
School Readiness Programs in Ethiopia: Practices, Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract: *Despite tremendous progress in achieving education for all, primary education in Ethiopia notably suffers from problems of quality. This would be attributed to school readiness problems in the early preprimary education systems. Evidences indicate that two-third of the young children who need ECCE programs are as yet marginalized and underserved. The Government has adopted low-cost, culture-sensitive and seemingly innovative one-year school readiness programs (O-class and Child-to-Child Initiatives) thereby improving access from 3.9% in 2008 to about 34% in 2013. This study attempts to critically reflect on these practices, contributions and challenges in order to delineate the way forward. It strongly argues that both approaches have high prospect of scalability and feasibility in the Ethiopian soil but they are constrained by several implementation problems. It is suggested, among others, that the combined use of these modalities would somehow help offset some of the limitations noted.*

Key words: O-class, child to-child, preschool education, ECCE, school readiness, preprimary education.

Introduction

Despite significant strides registered in achieving education for all globally, the greater majority of children are, however, most disadvantaged and are either at risk of educational exclusion or underachievement and early drop-out (UNESCO, 2006) particularly in resource scarce parts of the world. According to Woodhead & Moss

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(2007), these challenges have generally been conceptualized as problems of 'school readiness.' Low enrolment rates, poor attendance, grade repetitions, high drop-out rates, and widespread underachievement during the early grades all signal that a school system is not achieving the goal of 'readiness for children' (Woodhead, 2007).

The concept of 'readiness' has been, therefore, a central issue in the discussion on children's transitions to school globally (Kagan, 2007) and nationally (e.g. see MoE, MoWCYA, and MoH, 2010 a, b, c) as well. Nationally, although establishment of early years' education in Ethiopia may not be regarded a delay even by European standards (cited in Belay and Hawaz, 2015, p.1.), school readiness is in fact an increasingly important source of concern rather in more recent years with a realization, on the one hand, of the role and importance of ECCE in the whole educational pursuit and, on the other hand, the reality on the ground that only a negligible 3.9% of children are accessing ECCE services of one kind or another (MoE, 2008). This has shortly led to the development of the National ECCE Policy Framework (MoE, MoWA and MoH, 2010a, b, c) after its "long incubation period" (Boakye, 2008)¹ and analysis of the state of conditions of ECCE in Ethiopia.

The National Policy Framework is a critically important document in the history of ECCE in Ethiopia to officially articulate government intentions and eventually enforce commitments towards the realization of missions and goals envisaged in the document. The Policy stipulates four basic pillars of ECCE service delivery that are believed to materialize in an integrated manner. One of these pillars of the policy

¹A number of push and pull factors prompted the development of the policy document. The 1998 conference by African Ministers of Education (UNESCO, 1998), the steady and unprecedented support given by development partners such as the UNICEF and the World Bank to the sector created a sense of urgency in Ethiopia to formulate sector wide and developmentally appropriate ECD policy that involved main stream ministries. The crisis Ethiopian education system is facing in terms of drop outs especially at primary level, the situation of orphans and vulnerable children for instance due to HIV/AIDS, and an obligation for the government to ensure the wellbeing and development of children in light of MDG and EFA goals are all push factors that contributed to the inception and formulation of the policy framework.

holds that the Government shall put in place a Non- Formal Community Based School Readiness program and ensure accessibility until more formal ECCE structure is instituted. A non-formal school readiness program stipulated in the policy for possible use is the Child-to-Child Initiative. According to the Policy, “While waiting for the proposed ECCE structure to be in place, other non-formal settings, such as the Child-to-Child Initiative, can be used” (p.22). The Child-to-Child Initiative is a practice in which older children (or young facilitators of preferable grade 5 and 6 students) are to engage in structured play-oriented activities with their younger siblings and neighboring children either at their own houses or in a place close to the participating children’s homes being trained, guided and supervised by their teachers, and parents with the purpose, “to better prepare young children for primary school” (p.22).

It has also been indicated in the Policy that other low cost modalities will still be developed in the future in order to improve the alarmingly lower rate of access to ECCE programs in the country (MoH, MoWCYA, MoH, 2010 a). Accordingly, the Ethiopian Government has initiated a new modality of delivery known as ‘zero grade²’ (preferably ‘O-class’) in the year 2003 E.C. (MoE, 2011/12). This is a one-year program based in public primary schools for children aged 5-6 years, immediately preceding the first year of primary school (cited in Britto et al., 2012).

Some evidences in other countries indicate that experiences with these school readiness programs could be helpful in preparing children for formal school. However, their experiences are not uniform across the board; they have limitations of one kind and another and, hence, they need to be critically examined, improved, and integrated within the school system (Thorpe et al., 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Mhangami, 2009; Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg 2009; Al-Hassan and Lansford,

²Initially it used to be called ‘zero grade’ or ‘zero-class’ but this has been renamed to be ‘O-class’ (letter-O, instead of number zero) to avoid the connotations of nil associated with zero.

2009). One such limitation is, for example, the tendency to emphasize only on the sending setting, such as the family home or the preschool, rather than on the receiving setting, such as the school, or on shared responsibility (Dockett and Perry, 2007) of scaffolding transitioning which in a way has inappropriately led to the tendency of 'schoolifying' the preschools. Critical investigation of practices and provisions are required to check out, among others, if these premature 'schoolifying' tendencies surface out in these allegedly transitioning educational programs. Basically more research is needed to examining the organization, aims and pedagogy of both the preschool and the early classes of primary school to achieve successful transition for all young children (Bennett, 2007). Hence, our present research attempts to explore the situation of the newly initiated one year early school readiness programs (O-class and Child-to-Child Initiative) in Ethiopia. It attempts, on the one hand, to examine the status (practices, opportunities, implementations) of these programs and delineates, on the other hand, the lessons (strengths and challenges) to be drawn for further scale up of the services possibly uprooting inappropriate practices at this early stage of program implementation so that these practices would not eventually crystalize.

Approaches and Methods

This paper employs a systematic intellectual analysis of the existing practices along the established theoretical and conceptual principles of school readiness programs following the procedures, approaches, and methods outlined here under.

Attempts are made, first and foremost, to conceptualize school readiness, associated factors, and some major principles further explicating its essence synthesizing more recent international researches in the field. Then, practices and reflections of the Ethiopian school readiness programs are presented. Views, ideas, data and findings were borrowed from the following major existing local literature/ prior work (research, policy documents, national data, and

assessments) with respect to these new initiatives. Firstly, African ECCE conceptions and experiences were drawn from Child-to-Child approach for getting children ready for school in Ethiopia (Maekelch, 2009), O-class challenges in enabling equitable access to ECD programs in Zimbabwe (Mhangami, 2009), sibling teaching during sibling caretaking in Kenya (Mweru, 2009), and agency of African culture, education, children, and communities in ECCE profoundly elaborated by notable Africanist scholars (Robert Serpell, and Bame Nsamenang). Secondly, such government documents were consulted as national policy framework for early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ethiopia (MoE, MoWA, MoH, 201a), strategic operational plan (MoE, MoWA, MoH, 201b), and guidelines (MoE, MoWA, MoH, 2010c). National education data were also secured from the national Education Statistics Annual Abstract of 2007-2008 (MoE, 2008), 2011-2012 (MoE, 2012), 2012-2013 (MoE, 2013), and 2013-2014 (MoE, 2014). Last but equally important, the following research assessment reports were also consulted: National feasibility study for the implementation of the early childhood care and education policy framework in Ethiopia (Britto, et al., 2012), mid-term evaluation on improving the quality of basic education in Amhara Region (KES, 2012), status assessment of the early childhood development pilot project in Chilga and Lai Armachiho (SCN, 2011), early childhood care and education and the role of civic societies in Ethiopia (Teka & Belay, 2015), and assessment of the status of O-class in four regional states of Ethiopia (Tirussew & Belay, 2016).

