and ESDP VI plan years. The targets for ESDP V years 2017/18(654.5%), 2018/19(72.5%), 2019/20(45.35%) and ESDPVI (2020/21, 46.5%) were missed by 20%, 31.71%, 34.65% and 9.85% respectively. This implicates that the nation left far away from addressing universal ECCE in 2030. Unfortunately, as it is shown on the graph among the regions and nationally, the rate of enrollment to ECCE has been dropped in the year 2020/2021.

With respect to age relevance, the data justifies that the ECCE programs were highly influenced by the age inappropriateness. In none of the regions the GER exactly equated with NER. According to the above diagram, in the regions like Amhara(1.07%,59.21%, 57.52% and 54.4%), Somali(35.56%, 77.14%, 37.83%, and 65.2%), Gambella(14%, 44.8%, 45.7% and 44.2%), SNNPR(3.5%, 42.63%, 42.71%, and 51.57%) Oromia(40%,44.2%,41% and 40%), Afar(10%, 55%,37.1%, and 40%) and Harar(10.2%, 26.97%, 31.82%, 27.63%) of their generally enrolled children in ECCE programs were in inappropriate age cohort with the respective order of academic years. They might be below or above appropriate age groups. Unlikely, Tigray, Addis Abeba (until the war), Dire dawa were the regions with better appropriate enrollments.

Thus, it can be concluded that the general enrolment of ECCE program has been creditably increased. However, in some regions roughly half of the children were enrolled in inappropriate age groups. In this regard, Amhara, Somali, Gambella, SNNPR, Oromia, Afar and Harar were the regions with significant number of students who enrolled in unofficial age groups.

6.2. ECCE Trends in Modalities Across the Regions from 2018-2021

Though there is a progress on the general enrollment in KG there still remains a lot as nearly 90% of the students are not attending this modality. In the year 2020/2021 the general enrollment in kindergarten fallen by 2.5% from the previous year. This may be due to the war in the northern part of the country relocating more than 1.7 million people from Tigray, Amhara and Afar. Due to this, the expected number of children is not attending the formal education and hence imposes a significant impact on the attainment of key performance indicators(MOE, 2021). While KG is more appropriate modality to prepare the children for formal compared to other modalities being practiced in the country (O or child to child modality for one year(MOE, 2015), it still remained to grow little by little.

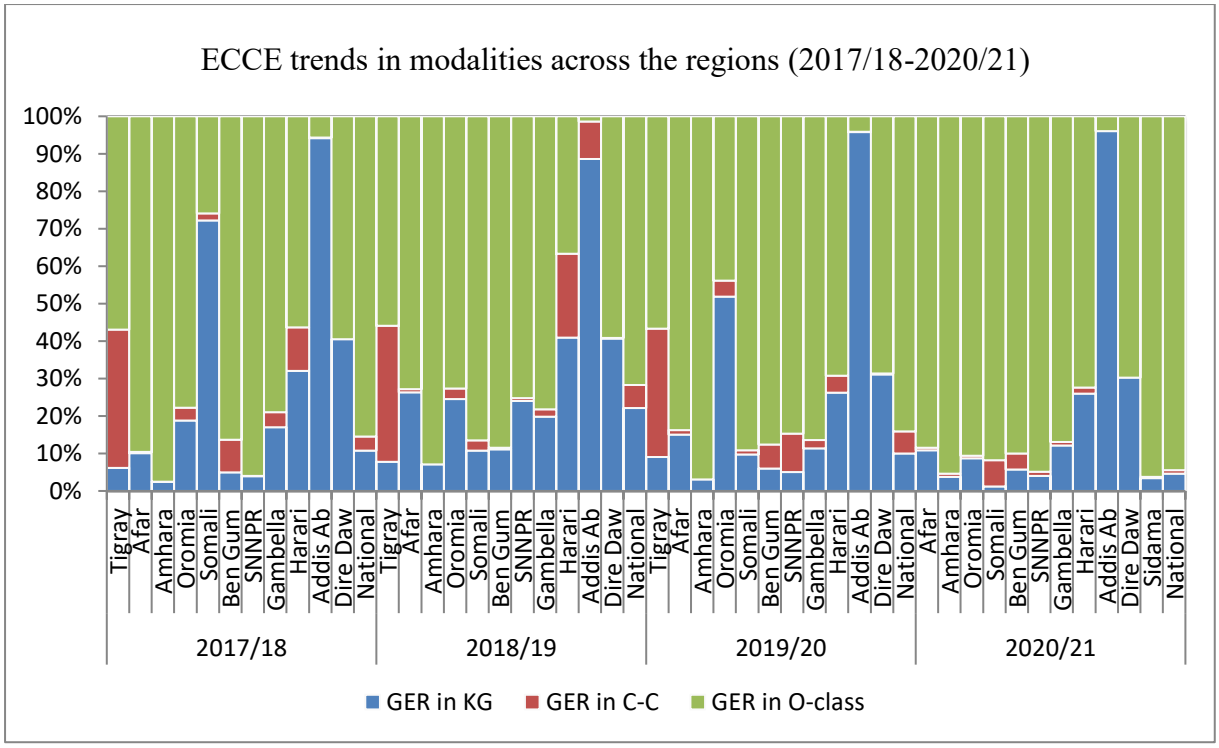


Figure 2. ECCE trends in modalities across the regions (2017/18-2020/21)

Moreover, the accessibility of KG program is quite unevenly distributed across the regions of the country. In this regard, the children in Addis Abeba(91.8%,86.8%,104% and 92.5) , Harar(45.5%, 43.8%, 45.3% and 32.5%) and Dire Dawa(29.1%, 25%, 30.7% and 24.6%) had better access to KG modality whereas the national averages left below 10% for these consecutive years. The children who attend the three-year kindergarten program are better prepared for formal school than those who attend the one-year reception program (MOE, 2020). However, the provision of KG modality is predominantly left for private sectors and religious organization (Tsegai, 2015:4). Unluckily, the majority of the children whose family cannot afford to pay and around rural areas obliged to be enrolled in other ECCE programs which are comparatively of less quality. Conversely, the very inception ECCE was believed that, children, particularly, the underprivileged ones and societies can earn the recognized paybacks of quality ECCE. In addition, it is supposed that ECCE will empower the children from the less well-offed backgrounds to share similar beginning in the school and in other private life through its repaying effects(Marope & Kaga, 2015) as cited in (Mahmud Reshad Abdo, 2020). Inevitably, nevertheless the education access in the early child hood is creating the citizens of different classes. Related to this, the case of Tigray region can reveal the fact that a significant number of children grouped in Child to Child modality which is an informal modality. As (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021:2) affirms, the child to child modality is less developed and organized program that was designed to with the aim that the older children will support the younger ones by sharing their school experiences. Even though, (Mundy et al., 2014) insist that young children who participated in the child to child modality had significantly higher scores on all early numeracy and literacy tasks tested compared to children who never attended the early education, still compared to KG and O-class it is less formalized and less supervised.

