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Understanding Teachers', School Principals, and Early Childhood Education Experts' Perception of O-Class Program for Children's School Readiness: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Only one in five children in the low-income country have access to pre-primary schooling. The greatest benefits would come from early childhood education programs for those who are least likely to participate in them (UNICEF, 2018). This study aimed to explore teachers', school principals, and early childhood education experts' perceptions of O-class programs for children's school readiness. A phenomenological research design under a qualitative approach was used. Participants included 16 O-class principals (6 male and 10), 10 teachers (2 male and 8 female), and 5 ECE experts (all male). The researchers measured teachers' perceptions towards culturally responsive and locally available resources in the O-class through interviews and school principals and ECE experts perceived the success and challenges of the O-class program for children's school readiness through focus group discussions. From the analysis, eight themes emerged. Our data demonstrate that the O-class program increases parental and child attendance, benefiting children's school readiness. This implies that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are still less likely to have taken part in the O-class program, do not have the same opportunity to advance in the first few years of elementary school. Overall, children's school readiness is impacted by resource limitations, background differences, and learning difficulties. Finally, based on the main findings, conclusion, areas for additional study, and implications for policy and practice were suggested.

Keywords

Ethiopia, O-Class, School Readiness, Qualitative

1. Introduction

Globally, the gross pre-primary enrolment rate increased by 28 percentage points in the last 20 years, rising from 33% in 2000 to 61% in 2020. Despite these developments, UNICEF research on early childhood education in the world indicates that as of 2019, at least 175 million children between the ages of 3 and 6 were not enrolled in school (*Pre-Primary Education—UNICEF DATA*, n.d.). When they were one year younger than the school age for a primary school in their country, one in four children around the world were still out of school. Over the previous ten years, the number of children this age who are not in school has decreased, from 38 million in 2010 to 33 million in 2020. Despite considerable progress, it happened in the four years from 2010 to 2013, when the number declined from 38 million to 33 million from 2014 to 2020. This slower rate of recovery is likely due to factors such as rapid population growth, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as an increase in emergencies and humanitarian crises. The COVID-19 pandemic's additional challenges could harm pre-primary enrollment (*Pre-Primary Education—UNICEF DATA*, n.d.).

The National Education Goals Panel (1997) established five major school readiness categories to address young children's diverse development. These five areas have been acknowledged by early education policies and initiatives (social and emotional development, approaches to learning, health and physical development, cognitive development, and language development).

According to early educators and policymakers, school readiness is a key objective of early childhood education (National Education Goals Panel (NEGP), 1997; School Readiness Indicators Initiative, 2005). Less consensus exists over what constitutes school readiness and how it should be assessed (Daily, Burkhauser, & Halle, 2012). School readiness was described in a very general way by Snow (2006) as "the status of children's competencies at the time of school enrollment that is critical for later success". She continued by saying that there is disagreement over the precise elements that make up school readiness. According to Graue (2009), school readiness is a "collection of skills and dispositions that are loosely associated with success in school".

There is controversy in the area over the significance of academic vs developmental abilities in preparing students for school, which may contribute to the difficulties in determining school readiness (Graue, 2009; La Paro & Pianta, 2000). Early reading and math are the only emphases of certain school readiness assessments, whilst other tests emphasize physical or social-emotional development (Daily et al., 2012). Early academic assessment frequently uses direct assessment, but developmental assessment frequently involves observation (Bradbury, 2014; Casbergue, 2011). However, research has indicated that when determining a child's readiness for school, a whole-child approach that takes into account both academic and developmental skills may be the most effective (Daily et al., 2012; Davoudzadeh et al., 2015; Yoon, 2015).

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) stated three important points

about the significance of children, schools, and families in terms of children's school readiness; to begin with, children who are prepared effectively for school, focus on learning and development. In addition, schools that are ready efficiently for school readiness of children, provide optimum conditions for children's learning and development. Furthermore, a ready family and the closest environment to a child's family provide support for children's early learning and development (UNICEF, 2012).