Using information obtained from these varied sources, the meaning, nature and status of the two school readiness programs in Ethiopia are outlined. Their contributions and challenges are also discussed firstly for the O-class program and then for the Child-to-Child initiative. Finally, attempts are made to delineate the way forward by way of reflecting on core aspects of the two programs.

Conceptions, Principles and Approaches

Meaning and nature of school readiness: The concept of school readiness is far from simple. It lacks universally accepted definition (Dockett and Perry 2009) because it is culturally diverse (Winter, 2011) and, hence, begs for a comprehensive definition that can be widely embraced (Winter, 2011) to guide communities, teachers, and parents so that they would work to ensure that children enter school prepared to achieve academic success (Dockett & Perry, 2009). However, synthesizing literature in the field, may conceptualize 'school readiness' to represent both the outcome (Janus, 2011) as well as important moments of transition invariably described, at least in principle, as enabling in many ways:

- a stimulus of growth and development (Bennett, 2007),
- a match between the child and the institutions (Scott-Little et al., 2006; Kagan, 2007) ensuring either adjustment (Woodhead & Moss, 2007) or school drop out altogether (Kagan, 2007),
- children's school entry competencies that are important for later school success (e.g. Snow, 2006; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta, 2000),
- a factor that boosts cognitive and emotional skills for later school success (e.g., Gormley, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000),
- a valuable contributor to children's sense of confidence in the school setting and to improving children's academic outcomes (Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011),
- a quality necessary for the child to have an enjoyable, successful, and fulfilling experience in school (Janus, 2011), successful adaptation to new encounters (Balaban, 2011) and, generally,
- especially important for children with disabilities given their risk for school difficulties (Fowler et al., 1991; McIntyre et al., 2006). As a group, children with developmental delays or disabilities may require additional supports to facilitate successful elementary school entry.

Factors influencing school readiness: While children's development progresses through the same milestones regardless of their place of birth and ethnicity, there are socially and culturally-influenced variations in encouragement, acceptability, and manifestations of development (Janus, 2011). In resource-scarce developing countries that make up two thirds of the world (referred to as the Majority World) (Woodhead & Moss, 2007), children are least likely to have access to good programs either at pre-primary or primary levels (Myers & Landers, 1989). Poverty undermines parents' capacity to provide support and stimulating environment (Kagan, 2007), affordable opportunities (Arnold & Bartlett, 2007), opportunities for promoting children's best interests (Arnold, 2004), and support children's enthusiasm for learning, their language development and their sense of self (Arnold, 2004). Accordingly, poverty-induced deprivation in the early years adversely impacts on children's health, intellectual capabilities, academic achievement and behavior (Weitzman, 2003), fulfillment of developmental potential (Woodhead & Moss, 2007), children's readiness for school (Arnold and Bartlett, 2007), as well as schools' readiness to support all children at this key transition in their lives (Kagan, 2007).

Studies have also indicated that teachers' beliefs about the important elements of school readiness are critical to the structure of the program and are believed to be associated with quality of care and children's subsequent academic performance (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2011; Duncan et al., 2007; Fang 1996). Inadequate nutrition, absence of a caring early environment, and health issues are common factors explaining difficulties of transition or adjustment to school (Janus, 2011). School adaptation is affected by personal developmental competencies (McIntyre et al. 2006; Perry and Weinstein 1998) as well as family and community factors (McIntyre et al. 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 2000).

Some principles of school readiness: successful school readiness and transition is premised on some principles that include some of the following:

First, school readiness is a transition from early care and education to elementary school; possibly one of the first rites of passage in the formative years (McIntyre and Wildenger, 2011) that can potentially be the most dramatic and traumatic one for many children, especially in the face of serious discontinuities between the preschool and school environments (Kagan & Neville, 1996).

Second, school readiness is a transition means that it is not a fixed construct, but perpetually evoking new ideas about how young children should be served best (Kagan, 2007). It is gradual in the sense that transition to school does not all happen on the first day (Pianta & McCoy, 1997); it is a gradual process of adjustment to the new environment, learning about learning and about the teacher, and about the school (Pianta & McCoy, 1997).

Third, this move brings increased responsibility, expectations, and opportunities for success and failure for children and their families (McIntyre & Wildenger, 2011). Some researchers have even conceptualized the kindergarten transition as a “sensitive period” (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) necessary to establish positive, academic, and social trajectories in a child’s educational experience (Eckert et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman et al. 2000).

Fourth, if transition from preschool to school is too abrupt and handled without care, it entails the risk of regression and failure particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bennett, 2007).

Fifth, given the developmental flux often experienced by many children at this age, coupled with changing systems of support, partnership established between professionals and families is important for children to have as smooth formal school entry as possible (Balaban, 2011).

Six, young children have a deep desire to move forward through transition (OECD, 2006), communicate with and imitate others (Bennett, 2007), and, hence, educators need to use these and other strengths far more positively, with greater insight into their potential, rather than seeing transitions as inherently problematic for every child (Bennett, 2007).

Seventh, school readiness is at the same time recognized as a multifaceted construct (Scott-Little et al., 2006) that encompasses not one specific skill, ability (Janus, 2011) but the “whole child” or a combination of many set in a developmental perspective (Love et al., 1994; Meisels, 1999) including academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive competencies of the child (McIntyre et al., 2006; Perry and Weinstein, 1998), as well as family and community factors (McIntyre et al., 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 2000). That is, it is a combination of what the child brings to school as an outcome of his/her first five years in his/ her family, in the neighborhood, in an idiosyncratic combination with the child’s age and gender, and the school practices towards easing the transition process (Meisels 1999). Hence, readiness is no longer mainly seen as a condition of the child. It is also being seen as a condition of families, of schools, and of communities (Kagan, 2007). It requires the participation of families, schools and communities (Kagan, 2007).

Eighth, focusing on children’s readiness to benefit from schooling is, therefore, ‘a narrow approach to transition’ (Petriwskyj & Grieshaber, 2011) that at best oversimplifies, and at worst, ‘blames the victim’ for the inefficiencies of educational systems (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). A more balanced view recognizes that school systems are currently part of the problem as much as they are a solution to that problem (Woodhead & Moss, 2007).

Ninth, early childhood programs need to bridge gaps between home and school, leading to better adjustment to primary school and higher achievement levels (Woodhead and Moss, 2007). In trying to construct this bridge, neither formalizing the informal (schoolification of preschools) nor deformatizing schools (preschoolification of schools) would, however, help addressing the school readiness gap. 'Schoolification' of ECEC is a tendency to bring down into ECCE of the traditional aims and practices of compulsory schooling (Woodhead & Moss, 2007) and this is likely to create undue pressures on early education programs and have led some to express concern about it. The tendency in some countries to deformatize the formal by 'carrying upward into primary school some of the main pedagogical strengths'³ of early childhood practice could be most welcomed but structuring the entire compulsory education along the preschool set up could again be inappropriate. Hence, one tradition taking over the other must be avoided. Rather, an alternative approach envisages a strong and equal partnership, avoiding one tradition dominating the other, and ensuring greater continuity for children (Woodhead & Moss, 2007).

Tenth, working towards 'a strong and equal partnership' between early childhood and primary education services offers a more positive vision about the two programs, serves to create a new and shared view of the child, learning and knowledge, recognizing (OECD, 2006), and ensures greater continuity between children's early educational experiences, and foster successful transitions (OECD, 2001, 2006).

Finally, school readiness is in sum a gradually emerging, multi-faced, and comprehensive skill that is structurally and culturally divergent and requires a critical pedagogue to reflect on experiences, plans for change, and works on them in the classroom on daily basis

³For example, attention to the well-being of children, active and experiential learning confidence in children's learning strategies with avoidance of child measurement and ranking.

establishing nexus with such important stakeholders as parents, peers, parent-teacher-association (PTAs).

Practices and Reflections: O-Class

Meaning, nature and status: The official definition of an O-class is a one-year program to be conducted within the public primary school premises for children aged 5-6 years, immediately preceding the first year of primary school. However, the operational definitions of O-classes and preschools are often confounded. Preschools typically offer a three-year program for children aged 3-6 and are currently operated primarily by non-state actors. However, some primary schools have their own attached preschools (Britto et al., 2012).