Outside of Addis Ababa, the ECCE provision is outweighed by O-class modality. This is a reception class based in government primary schools for children aged 6, before starting formal schooling at age 7. According to Woodhead (2017), following the introduction of the National Policy Framework for ECCE I n2011/12, the enrollment in O-Classes was expanded more than three times as it was in the year before. The enrolment continued to grow through 2020/21 with O-Class serving 2,244,462 young children and which was still three times larger than KG and Child to Child modalities. Despite of this recognizable developments as asserted by (Rossiter et al., 2018) as cited in (Neuman & Powers, 2021) the ESDP V's target of an O-Class to be attached to every primary school to reach all 6-year-olds by 2020 was not realized due to absence of sufficient budget and donors' supports accompanied by biased distribution of existing resources across the region without considering less disadvantaged areas. . Thus compared across the regions, the smallest enrollment was still registered in Somali region (1.4%, 3.2%, 16.4 and 7.8%) followed by Oromia(31.5%, 23.1, 8.2% and 66.7% and Afar(31.5%, 8.3%, 35.8% and 36.7%) in academic years under consideration.

Moreover, it was found that in some in regions the general enrollment in O-class modality exceeded 100% in these academic years. For instance, in Amhara region it was128% in 2017/18, 111% in 2019/20 and 109% in 2020/21. In the same years it was recorded as 185%, 141% and 127.2% in SNNPR. Similarly, it was 139.7% and 140.1 % in Gambella region in 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. These outpaced enrollments indicate that a large number of children under year six were enrolled to O-class modality. Consequently, it is undeniable that the rapid expansion of O-classes in under resourced primary schools has raised another concern regarding the quality of childhood education provided (MoE, 2015) as cited in Diale Boitumelo M. (2021:2).

Thus it can be concluded that, the access to KG modality was yet available to the children whose parents are well-off to pay and located around the cities. Its provision is predominantly

left for the private sector where education cannot be considered as public goods. On the side of this, the expansion of O-class can be considerable but it is being tempted by age inappropriateness and poor quality and which consequently creates the population different quality between the urban and rural centers as the majority of children in O-class are from the rural areas. Therefore, the government should be committed to arrange the modality which could serve the children from the same age to KG.

6.3. Distribution of Teachers

Teachers are a basic part of educational system as having a vital and decisive role in the quality of education and how well students learn. Actually, their role on the quality of education can be viewed in terms of the quality and the quantity of teachers. Conformingly, (Manning et al., 2017) also show the significant association between having lead teachers with higher qualifications and the overall structural and process quality within ECEC settings. Besides the quality of services pre-school teachers and other care givers influence the development of children more than any specific curriculum or methodology as they are responsible for immediate, face to face care and support for children (Hailu Dinka 2017). Moreover, trained and qualified teachers are ideally informed about child development and suitable practices and teaching strategies for use with young children (Bose, 2008) as cited in (Mwaipopo, 2021) Consequently, the availability of trained ECCE teachers will inevitably have impact on the development of children and the quality of services to be provided at early ages. The level of their availability can be measured by the number of students they will treat in a single class so as to address each child. Thus, in the school where the ratio of the students to the teacher is high, doubtlessly the quality of education will be lower and vice versa.