Three domains are relevant to school readiness: early reading, early math, and developmental milestones. Background on each of these areas is provided as well as research to support the inclusion of the skill in school readiness assessments. In addition, examples of some common assessments in each area are provided. Early reading and early math skills are the best predictors of later academic success, beyond other cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors across different populations of students (Duncan et al., 2007; Hecht et al., 2001; Hooper et al., 2010). Low early academic skills were also shown to be the best predictor of later-grade retention in elementary school (Davoudzadeh et al., 2015). The inclusion of early academic skills in the assessment of school readiness may provide information to help determine a student's readiness for school.

Some researches indicate that school readiness is associated with learning, attending school, developing further skills, and academic success or failure (Jaramillo & Tietjen, 2001; Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005). Supporting school readiness in early childhood, especially between 3 - 8 years, affects significantly the other grades of school life (UNICEF, 2012).

Pre-primary education is provided in Ethiopia in three different ways: the O-class model, the child-to-child program, and Kindergarten (KG1, 2 & 3). Ethiopian children start primary school when they are seven years old. Ethiopia's education and training system divide preprimary schools into the kindergarten (KG1, KG2, and KG3), O-class, and CTC categories (child-to-child approach). Before the age of seven, children have been expected to attend kindergarten (KG) school. The children's expected to participate in O-class if there is no access to KG school. Children in remote areas attend O-class because there is no kindergarten there. It is designed for children aged 6 and provides basic pre-language for young children, early numeracy and reading abilities, as well as socio-emotional development for a year to help children build their social and local awareness skills. Children who are unable to enroll in kindergarten, which is a separate pre-primary education, attend the one-year O-class program, which is also a pre-primary education. They are promoted to first grade once they have finished the O-class program.

Children that join in O-class at the age of six spend a year there before moving on to primary school, which is also known as Zero Grade in Ethiopia (Diale & Sewagegn, 2021; MoE, 2015; Rossiter, 2016). The O-class initiative was developed to bridge access gaps in places without kindergartens, particularly in rural areas (Fantahun, 2016; Mulugeta, 2015). It serves as a transitional year between kindergarten and first grade. Children in the O-class attend a reception class run

by government primary schools until formal schooling starts at age seven (MoE, 2015). The increasing growth of O-classes has raised questions about the quality of the early education provided (MoE, 2015). These 6-year-olds are enrolled in this portion of the pre-primary education system because they do not have access to kindergarten.

The O-class modality is used in a lot of rural and remote schools that are far from educational facilities. The curriculum in O-class is different from the kindergarten curriculum. The one-year program's curriculum was designed to get children ready for first grade. Teachers for the O-class have degrees from teacher training institutions and high schools. Before enrolling in the O-class, some recent high school graduates receive some brief training, while others do not. After finishing the one-year reception program, the children are placed in the first grade of a nearby primary school.

In general, the Ethiopian rural areas, the O-class system is typically employed for pre-primary education. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division (2019), about 80% of Ethiopia's population resides in rural areas, making kindergarten education for all challenging. The government created O-class approach to the rural population as a result.

Statement of the Problem

It includes children between the ages of 5 and 6 who cannot have access to kindergarten. Selected teachers from the individual primary school coach the children in this program. Preschoolers go through this procedure to prepare for grade one (Mulugeta, 2015). Even with the implementation of O-classes and child-to-child programs, the number of young children enrolled in early childhood education in Ethiopia is still insignificant compared to the number of eligible children (Fantahun, 2016).

Previous studies on ECE in Ethiopia have concentrated on urban areas, kindergarten education in particular (Girima, 2014; Hamelmal, 2015; Adam, 2020; Yizengaw & Tessega, 2020). Numerous studies have looked at the civil society-initiated pilot ECEs, which were discovered to be expensive, less sensitive to local realities, and appear to have lower sustainability prospects because they seemed to stretch the features of urban-based ECEs to a rural context (e.g., Zewdie & Tefera, 2015).

Ethiopian preschool enrollment is influenced by the income of the families. In a study, Woldehanna (2016) found that while children in rural areas did not have access to preschool, more than half of children in urban areas did. Additionally, there is a clear distinction between preschools in urban and rural areas. There are many different non-governmental service providers in urban areas. While some disadvantaged parents use constrained faith-based organizations, wealthier parents typically bring their kids to private preschools. Only a small number of non-governmental groups offer preschool services in remote areas (Tefera, 2018).