A lot of clarity lacks regarding O-class at the moment mainly because they were afterthoughts of the ECCE Policy documents and manuals that would have given better clarity-Who are they- are they ECD programs or school programs, who is to open, run and own them (e.g. *kebeles*, CBOs, NGOs, or schools), and where is the finance to come from? For example, in North Gondar, there are 579 *kebeles* and a minimum of 579 ECD centers (O-classes) to be opened according to the Zone Education Department. *Kebeles*, CBO's and different associations are expected to take part in the provision of ECD services (SCN, 2011). The *woredas* intend to open at least one ECD center in each *kebele* administration (sub district) as indicated by the Zone Education Department (SCN, 2011). According to the *woreda* education officials, small villages are evolving where health posts, mills, telephone centers, primary schools are all found at one site. This is attracting households to form villages in these areas. Seizing this newly created opportunity, *woreda* education offices have plans of creating O-classes attached to formal schools so that school directors could supervise and technically support them. The ECD centers attached to formal schools will be referred to as O-classes. So far, the two *woreda* education offices have registered children at two sites even those have not started the program. The *woredas* feel that the

respective local communities will be responsible for paying for the salary of facilitators and other costs (SCN, 2011).

There is a curriculum prepared for O-class (MoE, 2013); though dissemination and implementation plans were not in place to ensure the appropriate uptake and use of this guideline (Britto et al., 2012). One primary school teacher is assigned to take charge of the O-class. The assignment is different in different schools. In some schools it is based on interest, in others it is based on turn-taking approach. In some cases, short-term training has been offered by NGOs but in most cases teachers are without training. The O-class has no sufficient qualified teachers in 18 schools visited for a mid-term evaluation of a project in North Gondar (KES, 2012).

There is no statistics on the actual number of primary schools that have already started the O-class but experience shows that only few have been involved particularly in rural settings. The number of enrolled children is lower in those rural schools that have already started the O-class because of many reasons including distance, awareness issues, and child labor. Previous experiences have shown that there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of children after registration even in the regular NGO-initiated rural preschool in Ethiopia mainly due to heavy work load that children have to bear at home particularly girls; parental misconceptions about children's status that they are too young to go to school; distance or location of the center from home thus encouraging parents to keep their children at home for fear of safety on the way to school - that the child might be exposed to harmful conditions like heat, cold weather, muddy roads, or from risking their lives in flooded river banks (Teka & Belay, 2015). But, in urban areas these problems do not seem to be common. Schools are closer, there is better awareness of ECCE as it has been implemented for long, child labor seems to start a bit later at about 7 to 9 years etc. Hence, classrooms for O-class are extremely crowded as there is only one class in one school.

The classroom organization is an arrangement of benches and tables in a row; teaching methods are the same didactic methods for upper grades, except for the use of songs intermittently in the class. Outdoor play materials, separate field to play, separate latrine etc. are not available. In other words, preschool features of the program are not visible and it appears basically that a mere schoolification practice is in place. ECCE focal persons were reported as the key ECCE Taskforce and/or Ministerial representatives that facilitate the communication with Regional Bureaus for the planning, implementation, and scale-up of preschools, attached to primary schools and O-class. Regarding monitoring, evaluation and supervision, some informants reported that primary school supervisors are often responsible for overseeing O-classes (Britto et al., 2012). Neither the supervisors nor the school directors were again professionally trained.

O-class and other programs: The O-class is part of the preprimary educational system that compares and contrasts with the existing regular ECCE practices. Compared to the regular ECCE (preschool education), O-class is a one year program for older preschoolers and conducted in government primary schools until such time that the regular ECCE structure is in place. On the other hand, preschool education is a three years program with three tiers (lower KG for 3 to 4 years, middle KG for 4 to 5 years, and upper KG for 5 to 6 years) mainly operated in urban areas by the private sector, but in a separate compound of the same school in which primary grades are run. In fact, more recent years have also witnessed a downward expansion of center-based private daycare services for children with ages from 6 months to 3 years (Martha, 2013; Belay & Hawaz, 2015).

Similar to church schools, O-class has both rural and urban existence and is conveniently community-based. Although not articulated in the policy, it has a potential and feasibility for wider coverage particularly for the disadvantaged group, and is a school readiness (one year) program. It, however, contrasts with church schools in so many other variables. For example, unlike church schools which had a longer

historical presence and unrecognized by the government, O-class are the most recent, government- initiated and possibly owned programs. Furthermore, while church schools are on the dying, O-classes are on the rise.

In fact, one may be skeptical of the importance of O-class as they are new introductions to Ethiopia. However, in Ethiopian schools, it was a tradition that primary schools enrolling students without pre-reading and writing skills used to arrange some preparatory classes to enable such children develop some kind of readiness for Grade 1. These programs were not, of course, officially recognized in the system and were not part of the regular programs. They were school-based with durations depending on the learning pace of the students; but in most cases were expected to finish early so that Grade 1 should finish in the first year of the children's enrollment. Some schools used to have the communities hire and pay salaries for teachers; thus the programs had their own separate teachers.

These preparatory classes, which somehow resemble what is currently called 'O-class', were the spring board for creating readiness particularly among children who were unable to get the opportunity to pass through church schools. In fact, this practice was going on even in a more formal way during the socialist regime. For example, in a study report of the general situation of KGs in Addis Ababa in 1986 (Government, *kebele*, public, church, missionaries, community, and private preschools), it was found out that out of the KGs that were conducted by the Government, some were found annexed with primary schools (AAEOPU, 1978 E.C) in a more or less similar fashion that today's O-class are operating. In fact, the previous ones were full scale preschool programs. This suggests then that O-class would have been scaled up even quite earlier in Ethiopia and thereby allow access improve much better had there been continuity of systemic operation as well as an inward looking attitude that could give space to checking best practices on the ground before looking far to import practices.

In fact, versions of O-class have also existed in some developed and developing countries in different forms and approaches, durations, and purposes: e.g. school attached preschool in Ethiopia during the Socialist Regime (AAEOPU, 1978 E.C), O-class of the current Ethiopian type in Zambia (Mhangami, 2009), an intensive two-month compensatory intervention program in Cambodia (Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg 2009), school-based early childhood programs in Canada (Zigler & Finn-Stevenson, 2007), and school-based preparatory program in Australia (Thorpe et al. 2004). Furthermore, Australian schools have also introduced reception classes based in schools to support transition (e.g. kindergarten, pre-primary), transition curricula (e.g. Early Years Curriculum Guidelines) and specialized programs for groups whose progress has been an ongoing concern (e.g. indigenous children, McCrea et al. 2000).

To be more specific, the Government of Zimbabwe, for example, instructed that all primary schools should, with effect from 2005, enroll at least one class of preschool children, to be known as O-class in a bid to promote equitable access to ECD programs (Mhangami, 2009). Preparatory program was tried out in Cambodia for a period of time as short as two months. This intensive two-month intervention program was intended to compensate for the lack of preschool education available to children before they entered formal schooling. The findings of the study revealed that children who participated in the school readiness program were able to acquire fundamental school readiness skills in the short term. Later school performance of children who participated in the school readiness program exceeded those of peers who did not participate in the program. These findings suggest that school readiness programs can make a difference in countries where access to early education programs is limited (Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg, 2009). However, such readiness programs were not as cheaper as the one currently implemented in Ethiopia and, therefore, may not be scalable for a bigger audience. The transition class that came to be known as “preparatory” program of a school-based preschool type was also introduced in the state of Queensland,

Australia, to bridge prior-to-school and early elementary school programs (Thorpe et al., 2004) and was found to support children's progress in many ways but was found to have concerns in addressing the needs of the minority groups. The Jordanian-launched widespread school readiness reform efforts focusing on children in poor, rural areas yielded better results but more affluent, males, and urban children were better prepared for school compared to children in lower income families residing in rural areas (Al-Hassan & Lansford, 2009).