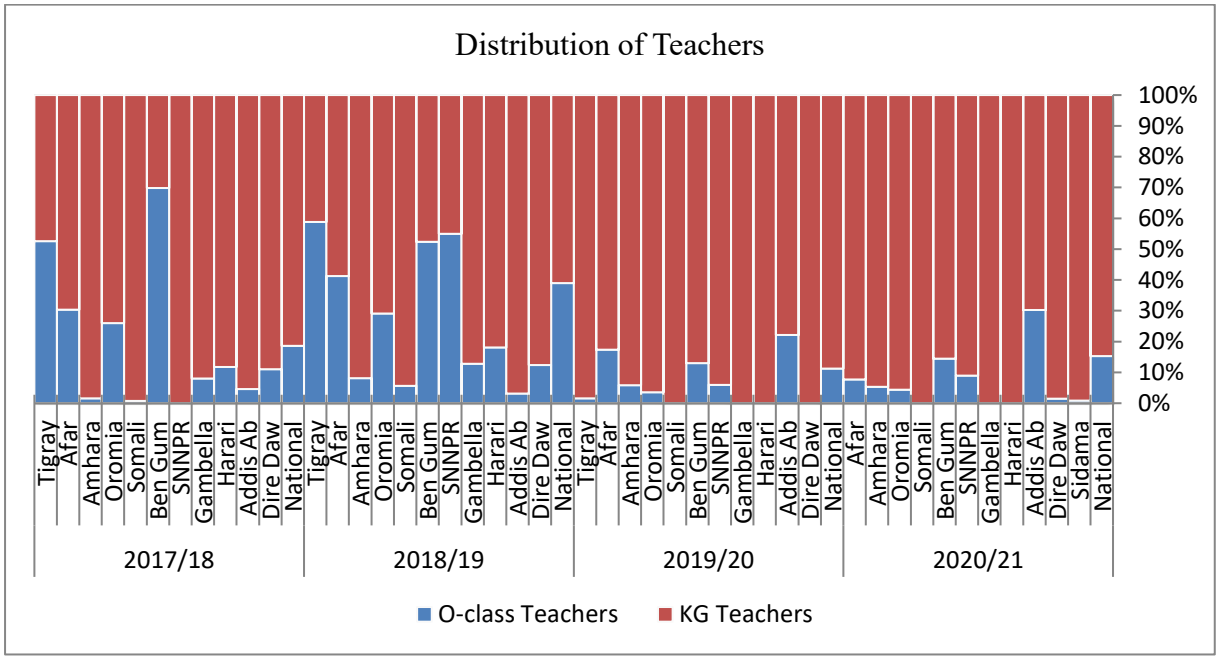


Figure 3. Distribution of Teachers

Based on the data, some regions like Addis Ababa, Oromia, Amhara, SNNPR and Tigray had higher number of KG teachers compared to others. Whereas the in Somali, Afar, Benshanguli Gumuz, Gambela , Harari and Dire Dawa the number of the teachers were very low in a rough comparison to the others. The number of the teachers can be genuinely explained when it is rated via the number of the students they teach. In this regard, comparing the pupils-teachers ratio is an essential indicator of the teachers' distribution. This is due to the fact that

as (Barros & Aguiar, 2010) in (Õun et al., 2018) asserted, the structural and process quality of child care institutions is higher with a smaller teacher–child ratio and a smaller group size. (Johnson, 2011) also as cited in (Koc & Celik, 2015:64) affirms that in schools with smaller student teacher ratio, teachers can have more time to spend with each student and check the progress of every student they are responsible and can provide a more individualized teaching that is more suitable to each student. Moreover, it has a lifelong impact as noted by (Ajani & Akinyele, 2014:101) , "students benefit in later grades from being in small classes during early grades. Longer periods in small classes resulted in more increases in achievement in later grades for all students." In the light of this, the distributions of the teachers in pre-school programs across the regions need to be assessed with students- teacher ratio.

Accordingly, in 2017/18 Harar region had 15:1 ratio which was the least in the academic year followed by Tigray, Amhara, and Dire Dawa with 17:1. In contrary to this, Somali (55:1), SNNPR (35:1), Benshangul Gumuz (34:1) and Dire Dawa (28:1) experienced the highest pupils-teachers ratio in the distribution KG teachers. In 2018/19, Somali (1:8) though it was criticized as under reported by (MOE, 2021), Benshangul Gumuz(14:1), SNNPR(16:1) and Addis Ababa (17:1) had the lower teacher students ratio whereas Afar(31:1), Amhara(29:1), Tigray(28:1) Oromia(28:1), Dire Dawa(27:1), Harar(25:1) and Gambella(25:1) comparatively had the higher pupils- teacher ratio in the same year. In this year, it was observed that, the regions with better students-teacher ratio were in reciprocal position in the former year. In 2019/20, in Somali (4829:1), Afar (42:1), Benshangul Gumuz(33:1) , SNNPR(32:1) and Oromia(29:1) had relatively higher ratio compared to Addis Ababa(20:1), Harari(23:1), Dire Dawa(23:1), Tigray(24:1) and Amhara(25:1). In 2020/21, Somali (15:1), Gambella(15:1), Dire Dawa(16:1), Harari(23:1) and Sidama(23:1) had the lower teacher-students' ratio where it was (42:1) in Afar, (30:1) in Benshangul Gumuz, (29:1) SNNPR in and (26:1) in Amhara.

Generally, the regions like SNNPR, Benshangul Gumuz, Afar, Somali, Dire Dawa and Oromia were frequently spotted in the higher teacher- student ratio categories whereas the students-teachers ratios found relatively lower in Addis Abeba, Harari and Gambella. Even though, the numbers of the teachers seem higher in the regions like Oromia and SNNPR, it defines just the total numbers without considering how many students the teacher was assigned to support. At national level, the average pupils-teacher ratio of KG modality was 1:20 in 2017/18, 1:21 in 2018/19, 1:26 in 2019/20 and 1:24 in 2020/21.

The average ratio of students to the qualified teacher was extensively out of management in the case of O-class where one trained teacher was supposed to handle thousands of the students. For instances, there was 1:13622 in Amhara region in 2017/18 as there was no a qualified teacher reported for 970500 in SNNPR in the same years. In the same fashion, the ratio of students to a teacher was contemptibly huge in all regions except in Addis Ababa. In fact it is a plain fact that these reported numbers of the students couldn't be managed by the existing facilitators and teachers. However, as it was found by (Birhanu et al., 2021:17) that in most cases the facilitators/teachers had not received formal training to teach O-classes. Most had completed either Grade 10 or 12, and some were volunteers who had other full-time engagements. Therefore, most of the children in O-class students learn by the caregivers, teachers and directors without having pre and in-service training which undoubtedly influences the quality of the education in this modality.

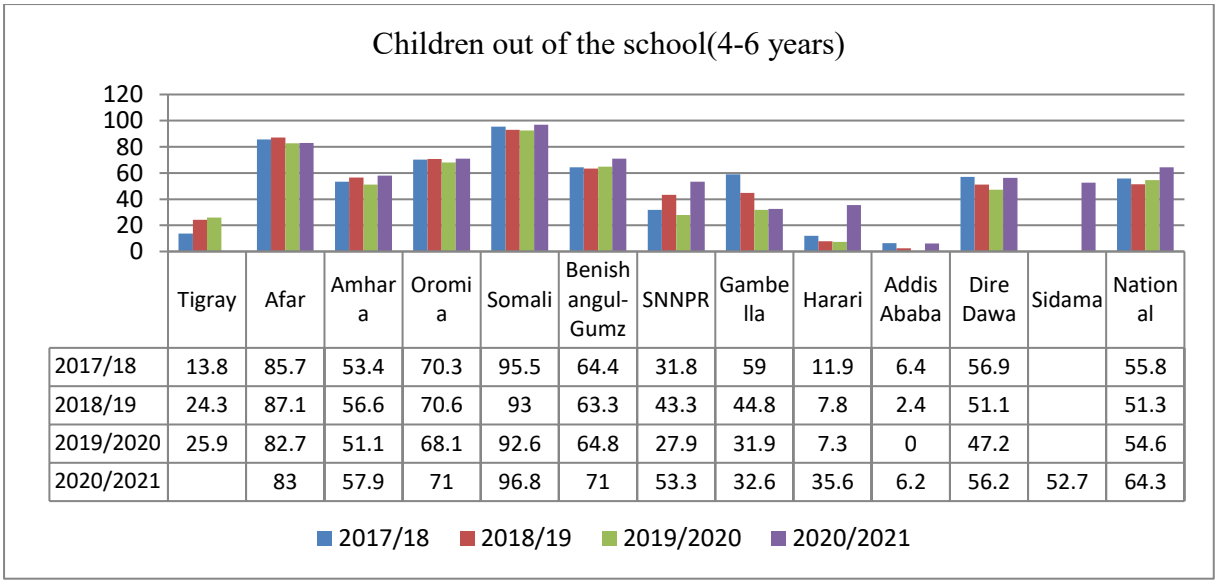
In face of this, in the years 2019/20 and 2020/21 the numbers of KG teachers have fallen by 7075 and 6603 respectively from their former academic years. In the same years, there were instances where all teachers in O-class completely withdrawn in Somali, Gambella and Harari which was 22, 25, and 49 respectively. This could be associated with low facilitators'