The researcher noticed a lack of early childhood services (educational input)

or issues with the implementation of O-class, grade repetition, drop-out rates, and a lack of parental awareness, teachers' competency, and accessibility issues in the physical setting. According to the researcher's knowledge and information, there hasn't been much research on how teachers, school administrators, and early childhood education specialists' perception of the O-class program's contribution to children's school readiness. Given the aforementioned inadequacies, the authors of this study attempt to describe the current functions and roles of O-class modality for children's school readiness in Wolaita zone pre-primary schools, particularly in a rural setting.

To this end, the following research questions guided the course of the study to the problem.

1) What do teachers think about culturally responsive and locally available resources in the O-class?

2) What do school principals and ECE experts perceive as the success and challenges of the O-class program for children's school readiness?

This study aimed to explore teachers', school principals, and early childhood education experts' perceptions of O-class programs for children's school readiness:

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

The ecological systems model, which contends that children's development should be understood within a network of subsystems acting in a multidimensional way, is a methodology that directs research engagements in ECE-related topics (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008). Early childhood studies now place a strong emphasis on the necessity of comprehending the various ways in which children engage with their parents, significant other family members, the school, cultural contexts, kindergarten teachers, and the community within the complex social framework.

To investigates participants' daily experiences and preconceived notions regarding the significance of O-class in preparing children for school. This study used phenomenological research, a qualitative methodology that aims to comprehend and characterize the fundamental features of a phenomenon.

To understand the interactions between children, parents/significant others, teachers, school principals, and ECE experts regarding O-class endeavors and children's readiness for school, it would be helpful to use a qualitative approach to collect rich data from the interview and FGD guides. In light of this, it appears that the appropriate approach for the current inquiry was to harmonize the qualitative methods of data gathering.

2.2. Section of Study Sample

We selected the participants for the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) from the 49 O-class which were located in Wolaita Zone.

Based on their experience, participants were picked from these schools purposively. Moreover, 16 school principals, 10 teachers, and 5 ECE experts participated.

2.3. Data Collection and Procedure

The interview protocol explains the purpose of the study, the methods used to keep the data private, the duration of the interview, and the interview questions. Researchers prepared open-ended questions for the participants, which were then followed by probes. The research issues were addressed in the interview questions, which probed the 10 teachers' views on the value and application of locally and culturally relevant resources in the O-class. The use of follow-up questions allowed the participant to elaborate on and clarify their perceptions. Each interview lasted between 25 and 30 minutes and adhered to a data recording protocol.

The interviews were audio recorded with participant consent to guarantee a thorough transcript (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). All interviews were recorded as typed notes, which allowed the researcher to keep track of important details to revisit later in the interview and to use for data analysis. As the data was gathered, the information it yielded was meticulously structured. Data were acquired and analyzed by the researcher to help with the research problem.

FGDs give a smaller group of participants the chance to share their knowledge, viewpoints, and feelings about the topic at hand. Duggleby (2005) asserts that this qualitative tool helps in eliciting insights from a small group of discussants regarding the current social norms around a certain subject. The researcher created the FGD questions. It evaluated the essential issues of the O-class program's successes and challenges in preparing children for school. The FGD sessions included sixteen (16) school principals and five (5) ECE experts, with eight (8) principals and three (3) ECE experts participating in the first session and the remaining participants in the second.

Trustworthiness

The researcher must ensure the accuracy of their conclusions and interpretations through the data collection and analysis process. By using techniques like member checking or triangulation, the researcher can assess the validity or accuracy of the findings.

To increase the accuracy of a study, qualitative researchers combine data from several sources. Triangulation is the process of correlating data in qualitative research descriptions and themes from various sources, such as different people (such as a principal and a student), different types of data (such as observational field notes and interviews), or different methods of data collection (such as documents and interviews). Each source of information is examined by the researcher, who then gathers data to support a theme. As a result, the study will be accurate since it draws on a variety of informational sources, people, or procedures. It motivates the researcher to produce a report that is truthful and believ-

able reports (Creswell, 2012).

The researcher used two forms of data triangulation to ensure the validity of the qualitative data collected for this study. First, data triangulation was employed by collecting information obtained from other sources. The second method, known as investigator triangulation, involved analyzing the data from the viewpoint of specialists.