Hence, school readiness programs are varied across nations and the only common feature is that they all are school-based readiness programs. Durations (some as short as one year or less, others full term preschool education type), approaches (some play-based, others didactic type), purpose (some strengthen previous ECCE background, others entirely new ventures), and, hence, results (some successful, others not) have been different. Hence, there is a need to design programs that meet national needs possibly by taking some lessons from such practices.

Contributions and challenges: There are both contributions and challenges in the implementation of these O-classes and their variants in Ethiopia as well as internationally. As regards contributions, the O-classes are generally conducted within the public primary school premises with the same resources (material, human, and financial) allocated for primary schools. This is, in fact, a judicious use of resources that really works sustainably in the resource scarce country like Ethiopia. Particularly the government primary schools own bigger spaces that don't exist elsewhere even in rural areas. Lack of a plot of land for ECCE establishment was reported to be the major problem experienced surprisingly in a context (rural) where it is expected to exist in abundance. It has been difficult to convince the community in securing a building site, as people are worried of being evicted from their land (Teka and Belay, 2015). The "O" class recently attached to primary schools plays a significant role for children with low income

families to help in development of school readiness and child socialization (Tirussew & Belay, 2016).

As can be seen from the table below, access to pre-primary through O-class modality has improved by 8% from 13.7% in 2011/12 to 21.6% nearly two years later in 2013/14. In fact, O-class modality of preprimary education contributed 63.2% of the total preschool enrollment in 2013/14 academic year.

National preprimary education enrolment and Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER)* for three years in the three modalities of ECCE delivery

ECCE Modality	2004 EC (2011/12)			2005 EC (2012/13)			2005 EC (2013/14)		
	Enrollment (N)	GER (%)	C** (%)	Enrollment (N)	GER (%)	C** (%)	Enrollment (N)	GER (%)	C** (%)
Kindergarten	397,861	5.3	24.5	478,977	6.2	23.8	486,393	6.6	19.5
O-class	1,031,151	13.7	63.5	1,242,406	16.1	61.7	1,578,494	21.6	63.2
Child-to-Child	193,750	2.6	11.9	291,831	3.8	14.5	433,473	5.8	17.4
Total Preprimary	1,622,762	21.6		2,013,214	26.1		2,498,360	33.7	

* **Source:** MoE, 2011/12, 2012/2013, 2013/14

** C = contribution of enrolment of the ECCE modality to overall preschool enrollment in percent

Above and beyond paving the way for smooth transition to the formal education by bridging the gap between children that had access to the service and the ones that are denied of this opportunity (Britto et al., 2012), introduction of the O-class into areas in Ethiopia where ECCE would turn out to be a dream to materialize even so many years to come have many other positive roles to contribute for children's learning and development. Apart from, it is expected to increase school success by reducing the high dropout rate observed in the first cycle of the primary education. The national feasibility study for the implementation of the Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Framework in Ethiopia (Britto et al., 2012) has indicated that, in general, using the existing primary school structure is a feasible

approach to scalability (Britto et al., 2012) and that the informants were most often mentioning preschools attached to primary schools and O-classes as effective entry points to ECCE (Britto et al., 2012). Experiences from other countries has still shown generally that preparatory practices are valued strategy for improving children's sense of confidence at school entry (Dockett and Perry, 2007) or in entering an unfamiliar setting (Henderson 2004), support children's progress (Thorpe et al. 2004), and can make a difference in school readiness even when provided as short intervention programs and are, therefore, feasible for countries where access to early education programs is limited (Nonoyama-Tarumi & Bredenberg, 2009). Of course, when durations become shorter, they need to be intensive, and when intensive, they require more resources and hence they may not be feasible national programs. More meaningfully, experiences in Zambia also seem to support these observations. Ensuring children's right to protection and development, the approach allows the pupils to be automatically enrolled for first grade at the same school and children's progression records are, therefore, maintained. Furthermore, professional linkages have been established between ECD teachers and those in the formal school system (Mhangami, 2009).

The O-class has still its own challenges. Absence of clear guideline on the management of these centers is one of the implementation problems. The primary schools that operate under serious budget and logistic constraints are expected to host these centers. Whether or not this resource sharing strategy would yield better result in preparing the out of access children for the formal school system is to be seen. Whether or not this increment is meaningful and promising in terms of providing quality service to children is also a point of argument. The policy directive was not accompanied by any form of financial support, little technical support to schools to enable them properly handle this tender age, lack of qualified teachers, lack of the requisite administrative skills in heads of schools and education officers, shortage of classroom space, shortage of furniture, lack of play and learning materials, lack of sanitary facilities (Britto et al., 2012).

In a study report of the general situation of KGs in Addis Ababa (Government, *kebele*, public, church, missionaries, community, and private preschools), a number of concerns were observed regarding the overall performance of the KGs (AAEOPU, 1978 E.C.). Some KGs were annexed with schools and were, therefore, forced to share with schools' budget, toilets and drinking water, play ground with other older children, shortages of toilets, snacks were not provided in some KGs, children's sleeping spaces were not convenient, there was lack of uniformity in salary of teachers, and about 23 % of the teachers didn't receive training.

Feasibility study of the implementation of the early childhood care and education policy framework in Ethiopia has brought the following findings to the fore (Britto et al., 2012):

- The O-class curriculum appears to be in the process of being developed with the support of development partners. This is a critical issue because some informants indicated that O-classes are not always age-appropriate.
- The results suggest, in general, that using the existing primary school structure is a feasible approach to scalability, but that regional-specific preferences must be taken into account to ensure contextual acceptance of the approaches used (Britto et al., 2012).
- Informants also highlighted in some regions alternative modalities (e.g. community-based centers and private schools) as strategies that have strong stakeholder support (Britto et al., 2012).
- Even though some regions have already implemented an O-class, there is no standardized pedagogical strategy (Britto et al., 2012).
- Primary school teachers were reported to instruct O-class students, despite the fact that they were not trained to be teachers in early education. This compromises the quality and continuity of education in the pre-primary setting (Britto et al., 2012).
- Some teachers disliked this arrangement because they thought supervisors were not trained to work with young children, and

therefore, poorly qualified to mentor and supervise ECCE teachers (Britto et al., 2012).

- In turn, primary school supervisors pointed out key challenges: (i) supervisors have little authority or recourses to enforce any standards or rules; and (ii) teachers are paid so little that they have no incentive to comply, and can easily quit the profession (Britto et al., 2012).
- It is urgent to generate a set of interim solutions to scale-up and strengthen current teacher training strategies. Interim solutions could consist of reaching primary school teachers who are working in O-classes and conduct in-service training (e.g., on the developing of O-class curriculum). ToT programs need to be bolstered and established.

In a more recent O-class national assessment (Tirussew and Belay, 2016), it was also found that O-class has some strengths, opportunities, and contributions. But as a new program, it was found to have many problems that require immediate interventions:

- *Problem of Purpose:* mere focus on reading and writing skills-attitudes and other skills(i.e. cognitive, social and emotional) skills not given due consideration; focus on education while care aspect is almost missing (health services and kits not available, some risky school features embedded in and outside the classrooms, overcrowded classroom resulting in stuffy room, nutritional needs totally neglected, concerns with toilets and tap water)
- *Identity problem:* O-class is basically an afterthought and seems to suffer from some confusion of identity. At best they seem partly independent retaining some ECCE features and at worse are part of the primary school system sharing many things in common with the schools they are attached to, and at worst even their very existence doesn't seem recognized in many cases: no budget, no administration lay out, no guide, no separate compound; less

attention is given by the regional and *woreda* educational bureau, and surprisingly even less attention is given by the school itself.