remuneration that most of the facilitators felt they were underpaid in relation to their workload, and some were not yet permanent employees as they did not have formal training for the job (Ibid). Accordingly, it can be concluded that the attrition of ECCE teachers was the impeding challenge on the quality of education of the level along with low production of the teachers targeting the government schools.

6.4. Children Out of the School

According to SDG 4(2), all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary educations by 2030(Johnston, 2016). However, according to UNESCO 2019, more than 175 million children - around half of pre-primary-age children globally - are not enrolled in pre-primary education, missing a critical investment opportunity and suffering deep inequalities from the start. In low-income countries, the picture is much bleaker, with only 1 in 5 young children enrolled in pre-primary education (https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/175-million-children-are-not-enrolled-pre-primary-education-unicef). Unfortunately as *UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore argues, "…this increases their risk of repeating grades or dropping out of school altogether and relegates them to the shadows of their more fortunate peers."*

Admitting this, the government of Ethiopia has been striving to increase the number of children who have access to pre-primary education in all regions, prioritizing the most disadvantaged groups(MOE, 2020). In fact pre-primary enrollment has been increasing each year, the large number of children of pre-primary-school- age out of the school persist as a challenge (MoE, 2019). The regional share of the children out of the school is desperately differing that there were states trying to accomplish the universal enrollment rate while others were not up to snuff level. In light of this, the average participation of the children to ECCE across the regions were assessed as follow



	Tigray	Afar	Amhara	Oromia	Somali	Benish angul-Gumz	SNNPR	Gambella	Harari	Addis Ababa	Dire Dawa	Sidama	National
2017/18	13.8	85.7	53.4	70.3	95.5	64.4	31.8	59	11.9	6.4	56.9		55.8
2018/19	24.3	87.1	56.6	70.6	93	63.3	43.3	44.8	7.8	2.4	51.1		51.3
2019/2020	25.9	82.7	51.1	68.1	92.6	64.8	27.9	31.9	7.3	0	47.2		54.6
2020/2021		83	57.9	71	96.8	71	53.3	32.6	35.6	6.2	56.2	52.7	64.3

Figure 4. Children out of the school (4-6 years)

From the above data, in Addis Abeba the rate of children out of the school in ECCE official age was continuously below 10% in these study years registering 6.4%, 2.4%, 0% and 6.2% respectively. Another least number was recorded in Harar Region in the earlier three years with 11.9%, 7.8% and 7.3% respectively. Following Harar region, the number of the children out of the school was showing estimable decline in Tigray region before the northern war

with 13.8%, 24.3%, and 25.9% while considering that in 2019/2020 there was only early enrollment before the outbreak of the war.

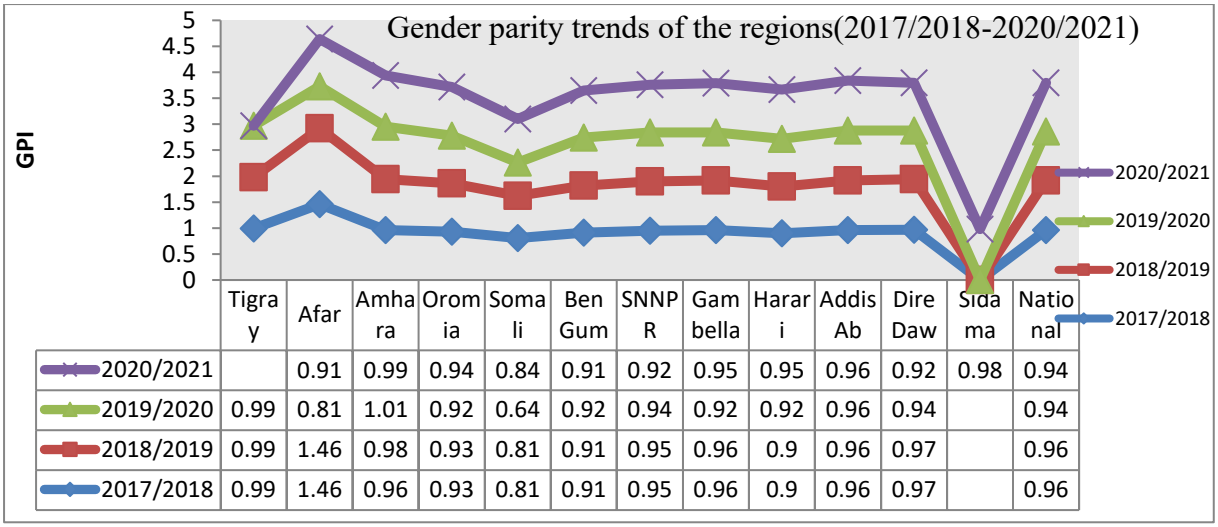
In sharp dissimilarity, the number of the students out of the school in Somal, Affar, Oromia, Benshangul Gumuz, Amhara, Dire Dawa Gambella, and SNNPR regions was enormously large in their respective order. In somali's case, 95.5%, 93%, 92.6% and 96.8% students upto six years had no access to pre-primary education in these study years. In near step, the relative access of ECCE education in Afar region remained largely inaccessible as 85.7%, 87.1%, 82.7% and 83% of children in official age left out of the school. In similar fashion the accessibility of pre-primary education remained very inadequate in Oromia region that 70.3%, 70.6%, 68.1% and 71% of children in ECCE age were not attending education. The accessibility of pre-primary education was also found insufficient in Benshangul Gumuz region where 64.4 %, 63.3%, 64.8% and 71% of ECCE age students were not attending formal education of their age in these study years.