2.4. Data Analysis

Seven steps made up the framework analysis method the researcher utilized. These included transcribing, interview familiarization, coding, developing a working framework, application of an analytical framework, data charting into the framework matrix, and data interpretation (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). The data were verbatim audio-recorded, verbatim transcribed, and then translated into English by the lead investigator and language specialist at the initial transcription stage. The authors repeatedly read and reread the transcripts during the second familiarization phase. The audio recordings were listened to several times after this step to gain fresh perspectives. Additionally, the study made notes, gave thought to its observations, and reflected on its interviewing experiences. The initial informative comments were made, recognized, and recorded. Thirdly, the researcher identified codes by examining the transcripts' textual content. Software NVIVO 11 to help with data organizing and analysis. In the fourth stage, the researcher developed a workable framework, compared the labels, and decided on the set of codes to be used in the next transcripts. After that, the codes were grouped into categories. The method produced the working analytic framework. The researcher carried out the analytical framework in the fifth stage by indexing the following transcripts using the provided codes and categories. The researcher used a spreadsheet to graph the data into the framework matrix in the sixth stage. It entailed summarizing the data by groups from the transcripts of the research. Interpreting the data was the last phase which started with penning a narrative report of the research. From the data, three and five (from the interviews and FGD) themes were generated. Additionally, it clarified each of the themes by explaining them and providing instances from interviews and FGD, followed by the researchers' analytical comments.

3. Results

The O-class teachers, principals, and ECE experts who participated in this study answered interview questions using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions and focus group discussions respectively. In responding to the semi-structured interview questions, 10 participants described their experiences, success, and challenges in thinking about the importance and practice of culturally and locally available resources. 16 School principals and 5 ECE experts participated in focus group discussions.

There were interviews and two sessions of focus groups. Each interview lasted between 25 and 30 min. Participants were allowed to review their interview and FGD's transcripts for approval. The qualitative data obtained through both instruments were analyzed using a thematic approach. The sources were coded for analyzing data. In this case, numeric coding for participants was used. The study participants were assigned identifiable codes to organize, store, and report research findings and were identified as E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, and E10 for an interview analysis.

3.1. Interview Analysis

All the participating teachers mentioned that they had experiences with culturally or locally available resources and diverse learners. According to the analysis of qualitative data, three important themes were revealed and described in the following ways (Table 1).

From the analysis, the following three themes emerged. These are a lack of teaching resources, children learning difficulties, and teachers' experience in multicultural teaching. Analysis of the interview data indicated that teachers felt they learned and gained three important themes. Here the researcher provides more detail to support this finding.

Theme 1: Lack of Teaching Resource Influences O-class Program

Early childhood educators should be aware of the opportunities and problems they may encounter while deciding to pursue a career as a kindergarten or Pre-K

Table 1. Themes and codes extracted from teachers' views of experience, culturally responsive and locally available resources in the O-class.

Themes	Codes
Lack of Teaching Resources	Books
	Artwork
	Salary
	Stories
	Play material
	Text sets
Multicultural Teaching	Diversity
	Active learning
	Facilitator
	Small group
	Content
Learning Difficulties	Reading
	Writing
	Math
	Direction

teacher. Early life educators must therefore possess the fortitude to endure hardships while maintaining a burning love for mentoring young children. By any measure of the imagination, it is not a simple process. According to the research, it not only requires a particular kind of person but also the backing of local communities and the entire country. Resources are a common source of issues for both kindergarten and preschool teachers.

Among the many challenges teachers face today, lack of resources remain one of the most important. To make up for the extremely small budgets set for classroom materials, many kindergarten and preschool teachers resort to desperate measures to make sure their kids don't fall behind. This can mean even reaching into their own pockets (which are often close to empty due to their poor salaries) to make up the difference. If you were to ask a group of early childhood educators the question: "what are the challenges of a preschool teacher?" a lack of resources would almost assuredly be discussed.