- *Infrastructural, resource and budgetary constraints:* O-class suffers from budgetary and resource constraints; classroom shortages, lack of toilet and water (potable and bathing), and indoor and outdoor materials like playground, resting space, puzzles, cards, models, blocks, colors, shapes, alphabets, different games, books, and other necessary materials that help both the facilitator and children. Children love school environment because it is more attractive than their home. Yet local resources and CBOs are not adequately exploited.
- *Limited orientation of O-class:* seems to make ECCE focus move towards O-classing early childhood education in Ethiopia; while it helped improve coverage, this is, however, for children aged 6 and above; the problem of access continues to persist for younger children of age 4 and 5 normally considered as critical and foundation periods for subsequent stages of development.
- *Professionalism compromised:* O-class seems a professional negotiated program because purpose is narrow; classroom interactions are less child-friendly; resources and materials are scarce in a classroom where learning can hardly occur with lecture; training competence of facilitators and relevant authorities is inadequate; there is feminization of facilitators and deprivation of O-class children from paternal care; guidelines, standards, curriculum, and books missing.
- *Lack of partnership:* Lack of coordination among stakeholders, parents not seriously involved and also assisted to getting parent education, partnerships being sporadic rather than deliberate; NGOs not adequately exploited and yet many of them are involved in the delivery of more expensive ECCEs Ethiopia; universities not adequately deployed; cluster schools not so much involved...

In the Zambian case, it has also resulted into certain negative/unintended outcomes: extinction of the community based ECD centers that were providing service to children of all ages, some children moved from conducive, well sheltered community ECD facilities to worse school environments. The health and nutrition aspects which typified the community based ECD have been lost. In some cases, there is now more emphasis on cognitive development at the expense of other spheres of the child's development (Mhangami, 2009). There are of course some arguments for not using the school as the site for delivering programs since schools are traditionally associated with more direct academic instructional orientations, children in school-based early childhood programs will be subjected to formal didactic instruction in academic skills at younger ages (Finn-Stevenson and Zigler 1999); schoolification problem, children with disabilities.

Practices and Reflections: Child-to-Child Initiative

Meaning, nature, status: The Child-to-Child Initiative has invariably been described as: an Afrique Noire (Nsamenang, 2010)–centered approach to child socialization (Serpell, 1993; Belay & Belay, 2010; Nsamenang, 2012), an African family-based education system that helps to integrate ‘the hands-on responsibility training component’ into curricula (Nsamenang, 2012). It is a non-formal approach that resonates with the socialization goals and practices of many indigenous African cultures (Serpell, 1993), a system of care in which older siblings are imputed to caring for their younger ones (Serpell et al., 2011) as secondary parents while parents are around and then would automatically transfer into primary caregivers with parental loss (Belay and Belay, 2010), and one of the most promising alternative channels in the quest to provide cost effective and efficient interventions in ECCE (Maekelech, 2009).

Child-to-child initiative is implemented in Tigray, Oromia, Harari, SNNPR, BenishangulGumuz, and Somali regions. The program started in 2008 with 3,500 participants and grew into 433,473 only in six years' period (MoE, 2013/14). Some regional differences were observed in implementing the program. For example, in Tigray, Child-to-Child was implemented in all *woredas* by the Regional Education Bureau while it was implemented in only *woredas* that were targeted by UNICEF in Oromiya. In Benishangul, it was implemented in six out of 20 rural *woredas*, in 33 schools, and 99 centers with a total of 99 young facilitators assisting 495 young children.

According to the ECCE policy documents, child-to-child is a non-formal school readiness initiative put in place considering that it will take time and effort to bring the formal ECCE services to a country-wide scale to reaching out children in the rural and pastoralist communities. This child-to-child initiative has two variants, also termed "two possible intervention strategies" (Maekelech, 2009) that are organized age-wise: Intervention strategy I for children 0 to 4/5 years, and Intervention II for children 5 to 7 years. Intervention Strategy I is a "helping the little ones or helping my own learning" program. It is envisaged to involve a developmentally appropriate series of play based learning activities that can be used by children in the early primary grades to enrich the overall development of their young siblings or other children in the community.

Intervention II, currently under implementation, is a one year school readiness (or ready for school) program that is designed to reach children a year before they are eligible for enrollment in grade 1. Older children, already in school, are paired with younger children to help them prepare for starting school through a series of weekly activities and monthly workshops. There are materials that are prepared especially for the child to child initiative. It is a kind of mentoring process whereby the learning of a younger child is facilitated by a trained older child (young facilitators) as they engage in structured play-like activities. Adults are involved in observing, reflecting on, and

giving feedback about the process. Teachers (of grades 1 to 5/6) are more fundamentally involved both as trainers, supporters, and supervisors. The main aim of the Child-to-Child Initiative is to prepare young children for primary school by providing opportunities for building skills that are important for the holistic development of the younger child - physical (fine and gross motor coordination), cognitive, emotional (sense of initiative, self-concept and problem-solving), social (family life, peer interaction, social competence and participation), artistic, and educational (reading, writing, counting and arithmetic) skills. The Child-to-Child model is well designed with respect to its quality elements associated with effective learning programs. It integrates cultural knowledge into the curriculum and uses interactive and child centered approaches to delivery. The content is particularly suited to preparing children for primary school, yet delivered in a manner to increase motivation for learning and engagement. The average length of one session is almost always 45 minutes to one hour. There are 36 sessions that need to be worked-out with the children, according to the program (Britto et al., 2012).

According to the guideline for non-formal school readiness, the young facilitator is supposed to get training once a week, at school, by his or her teacher so that s/he will be able to structure and guide the play through which peer learning is to be effected. Playing is to be done with available simple day-to-day local materials like stones, peanuts or beans for counting, for instance, as well as those basic materials provided by regional educational bureaus. While free, natural, and spontaneous play may occur under desired and less defined play settings, time, materials, conditions, and mates (i.e. anywhere, with anybody, and at any time in the life of children), it is, however, expected that the young facilitator will engage in a structured play with three to five defined preschool children in the community (relatives, neighbors or friends), close to the children's home at least once a week. The idea is the playing act turns out to stimulate learning as the benefiting child (aged 5-7 years) gets to know how, for instance, to count or to differentiate colors, while the turn belongs to him/her do the

counting, or distinguish the coloring. Materials have already been adapted and translated into different local languages used. The materials include guides for the teachers involved and for the young facilitators and a package for the participating children. The children's package contains story books, games, rhymes, exercises, etc.

In each school, 30 grade 5/6 students would be selected from different classes/sections to serve as young facilitators. Thus, if the school cluster in a specific region consist of seven schools, this region will have 210 young facilitators. Each facilitator will work with three to five young learners, bringing the total number of young children involved in one region to approximately 1050. Accordingly, a total of 193,750 children were enrolled nationally in 2012, or 2004 E.C. (MoE, 2011/12) and this grew into 433,473 in 2013, or 2006 E.C. (MoE, 2013/14).

The training model for the young facilitators consists of a two to three days training workshop, which is subsequently followed up by weekly evaluation and training. However, this training model was not implemented with fidelity to the design. The ECCE task force respondent noted that the training quality has weakened overtime and is highly dependent on the efforts of the regional education bureaus (REB). The respondents across the regions also noted that training of the young facilitators is not adequate and does not meet quality standards. This issue was not lost on the parents, as well. Several parents in the focus group discussions stated "Child-to-Child is a good idea, especially if there is a well-trained teacher to help", and another parent noted "Child-to-Child is a good idea if the older children are properly trained and can teach young children." Therefore, there appears to be a pervasive concern with the adequacy of the training received by the young facilitators. With respect to the interactions between the young facilitator and the child, not much can be reported, as those have not been observed or documented, systematically. There is a supervisory system in place where each coordinating teacher is not only responsible for visiting all of the implementing places for each and every young facilitator, but also for observing and

commenting on the implementations. However, this is not always done or possible, due to distances and displacement demands (Britto et al., 2012).

At the federal level, the ECCE focal person is taking charge of the program. Regionally, the education bureaus are bestowed with the responsibilities of implementing the program through local primary schools and with the technical and financial support of UNICEF. UNICEF administers and funds most of the program. With respect to financial sustainability, it was indicated by the respondents that it is primarily UNICEF that provides the funds for implementing the program. In Oromia, for example, the program is completely funded by UNICEF through block grants, whereas in Amhara, the funding sources include government (MoE), UNICEF and the community. It is estimated that two million USD is required to scale up Child-to-Child nationally throughout Ethiopia, based on a unit cost of \$5 per participating child per year. Oromia reported spending 800-1200 birr (or \$40-60) per year, per child. However, there are challenges in calculating expenditures because of delayed funding and procurement, as well as contractors' failure to complete the program on time (Britto et al., 2012).