As it was revealed by(MOE, 2020:9), these differences can be attributed to the fact that; even though Somali and Afar regions seem front liners at national level by the percentage of children out of the school, we should understand that they are much smaller regions and less populated than Oromia, Amhara, and SNNPR. So while Somali and Afar may have a high proportion of children out of the school the highest actual number of children out of the school can be found in Oromia, Amhara, and SNNPR. Moreover, these regions where the pre-primary centers left hardly available are those containing the significant portion of pastoralist communities in the country

The situation in which greatly needs the efforts of different concerned bodies and the different ECCE packages relevant to the life style of the pastoralist society may be considered. Furthermore, it needs the integrated efforts of different sectors to enable communities to lead possibly permanent settlement so as to enable the children to access education and enable regions to compete equally in human capital ratio and development. This is mainly due to the fact that , "poverty and other disadvantages experienced during early childhood can greatly affect a child's development, while well-planned interventions can have long-lasting benefits" (Woodhead, 2012). Concomitantly, the area with poor availability of pre-primary services produce insufficient manpower and left behind from other advantageous areas.

6.5. Gender Parity

According to (USAID 2008) attaining gender equality in education between the boys and girls will enable them to exercise their basic human rights. To realize this, the UN SDG 4 target 2 emphasizes on ensuring that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and preprimary education so that they are ready for primary educations. Compliantly, ensuring equal access to social services is indiscriminately granted to every citizen under FDRE constitution article 41(3) and 90(2). More specifically in ECCE, the issues of gender equality need to be deemed from the early ages to limit the later age stereotypes and inequalities. Thus, both boys and girls should equally access the preschool education. From this point of view, the participation of children in ECCE across the regions of Ethiopia was compared using GPI as follows.



	Tigray	Afar	Amhara	Oromia	Somali	Ben Gum	SNNPR	Gambella	Harari	Addis Ab	Dire Daw	Sidama	National
2020/2021		0.91	0.99	0.94	0.84	0.91	0.92	0.95	0.95	0.96	0.92	0.98	0.94
2019/2020	0.99	0.81	1.01	0.92	0.64	0.92	0.94	0.92	0.92	0.96	0.94		0.94
2018/2019	0.99	1.46	0.98	0.93	0.81	0.91	0.95	0.96	0.9	0.96	0.97		0.96
2017/2018	0.99	1.46	0.96	0.93	0.81	0.91	0.95	0.96	0.9	0.96	0.97		0.96

Figure 5. Gender parity trends of the regions (2017/2018-2020/2021)

According to (UNESCO, 2009:49) a GPI equal to 1 indicates parity between females and males. In general, a value less than 1 indicates disparity in favor of boys/men and a value greater than 1 indicates disparity in favor of girls/women. Based on this fact, the data on the diagram manifests that the number of male students in most cases taking upper hand throughout the regions though the disparity is not so wide. Besides this, in later two years (2019/20 and 2020/21) there happened an increase over the national gender disparity by 0.02% and which further expands the gap of equal access to education. In relation to this, there was a trend of increasing gender disparity by (0.03 and 0.02) in Dire Dawa,(0.04 and 0.03) in Gambella, (0.01, and 0.02)in SNNPR, (0.65 and 0.1) in Afar in these academic years. Moreover, In Tigray it was continuously observed the same gender parity index (0.99) until the outbreak of northern war and which was approaching to parity. From the regions, relatively wide gender disparity was observed in Somali region that its lowest performance (0.64) was observed in 2019/2020. Moreover, in the years 2017/18 and 2018/19, the highest gender parity index (1.46) was registered in Afar region. In these years the average attendance of female children surpassed their male counters by 0.46.

In general, the extent of differences in access to ECCE between the male and female children was narrowing despite the numbers of male children still leave behind the female children.

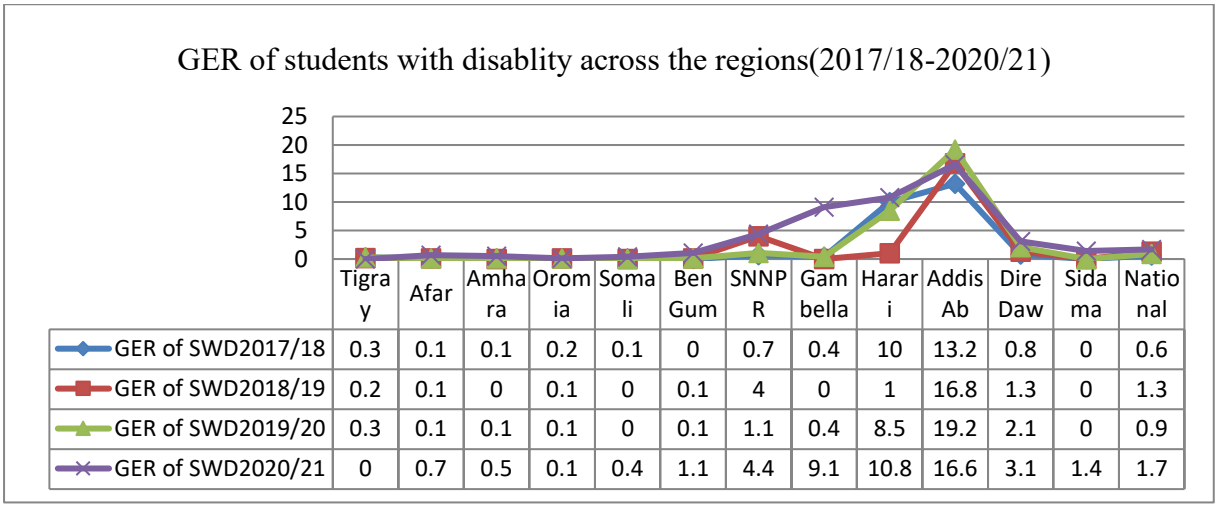
6.6. Children with Disability

The integration of children with and without disabilities is relatively new to early childhood education (Allen andCowdery, 2011). However, these days, there is a need for children with special needs to be part of the preschool education system as the right for education (Fantahun Admas, 2016) Children with identified special needs should also be part of the preschool program for it has an advantage of including children with special needs to their non-special needs peers which in turn help to socialize them (Jalongo et al., 2004). Moreover it is from this early age that they should learn different skills which are important for their primary education and future life such as Brail reading and writing, mobility, Sign language and different life skills (ESAA 2017/18).

To ensure these the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) article 24 obligate the States to recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and

the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity; the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential; and enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society(Baart & Taaka, 2017)

As one of the signatories of the convention, the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) and the Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy of the MoE have clearly stipulated the rights of students with special needs to participate at all education levels.



	Tigray	Afar	Amhara	Oromia	Somali	Ben Gum	SNNPR	Gambella	Harari	Addis Ab	Dire Daw	Sidama	National
GER of SWD2017/18	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.1	0	0.7	0.4	10	13.2	0.8	0	0.6
GER of SWD2018/19	0.2	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.1	4	0	1	16.8	1.3	0	1.3
GER of SWD2019/20	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0	0.1	1.1	0.4	8.5	19.2	2.1	0	0.9
GER of SWD2020/21	0	0.7	0.5	0.1	0.4	1.1	4.4	9.1	10.8	16.6	3.1	1.4	1.7

Figure 6. GER of students with disablity across the regions (2017/18-2020/21)

However, unlike to the legal expectations the existing data reveals that the participation of the children with special needs has been trivial. Nationally, the highest value in terms of enrolment of children with disability in ECCE was 1.7% in 2020/21 followed by 1.3% in 2018/19, 0.9% in 2019/20 and 0.6% in 2017/18 from the total of relevant age children to be enrolled in ECCE. Complementary to GER of children without disability, the GER of children with disability has been comparatively better in the regions with better access to ECCE (Addis Abeba,Harari, SNNPR and DireDawa).However, their relative position seems better, they are still far away to provide universal access to these children.

In other regions the entire participation of the children with disability have been less than or equal to 0.5% in these four years except Afar in 2020/21(0.7%) and Benshangul Gumuz in the same year with 1.1%. It also compels here to drag the case of Oromia and Amhara regions that they have contributed 724,960 children with special needs from the total of 1,236,542 in 2017/18, 725,441 out of 1,184,274 in 2018/19, 725,056 from 1,190,187 in 2019/20 and 724,972 from 1,200,775 in 2020/21. While the total number of the children with special needs is comparatively high, insignificant numbers of children from this cohort are attending the ECCE. The study of Fantahun(2013) as cited in Fantahun (2016:52) confirmed that, in general, children with special needs have no equal access in preschools.

Hence, based on this results, it can be concluded that; in terms of equity it is found that the gender parity across the regions approaching to parity and the national average is also approaching to one whereas the large gap is found in terms of the participation of children with disability.

6.7. Challenges

Despite some promising increment in the enrolment rates, ECCE has been challenged problems. Based on the above discussions and reviewing different literatures the following challenges of ECCE have been identified.

6.7.1. Access and Equity

The education should equally prepare the whole community of the nation for national shares and burdens regardless of locational difference. To this ends all citizens should access the opportunities to learn. In the process of preparing citizens for the nation where the majority of children from underdeveloped rural area they are supposed to attend less qualified and rapid instruction modalities while large number of their peers left without any access. Conforming to this, when we review ESAAs of these four years, except Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and Harari which are predominantly urban centers, the preprimary participation of other regions are dominated by child to child and O-class modalities. Undeniably, the difference in access throughout the regions will result in differences of readiness to join first grade.

As ascertained by (Birhanu et al., 2021:9) the children who had completed different modalities were found prepared differently to join grade schooling. Accordingly, the children who stayed in three years pre-schools (principally accessible in city areas) are truly well prepared than children who have followed other (O-class or Child to Child) one year modalities. Though three year KGs are believed as better option for the child development before schooling, it is found readily available to the children in the city areas and of the well-offed families. Besides, it has been exclusively been left to the private sector which is mostly driven by profit and faith oriented organizations which are not widely addressing all areas. It is therefore MOE admitted that if the same pattern of providing the pre-school education continued, it will unfairly continue to serve the children from the urban centers ignoring the children in rural areas in different situation(ESDP-V, 2015:14).

Besides, the difference in the type of ECCE modalities which created the urban –rural dictum in accessing the early childhood education, the greater numbers of the children were not enrolled in one of those modalities. Consequently, it is appearing as one of the reasons for huge of number of grade 1 drop rate at national level (MoE, 201/15) as cited) in (Haile & Mohammed, 2020:20). Furthermore, the access to the program is not equally available between the children with and without disabilities. The children with disability have been rarely accessing the early childhood education in Ethiopia just with slight differences across the regions. To redress this problem, as (Rossiter, 2016:6) recommends harnessing existing school systems to deliver ECCE has the potential to reduce these inequalities, especially through targeted resourcing and programming.