As regards monitoring and evaluation, it is said that there are no minimum standards for the child-to-child initiative as it is a low-cost and minimum requirement program. But, the guideline states that the following mechanisms are pursued to follow progress and learn about impact:

- Baseline surveys to be conducted with a control and case communities to determine the existing levels of on-time enrolment as well as the school readiness of children as they enter school.
- Evaluation will be based on on-time enrolment and school preparedness, and address issues related to programme outcomes, impact, and process.

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- The pattern of school readiness for groups of children exposed to the child-to-child learning materials will be compared against control communities whose first grade children will not have had any exposure to the materials.
 - In addition to evaluating the readiness of the children upon entry into formal school, a sub-sample of communities will be selected to participate in a long-term follow-up to determine whether the intervention has any long-term impact on the children's progress and performance throughout the first three years of primary school.
 - The evaluation will also determine the impact of the programme on parents, teachers, child educators and communities.

This being the proposed direction, it was not, however, possible to get data about the implementation of these actions and the resulting data.

Foundations of the child-to-child initiative: The child-to-child initiative is based on the assumptions children are agents of their own socialization and developmental learning (Nsamenang, 2011), that young children below school age are influenced most by other siblings, typically older siblings, playmates, or "minders", with whom they interact on a daily basis and, hence, by working with these older siblings, playmates, and minders, who are already in school, the education system can build on this natural phenomena to influence child development and school readiness in a more systematic manner (Maekelch, 2009). Different related terms are used to describe this child-to-child phenomenon: 'Guided participation' in which children are placed in learning environments where peers will nurture their learning and development and offers an alternative to readiness concepts, 'peer group cooperation' or 'Ku-gwirizanandianzache' that promotes socially responsible intelligence (Serpell, 2011), 'cooperative learning', and 'learning communities', peer learning' (Blanc, and Martin, 1994) that enhances learning through interaction among contemporaries or student-student interaction, 'play pedagogies' (Wood, 2008) of European origin, an African educational strategy (African ECD Voice, 2014), child agency (Nsamenang, 2011) referring to social processes

or situations in which the child is an initiating actor or willful force that drives experience, learning and development and the child is both a ‘manager’ and instigator of her or his own development and African parents’ values permit children to be agents of their own developmental learning.

At the heart of the philosophy of child-to-child is the idea that successful education is about “reciprocity, dialogue, and exchange” (Edwards et al. 1998, p. 10), child-centered curricula that value children’s intrinsic learning through free play activities have been developed, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory of the Zone of Proximal Development” and the notion of scaffolding of learning by competent peers (Vong, 2008).

It has still a cultural foundation rooted in developing countries (cited in Maekelech, 2009), play-based learning of a Eurocentric ECCE programs (Wood, 2008), and childrearing goal that resonates with the socialization goals and practices of many indigenous African cultures (Serpell, 1993) such as the Chewa of Zambia, the Baoule of Cote d’Ivoire and the Luo of Kenya. This CtC approach was appropriated in the 1980s by a group of creative teachers working at several different Government Primary Schools in the Northern Province of Zambia (Serpell, 2011).

The formal conceptualization of Child-to-Child which has been applied in more than 80 countries worldwide was designed to mobilize children as agents of health education (in African ECD Voice, 2014). A major inspiration was the practice, widespread in Africa and many regions, of entrusting preadolescent children with the care of younger siblings. A case study was conducted in Zambia of integrative curriculum development by a group of teachers at a government primary school in a small town using the Child-to-Child approach (Serpell, 2008).

Thus the purpose of schooling is widely understood as the extractive recruitment of the best and brightest individuals to climb up and out of the community and enter a higher, powerful, elite society. The Child-to-Child approach differs from the narrowing staircase model by focusing on the promotion of social responsibility in pre-adolescent children, an educational goal that resonates with the socialization goals and practices of many indigenous African cultures (Serpell, 1993) such as the Chewa of Zambia, the Baoule of Cote d'Ivoire and the Luo of Kenya. The formal conceptualization of Child-to-Child which has been applied in more than 80 countries worldwide was designed to mobilize children as agents of health education. A major inspiration was the practice, widespread in Africa and many regions, of entrusting preadolescent children with the care of younger siblings. A case study was conducted in Zambia of integrative curriculum development by a group of teachers at a government primary school in a small town using the Child-to-Child approach (Serpell, 2008).

The key insight that pre-adolescent children can take on responsibility as agents of infant care and nurture, within the context of primary health care and progressive social change was re-appropriated by the African teachers at Kabale Primary School in Mpika as a way of incorporating indigenous insights into the formal educational process. Striking long-term benefits were claimed by graduates of this innovative curriculum, including a growth of egalitarian relations between the genders, even within adult marriages (Serpell et al., 2011). In the light of this and other studies, we believe that Child-to-Child arrangements deserve special attention in the design of ECDCE programs in Africa, with a view to integrating into their curricula 'the hands-on responsibility training component of African family-based education' (Nsamenang, 2012).

Serpell (2009) reviewed a series of programmatic inquiries conducted in Zambia between 1971 and 2009 that have generated significant African contributions to developmental science, and reviewed the implications of this and other African research for the design of ECD

services in rural African communities. He outlined four principles of good practice that appear to have been largely neglected (and, in some cases, deliberately violated) by current ECCE programs for children of rural African communities: use of an indigenous language familiar to the enrolled young children; use of indigenous cultural games familiar to local adult family members/caregivers; Child-to-Child: involvement within the programs of preadolescent children of school-going age, inclusion of children with moderate and/or severe developmental disabilities among the young children enrolled in the programs.

Child-to-child is a practice that is also built into the Ethiopian childcare system. In the family, caring for a child is bestowed on grown up children. Parents normally mind for the first born and the rest will take care of themselves. Older siblings are in fact secondary parents who turn into primary caregivers when children lose their parents. This has played a significantly important role in protecting young children and keeping them in one roof at the time many households lost parents due to AIDS (Belay and Belay, 2010).

Field experiences with children in preschools in rural Ethiopia⁴ have also shown how important older siblings are. Young children's reported relationship with older siblings was satisfying. This relationship is in many cases so intimate that siblings are one of the multiple attachments that young children will develop with.

She is fond of her brother. They sleep together. She enquires a lot and worries too much if he stays away for long hours. She doesn't go to sleep if he is still away. She and her brother discuss school assignments and help each other in working out problems. They also sing together (a 28 years old mother, Klinto Center).

⁴The quotes under this section are all borrowed from field report of previous research by Teka and Belay (2015) on early childhood care and education in some NGO-funded rural ECCEs in Ethiopia.

Because of this positive relationship, children usually help one another:

My children (i.e. the grandchildren) have good relationships among themselves. They help one another (a 50 years old grandmother, Klinto Center mentioned).

She also has good relationship with her uncle and sometimes engages herself reading different materials for her elder sister's home chores (a 56 years old grandmother, Klinto Center).

Siblings are many things in one: playing with them as partners, training them how to play, providing protection, supporting and enabling them in them to play, and teaching them alphabets:

I play different games with my brother (6 years old boy child, living with both parents, Klinto Center).

I play imangeya with my brothers, and also the game, 'who saw my handkerchief' with them when we wanted to. My brothers come to my help when I get into fight with other children. They also teach me games of Eka-ka, and the letters, A, B, C, D (6 years old, boy child, lives with both parents, Selam Fire Center).

I play with my sisters and brother. We eat together. I love them, because they teach me the alphabets by writing them on the walls. They also help me wash my hands and face (6 years old, boy child, Lives with both parents, ChigWuha Center).