6.7.2. Teachers and Qualification Related Issues

It cannot be exaggeration that the success early childhood education will extensively affected by the availability and quality of the teachers. This is mainly because they for executing pre-primary instruction that's astutely arranged, stimulating, locks in ,coordinates, formatively suitable, and socially and linguistically responsive ,which advances positive results for all children(Anagaw, 2020:25). It is therefore that setting a strategy for producing adequate ECCE professionals is remained vital before expanding pre-school classrooms (F.AYANA, 2021:18, Rossiter, 2016:9). This indicates that where teachers are not at the expected level of qualification, it remains difficult to get the needed result. MOE on its initiation of ESDP IV identified the qualification of teachers as one of the challenges on the implementation of ECCE programs. So, it identified strategy to increase the number of the teachers in the field by working with the colleges of teacher education giving more attention to ECCE teacher

training and development in their teacher training programs (ESDP IV: 15). It was also supposed to increasing the number of qualified teachers and standard ECCE classrooms. In fact, the numbers of preprimary education teachers are increasing, however it is not as expected. For instance, according to (ESAA 2020/21), it was only about 32% of qualified teachers were available however government targeted 50% at the end of 2020/21.This highlights that 78% of early childhood teachers were not trained by pre-school education. As (Astatke, 2019:27) asserts from the teachers working in pre-primary education in the country, most of them are the TVET graduates in other field and only the smallest share of them have training in ECCE.

Consistent to this, Tirussew et al (2009) as cited in Astatke (2019) affirmed that there is a dire shortage off ECCE professionals (teachers, principals, supervisors, and others). Moreover (Mulualem, 2019:24) found that there is scarcity of qualified kindergarten teachers on areas of ECCE. This more noticed as ESAA 2020/21 asserts the government missed its target of producing appropriately qualified and licensed school leaders for pre-primary in 2021.The problem was more severe in O-classes. In some regions there were very insignificant numbers of teachers against the reported huge numbers of students while in other regions they were non-existed totally.

6.7.3. Facilities' and Space

As (Mulualem, 2019) states quality and effective implementation of ECCE program is largely determined by the availability of ECCE resources. Similarly, (Temesgen Yadeta 2016:206-207) affirms the effectiveness of preschool education inevitably impacted by the availability of the facilities and equipment. It offers plenty chances for children to advance skills and talents in handling materials, tries out and develops their creative and explorative urges, discover and test possibilities of learning that promote the attainment of the objectives of the program. Moreover, Boren and Pickett (1954) and Chowdhury and Choudhury (2002) as cited in (Anagaw, 2020) explained that the existence of sufficient indoor resources and equipment were essential for the active carrying out of numerous class-room events in particular and ECCE in general. Based on this logic, MOE (1995) as cited in Hailu Dinka 2017) issued standard for pre-school environmental set up. Accordingly, a pre-school must have outdoor play materials like different size balls, skipping ropes, foam Javelin, gymnastic mat, multiple purpose mats, large and small mobile toys, tricycle and small care tires. In addition, a pre-school need to have outdoor play equipment namely, swinging, merry-ground, slide, balance, boxes, crawling tunnels and climbing. Further a pre-school need to have child sized tables, and chairs and other indoor equipment and materials.

However, as stated in new roadmap (2018-30), it was found the existing centers are not able to accommodate all children under six in their respective localities and primary schools. The preschool centers functioning in the primary schools do not have ideal classrooms that support children's cognitive and social development. Although the ideal classroom size has been spelled out by Ministry of Education, many centers are extremely congested by large classroom sizes. Many of the preschool centers have been made to build outdoor play facilities such as merry go round and swinging. However, the safety of the children while using these outdoor materials is not well considered while installing these facilities. Similarly (Temesgen Yadeta 2016:206) confirms that the classrooms were so much compacted and unable to accommodate children. Consequently, the risk to children if early learning programs implemented in low-resource contexts that millions may be enrolled in low quality pre-primary and then progress to low quality primary classrooms, and despite considerable investment, the long-term policy objective of improved human capital development is not realize(Woodhead etal 2017).

6.7.4. Age Inappropriateness

In Ethiopia it is commonly observable that the children with inappropriate age to ECCE (below or above) attend their learning with the relevant ones. This is indistinctively the reality of all regions in all three modalities of ECCE in the nation however with different extent. The problem is glaringly deepened in O-class modality. From the very beginning the O-class was envisioned to accommodate the children of age 6 for one year before they join their first grade. According to Woodhead et al. (2017:18), reversely in its greater percent, it was found that the children of different ages were indistinctively merged and remained multiple age class. The trend differs among regions. Though, the O-class is more stressed from its original mission of preparing the children for one year time, the problem of age appropriateness is also still observable in kindergarten and child to child (ibid).

The multi-age structure of O-Class also has potential implications for the quality of provision. O-Class is designed to be developmentally appropriate for 6-year-olds, and so multi-age classes often with younger children can weaken the link between curriculum and age-appropriate pedagogy. With a wide range of ages in the same class, teaching and learning processes targeted at a child's developmental level are hard to define and deliver. Also any tendency for children to stay in O-Class for multiple years before progressing to Grade 1 is worryingly reminiscent of the early grade inefficiencies identified in emergent primary education systems (Woodhead et al., 2017).

6.7.5. Lack of Budget Track

As a holistic Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a cost-effective way to enhance long-term educational outcomes, there needs to be increased investment in promoting access to and quality for ECE. To allow the tracking and monitoring of such investments, a separate budget line should be available for ECE(UNICEF, 2017). Moreover, it is evident that when a higher percentage of the pre-primary budget is allocated to non- salary expenses, the possibility is created to give better inputs, support and training to teachers(UNICEF, 2019). However, it was found that there is no distinct budget allotted to the ECCE centers than that given to primary schools. Consequently, many pre-primary facilities were scantly available specially in government pre-schools as the ECCE center was working with zero budget(Hailu Dinka et al., 2017). Further, it was substantiated by (Young Lives, 2020, (Yekoyalem Desie, 2020:47)) that no region had a budget allocated for ECCE services, which raises important concerns about how the sub-sector can be promoted. Moreover, from the various available financial options, it was found that the early childhood education is financed by less than 3% educational budget at national level. Furthermore, the program is not being supplemented by the block grants from the different aids though it is being indicated in national education sector plans (Fekede Ayana, 2021:29)

6.7.6. Curriculum and Standardization

The government has made noticeable efforts to familiarize the curriculums of the early childhood education to the developmental needs and national cultural contexts despite the problem in implementation remained unsolved (Fantahun 2016).

Some of these obstacles include availability of foreign curriculum, teachers 'competence to translate the syllabus into practice, and parents 'choice. The most common problem is that parents demand ECE teachers and kindergarten owners to teach their children to read and write and speak English language (Fantahun, 2013). As a result, addressing the developmental needs of preschool children and the transmission of nation's culture, values and norms through the curriculum is questionable (Kassahun, 2013). The implementation of the existing preschool curriculum is overshadowed by the imported curricula from around the

world and the pressures of parents on preschools as they need their children read, write and do some arithmetic and above all speak foreign languages mainly English(Fantahun, 2016). Similar to this, Jemal Shanko et al.,(2019:49) revealed that the curriculum that has been used in the preschools were not uniform across all preschools even with in one regional state. Further they highlighted that the teaching and learning materials were not attractive, not easy, attractive, and the curriculum is not based on the age level of children.

Besides the relevance, the ECCE curriculum misses standardization. In implanting the curriculum of early childhood, it is apparent that the children of different ages are being merged to learn within a single class. This may be due to a shortage of necessary of classes and teachers in this level. Inevitably, teaching the children of different ages in a single class setting will affect the development of children and leads to use age inappropriate teaching strategies (Education Roadmap MOE, 2018-2030). This can be affirmed from the reports of MOE that in no place the numbers of KG1, KG2, and KG3 reported separately and the multi-aged enrolments were commonly reported in both KG as well as in O-classes. Thus, the ECCE programs have been fettered by irrelevant curriculum and lack the standardization while implementing them.

7. Conclusion

The study showed that in the regions in like Addis Ababa, Harar, Dire Dawa, Tigray of ECCE had been progressively increasing in GER. However, the GER declined in 2020/21 throughout all regions with differing rates and it has also shown decline by 9% in the same year at national level.

It was found that there is a dichotomy like arrangement between in urban-rural centers with different preparation competences. In urban centers KG were prevalent whereas in rural counter the O-class and child to child modalities were predominantly prevalent.

Almost in all regions there existed age inappropriateness in enrollment with differing levels. Besides, the issue of age inappropriateness is sever in O-class where the rural communities tended to send all above three years children regardless of the its original goal of preparing the 6yrs old children for grade one.

The nations of the world covenanted to assure universal education in 20130, however it was found that almost in all regions more than 50% of the children of legal age to ECCE were not attending education. Moreover, the students-teacher ratios of all regions and national average in these years were remarkably above the world average. The students- teacher ratio of KG modality was by far lower than the O-class modality. This infers that the governments' effort to expand ECCE especially O-class has not been harmoniously matched with the teachers production.

Under ESDP V, the government of Ethiopia planned to expand the pre-school programs targeting for the priority to disadvantaged areas and groups. Contrarily, the distribution of ECCE centers, teachers, and gross enrollment to the program were lower in the regions comparatively with higher pastoralist communities like Somali, Afar, SNNPR and Oromia.

Impressively, the gap between the girls and boys to access ECCE has been narrowing similarly in all regions. In all regions thus, the gender parity was approaching to one and exceeded 0.9 in all regions in this years except the case of Somali region where the participation of girls lagged behind the boys. Despite of this, in all regions the number of male students in ECCE still exceeds their counter female students.

Even though, the ECCE programs are supposed to be accessed by all children regardless of any differences, in Ethiopia it was found reverse. In this regard, the participation of children with disabilities remained strangely large as just less than or equal to 1% children got access to learn inclusively or exclusively with those don't have disabilities. So, the question of equity in ECCE remained unresolved in terms of accommodating handicapped children.

Generally, the ECCE in Ethiopia has been rigorously fettered by poor access and inequity, inadequate teachers and staffs, under resources facilities and spaces, age inappropriateness, lack of separate and adequate budgets, curriculum irrelevance and lack of standardizations.

8. Implications

Based on the above conclusions the following implications were drawn.

- Under the Ethiopian ESDPs the multi-years KG are predominantly left for the private sectors, faith organizations and communities. Since the private sectors are profit driven, they always search for the market with concentrated population and capability to pay for their services. As, the rural societies are highly scattered and most of them are not capable to pay, their children cannot equally pass through the same paths of the development. So, the government should work in its full effort to expand the three years KG throughout the country rather than leaving it to the private sector.
- It was found that the ECCE centers were under resourced and thus it needs the collaboration of various bodies to provide the services for successful functioning of the pre-schools across the regions
- In the regions with large pastoralist communities it needs to provide the ECCE service corresponding to the life styles of the pastoralist societies. As the societies are mobile in the search of pasture, there should be either permanent centers or establishing mobile schools. The problem in these regions was not only enrollment, the numbers of teachers was found also very low. So, special attention to train the teachers in these regions should be paid.
- The participation of the children with disabilities was found very low. This needs the further studies on the reasons that hinder the equal participation of the children with disabilities. Besides, the government should carefully monitor the implementation of the special needs and inclusive education strategy and calls should be made for vigilant participation of NGOs and various organizations on it.
- Across the regions, from the number of the children with relevant age to ECCE the greater portion of them were not in any modalities being practiced in the country. This calls for the government to massively expand the ECCE centers especially in rural hinter parts where the majority of country's population dwell.
- In ESDP V it was planned to expand the numbers of the teachers, however, across the regions the scarcity of the ECCE teachers remained unresolved. So, the government should strictly give responsibility to train only the preschool teachers and the private sector should also be empowered to take part in this vast market.
- Moreover, the problem of curriculum irrelevance and lack of standardization remained the problem to ECCE in the nation. Therefore, the government should take commitment and accountability to apply uniform curriculum throughout the country in both government and non-government schools.
- The ECCE programs have no separate and sufficient budgets other than collectively given to the primary schools of the public sphere and no budget to support the private sector. So, there should be a separate budget track for ECCE in order to follow up its progress and enhance the accountability.

- Finally, the comparative status of the regions in ECCE is under researched area in Ethiopia, that many studies focus on the problems, achievements and strategies specific to a given research areas or to the holistic investigations of overall national trends. So, the local success and challenges should be comparatively investigated as the local situations of the regions relatively vary from one to another.

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