Our daughter tells us what she has been taught at the center during the day. Her brother helps her when she fails to fully narrate the details of the story or the song she learned at the center. The facilitator's demonstrated love, attention, and care are the terms that our daughter uses in describing the positive side of the center (a 25 years old mother, Klinto Center).

Age mates and friends as equally important for children as siblings; play with and learn from each other, share materials, support one another, and study lessons together:

I also play such games as slides, swings, and seesaw. My age mates taught me these games. I also have such play materials as a toy car, and toy airplane, etc. Some are made by me, and others are offered by a female child of my neighborhood. I play different games with my brother (6 years old boy child, Living with both parents, Klinto Center).

Alongside the story time, I also enjoy playing ball, car, and chasing around". I learned the games from my neighboring age mates (5 years old boy child, Living with Mother, Klinto Center). I spend my time learning the alphabet with my friends (5 years old boy child, Living with Mother, Klinto Center).

I also play with my friends. We help one another. I love my friends because they give me money, they play with me and they also help me with my learning of the Amharic alphabet 'ha hu' (6 years old, boy child, Lives with both parents, ChigWuha Center).

I play with my friends and with children of the neighborhood. We play Eka-ka. I love my friends when they play Eka-ka with me. They all are younger than me. I am the one taking the lead/ the teaching role during our play (7 years old, girl child, Lives with grandparents, ChigWuha Center).

I enjoy such games, as kolkele; denbush, who saw my handkerchief, slides, hide-and-peek. I was taught all these by my facilitator and age mates (7 years old, girl child, Lives with grandparents, ChigWuha Center).

Siblings and friends alike are still the sources of care and support to the children. Elder siblings take their younger brothers/ sisters to and from the center, and this is an added opportunity for interacting with one another:

The children get care and support from their elder brothers and sisters. Their elder brothers or sisters take them to the center in the morning, and they take them back home after school hours (Facilitator One, male, 20 years old, married, family size of 3 persons with one girl child).

The older siblings take the children to the center, and take them back home after school (Facilitator Two, female, 42 years old, married, family size of 3 persons with one girl child).

The children would have several things from their elder sisters and brothers as they walk them to and from the center. For instance, they learn punctuality, orderliness, and the like (Facilitator, 30 years old, female, Selam Fire).

When they go back home after school, children tell their siblings what they have learned at the center. The elder siblings listen to the young child's story of daily learning with delight (Facilitator, 35 years old, female, ChiguWuha).

Siblings are also involved in routine care of younger ones as well as in teaching them stories and reading/ writing:

At home, my sister takes care of me most of the time. She also teaches me songs, plays, and stories (6 years old, girl child, Lives with both parents, Selam Fire Center).

My sisters and brother also wash my clothes and help me wash my face (6 years old, boy child, Lives with both parents, ChigWuha Center).

I am happy when my brother washes my body, serves me with water, fetches soap and washes my clothes (6 years old boy child, Living with both parents, Klinto Center).

My sisters help me in learning how to read. I love them. They also love me (6 years old, girl child, Lives with both parents, Selam Fire Center).

My sisters and brothers help me when I take a bath, and teach me some stories and songs (5 years old boy child, Living with Mother, Klinto Center).

Friends are to an equal extent sources of protection, learning and support:

I have friends I play with. Together, we herd the cows, and bathe ourselves in a river. I love my friends because they come to the help when I go into a fight with other children. They also help me in the learning of the A B C D (6 years old, boy child, Lives with both parents, Selam Fire Center).

I have two female friends. We play together. We sit on the same bench and write together. We also do other things together. I love my friends, because they let me have play materials when I wanted to. In addition, they teach me 'ha hu, le lu' (6 years old, girl child, Lives with mother and brother).

I have two friends who are my age mates. We play together, we play 'handkerchief' with my friends. I love my friends, because they let me play with them. They take me to their homes and let me watch films. We also study together (6 years old, boy child, full orphan, Lives with mother and brother).

My friends support me with writing. My mother is the one giving me more care (6 years old boy child, living with both parents (Klinto Center).

Contributions and challenges: The child-to-child initiative is one of the most promising alternative channels in the quest to provide cost effective and efficient interventions in ECCE (Maekelech, 2009). With respect to cost, Child-to-Child does provide a viable interim solution to reach the learning goals of primary school (Britto et al., 2012). It is considered that the informal modality will be an effective low-cost way of improving school readiness (MoE, MoWCYA, and MoH, 2010, P.11). It has significantly contributed to total percentage of children having access to readiness programs nearly by 12% in 2004 E.C. (MoE, 2011/12) which grew to 17.4 % in 2006E.C. (MoE, 2013/14). So much contribution is made only in a situation where the program is in its infancy. One can imagine the huge number of benefiting children when this approach is being implemented in all the regions and schools. In addition to improving access, this approach is believed to help participating Grade 1 teachers in particular to benefit from the materials used in the program to improve their classroom practices. It will also ultimately reduce child labor that appears a major problem of school attendance in rural Ethiopia. Impacts on parental notions of childrearing and play will also improve because of this practice. Many rural parents believe that play is a waste of time and makes children lazy. Even in urban areas, some parents prefer their children to come back home learning literacy, numeracy, and language rather than seeing them playing and singing ECCEs.

The strengths of the program are noted in improved learning outcomes in specific domains by children in the pilot implementation. The program serves to increase child motivation for learning at a lower cost than formal programs and reduces dropout rate. From a demand perspective, the program's strength is also noted in parents' endorsing it as a good idea, but with the condition that it does not impact the young facilitator's own learning and if the young facilitator is knowledgeable and able to offer support to the younger child. Child-to-Child builds on the culturally prevalent interactions between older and younger siblings, and children in the community (Britto et al., 2012).

The African tradition of pre-adolescent children caring for and nurturing younger siblings and neighbors is informed by sound principles that share the burden of care and promote the prosocial development of school age children. It is a community-based provision promoting community ownership and sustainability of ECDCE services. It also ECDCE programs in rural African communities not to rely on separating young children from their pre-adolescent elder siblings and peers and placing them under the exclusive care of adults (African ECD Voice, 2014). Highly valued dimensions of child development that are largely ignored by Western tests and preschool curricula include socially responsible intelligence, cooperation and the resourcefulness of children from disadvantaged homes. Cooperative learning arrangements deserve special attention in African ECDCE programs as an entry-point for the cultivation of social responsibility (African ECD Voice, 2014, p.19).

Other scholars have underscored the various contributions of the child-to-child approach of education and care. Nsamenang holds that in Cameroon most of children's 'work' is undertaken with peers in child-to-child social networks and exchanges with older siblings and peer mentors as child protectors rather than with parents or teachers. This is more commonplace in rural settings and urban slums. The considerable learning that occurs in child-to-child socialization is noteworthy given that in a 24-hour period, most parents, like teachers,

are only partially available to guide and supervise children's development and learning (Nsamenang, 2011). The peer culture offers opportunities for children to play, "work", and learn together, free from parental supervision and adult control. The freedom of the peer culture promotes creativity and challenges children to cultivate prosocial values and altruism on their own terms, to defer to more competent peers, to address and resolve problems are entirely based on available and local resources (existing schools, teachers, and students). The public schools have ample spaces that can be exploited in the face of today's resource (mainly plot of land) limitations in ECCE implementation even in rural Ethiopia (e.g. see Teka and Belay, 2015). Deploying existing primary school teachers as supervisors and trainers in child-to-child programs is still cost-effective. In fact, such judicious use of the limited resources needs to be a lesson even for other organizations to emulate in resource scarce countries. Hence, both programs have high prospect and feasibility for scalability and sustainability. But, the various implementation practices already discussed about each program seem to cast shadows along this direction, especially considering the 80% of the preschoolers are in O-class and Child-to-child modalities.

First, given that there is a low government involvement in these programs in terms of cost as well as serious follow up and supervision would indicate lesser commitment from the programs. There is a prominent government presence in the primary, secondary and tertiary education and it allocates a large share of its annual budget. So, one would expect the government to show commitment to the realization of the educational objectives. The fact that these approaches are homegrown and can be offered with low cost should not lead to an understanding that they would be conducted without any budget from the government as this seems the practice at the moment. However, the extremely limited government and donor funding available for the programs seems to place a significant burden on an already overstretched primary education system (Young Lives, 2012).

Third problem is the very notion of readiness itself. Both programs and the regular ECCE program (preschool education) in Ethiopia in general seem to cater for children's readiness for school. This approach narrowly defines ECCE only in terms of the role it plays in preparing children for Grade one disregarding its contribution for child learning and development at large. More importantly, it would enforce a move towards premature schoolification of the preschool years to smoothen transition to grade one. The tendency to emphasize academic subjects, use more didactic approach than play, lecture-type classroom organizations and many others reflect this early move of imposing the schooling culture on the preschool environments.

On the other hand, there are little changes in school environments to respond to the needs of the incoming children; suggesting that schools are not expected to be ready to serve the children. Readiness seems to be understood as a unidirectional concept of being "a Ready Child; not a Ready School." The risks that are attached to the concept of 'children's readiness are now widely recognized. Asking about readiness for school places disproportionate emphasis on families' inability to support their children to match the expectations of school. Scholars have increasingly pointed to the flip side of the coin – the readiness of school systems to support children's successful transitions: characteristics that define the 'readiness of schools for children' ... this includes the school's availability, accessibility, quality, and most important, its responsiveness to local needs and circumstances. These readiness characteristics of schools are influenced by the actions of families and communities as well as by the economic, social, and political conditions of the wider environment (Myers and Landers, 1989, p. 3) suggesting then that this school readiness idea would obviously be well above a suspect for neglect in Ethiopia where early childhood and primary school policies and services are uncoordinated.

The idea of having ready schools is conspicuous by its absence in East Africa. Arnold and colleagues (2006) expressed the challenges of having “ready schools” in east Africa,

In East Africa, a Grade 1 teacher often has 100 children enrolled in her class in the first months of school. The vast majority have not attended preschool before enrolling in primary school. Textbooks – especially in the first weeks or months – may not yet have arrived in the rural schools. The ages of the students range from 4 to 9+ years. The teacher – who is often paid less and treated as lower status than those teaching higher grades – is unlikely to have had specialized teacher training to help her organize, manage and teach the diverse group of students in her class. There may be at most a chalk board and chalk. Some children may not speak the language used for daily instruction. The teacher may well come from another part of the country and may or may not speak the children’s home language.

The idea is that there is a need for making mutual adjustment in the readiness process; that of monitoring and improving the readiness of schools for children as well as the readiness of children for school. School readiness failures are most evident in early-grade classrooms, but the underlying failures are in educational policies, management and resourcing. Relationships between primary education and the early childhood sector are often one-sided, with the school system dominating. Policies are needed that work towards a strong and equal partnership. There are widespread organizational differences between early childhood and primary school, and associated differences in culture and philosophy. Discontinuities and lack of coordination are common even within OECD countries with well-established education systems. In countries where universal basic education has yet to be achieved, the challenges are even greater. Five major aspects require attention: curricular, pedagogical, linguistic, professional and home-to-school continuities. Children themselves generally approach transitions

as a positive challenge. School systems must be organized to respond to that challenge (Moss, 2007).

A major concern of school-based readiness programs is the tendency to single out academic subjects as most important and the premature induction into didactic approach at the expense of play-based teaching. Schools are traditionally associated with more direct academic instructional orientations, children in school-based early childhood programs will be subjected to formal didactic instruction in academic skills at younger ages (Finn-Stevenson and Zigler, 1999). Burgeoning research is building a compelling case for the relationship between health, physical, emotional, and the cognitive aspects of children's development (Carlson et al., 2008). Such research suggests children are likely to fail to achieve academic goals unless educators actively promote children's development across all domains.

The need to provide O-class and Child-to-Child initiatives as integrated services (rather than rendering mainly individual and academic services that hardly involve parents and communities) is still important because such services promote (a) the holistic development of children (Zigler et al., 2006), (b) equitable access to services (Colley, 2006), (c) and continuity for children in early childhood service settings (Pelletier and Corter, 2006) which imply that children experience greater consistency in their daily interactions across settings or over a span of time as a result of fewer transitions.

It is also expected that early childhood programs should still be used as an entry point for parent education. However, few programs have truly integrated health into the curriculum for children, as well as training for parents and teachers. Yet, a variety of health conditions can affect children worldwide and place children at risk of school failure and interfere with their smooth transition to school. Diseases and chronic conditions, such as diabetes, intestinal parasite infections, cardiac deficits, sickle cell anemia and other health issues, are known to affect academic performance (Tarasand Potts-Datema, 2005).

It is recommended that early and continued family involvement in both early childhood education and elementary school settings to ease transition for children with disabilities (McIntyre and Wildenger, 2011). The results of Schulting and colleagues (2005) suggest that parental involvement may be important for both transition practices and children's school achievement. Findings from the small number of studies investigating parent perceptions of their involvement in kindergarten transition preparation activities suggest overall satisfaction with their efforts (Hamblin-Wilson and Thurman, 1990). Schools can reach out to families by developing two-way communication between home and school; can reach out to families prior to the first day of school; and can utilize a range of activities to encourage parent and family participation in transition programming (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Furthermore, the trend toward community collaboration is strong, and community involvement is considered an efficient use of resources that can result in a better system of support and services for families with young children. Strengthening families by ensuring access to critical community services has potential for exerting a positive impact on children's school readiness (Weigel and Martin, 2006). Establishing policies and creating relationships between local government agencies and early childhood programs has been recommended to improve the quality of early care and education. Community participation and public investment in school readiness efforts has shown promise as a strategy for achieving better child outcomes (Kagan and Neuman, 2003). Yet, despite the struggle to overcome the deleterious effects of poverty and insufficient resources for promoting school readiness, many children enter school ill-prepared and at a serious risk of school failure.

Equally important is the situation of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities experience a number of cognitive, social, behavioral, and developmental risk factors making their transition to school especially complex (McIntyre et al. 2006). Examining the State of the Science Empirical Support for Kindergarten Transition Practices for

Students with Disabilities (PP.21-22) Laura Lee McIntyre and Leah K. Wildenger reviewed the empirical literature on kindergarten transition for students with disabilities with respect to (1) caregiver perspectives on transition, (2) teacher perspectives on transition, (3) future environments, (4) intervention studies, and (5) comprehensive kindergarten transition preparation interventions. Studies assessing caregiver and teacher perceptions of transition illuminate some of the key issues and problems surrounding transition for children with disabilities.

Relationships between primary education and the early childhood sector are often one-sided, with the school system dominating. Policies are needed that work towards a strong and equal partnership. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends a rights-based approach to early childhood programs, including initiatives surrounding transition to primary school. There are widespread organizational differences between early childhood and primary school, and associated differences in culture and philosophy. Discontinuities and lack of coordination are common even within OECD countries with well-established education systems. In countries where universal basic education has yet to be achieved, the challenges are even greater. Five major aspects require attention: curricular, pedagogical, linguistic, professional and home-to-school continuities. Children themselves generally approach transitions as a positive challenge. School systems must be organized to respond to that challenge (Moss, 2007).

Generally, given that each of the two programs has its own strengths and limitations at the moment, it would be more meaningful to use them in combination rather than using them independently simply to improve access. Finally, the peer group is a trigger and central support of “agency” in African children, but it has not been well analyzed or researched and remains a largely uncharted developmental space (Nsmenang, 2011). The anchor of agency is theories and research that demonstrate how children construct knowledge through their own

efforts and actions on the world and how to explicate this idea and how it can be combined with O-class for better outcome.

Lastly, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis of infrastructure needed to ascertain: (i) how the sharing of spaces with primary schools benefits or affects the preschool infrastructure, and young child appropriateness and safety; (ii) how the community can provide safe and friendly spaces for children; and (iii) how locally-available materials can be used to provide long-term and sustainable resources of quality didactic materials (Britto et al., 2012).

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