Lack of resources continues to be one of the biggest problems facing teachers today in Ethiopia. Many kindergarten and preschool teachers turn to desperate tactics to make up for the incredibly meager budgets provided for classroom supplies to prevent their students from falling behind. Due to their low incomes, this may even require them to take money out of their wallets, which are frequently nearly empty. What are the difficulties faced by preschool teachers, if you were to put that question to a group of early childhood educators? There would very certainly be a discussion about a poor salary or resources. Some examples of teachers' opinions were described as follows:

"*I primarily taught young children (aged six) at O-class schools in diverse rural settings. I received inadequate compensation in those roles, which hurt my teaching career. I was given a very low standing in the community since I was a teacher of young children and made insufficient wage. In my nation, it is practically hard to work in O-class or teach preschool and get a fair income.*" (*E3*).

"*Salaries that are not high enough to satisfy present teachers while also being insufficient to draw in new teachers who can help improve schools. Teachers are frustrated as a result, and their teaching motivation is low.*" (*All participants*).

On the other hand, educational resources are essential to any successful teaching and learning process everywhere in the world. This is because these materials help the teacher successfully convey the subject matter to the pre-schooler. Teaching and learning resources that expose children to new experiences are one of the worries that tend to make children prefer going to school. These resources often help kids open up in a variety of ways, which promotes all-around learning. Children are more likely to be engaged and active learners when they have access to a variety of teaching and learning resources. This idea was supported by teachers' responses as follows:

"*Since I've been a teacher for four years, I've taught in two O-classes with a lot of poverty. Initially, I never had enough instructional materials for my students to take home and read. In class, everything had to be read. Children in O-class at my current school are not only allowed to take their instructional material home,*

but they are also not allowed to keep it. Every year, it has been difficult for me to modify the curriculum to meet the demands of my new students." (*E7*).

"*This may sound like a minor annoyance, but in my previous school, I had to pay cash for things like books, playthings, and art supplies. Additionally, I was limited to a set number of photocopies per semester. I had to pay for extra copies if I ran out. Math games would play out in my head: If I lowered the font size, tightened the margins, and decreased the spacing, I could cut the number of copies per child to two pages, and I would still have additional copies for another story the next day.*" (*E1*).

Theme 2: Teacher's Experience in Multicultural Teaching

The primary socializers of young children are their parents or legal guardians, but teachers have an equally significant socializing role for children in early childhood education settings, such as pre-K and elementary school. Teachers are in a unique position to educate students about a range of diverse issues and multicultural society. Multicultural education literature exhorts teacher educators to become culturally competent and educate themselves about the populations they serve. Programs for intercultural education have been implemented in a variety of ways, however, there is rare and conflicting data to support their efficacy in putting theory into practice. The teachers' views by relevant codes were given below:

"*According to my teaching experience, students come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic level, disability, language, religion, and sociocultural background. Every student also learns differently. I find it difficult because some children learn better by doing or participating in activities. While others learn by listening, visual learners learn by seeing. The majority of children combine these learning styles. It's crucial to choose resources that will assist children with all types of learning.*" (*E3, E7 & 10*).

It is generally accepted that effective early childhood education reflects and empowers the children and families with whom they work, who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The development of each child's positive self-esteem as well as the cultivation of their appreciation for the diversity that exists more broadly in society are both thought to depend on this positive representation of the diversity of children's identity in the daily programming, planning, and participatory teaching approach of early childhood education.

Some examples of teachers' opinions were described as follows:

"*What I intended to say is that preparing the classroom for instruction is a complex process. I have my schedule set up so that I can see the most children at once at the start of class. To make small-group activities easier, I might want to think about placing the students' desks together. Consider creating a space in the room where children may go to read quietly or just to relax.*" (*E1, E3 & 9*).

"*My directions are pretty explicit and simple to comprehend, thus performing the tasks is not tough to accomplish afterward. Since I have spent more time planning out what I will do in the classroom, it is simpler to simply assist stu-*

dents in participating effectively in the teaching and learning process in the classroom. I complete all of the tasks during class time to complete the lesson as planned. Everything, including the explanations, illustrations, and activities, must be timed so that the lesson is not carried over to the following class." (*E2*).

Some general considerations for pedagogy and resources would be as follows. Children are seated or engaged in their activities in mixed (ethnic/cultural) groups in the classroom. For instance, children must think, produce, and solve issues in an active learning environment rather than simply listening to lectures. Quick exercises that break up lectures can be created using active learning techniques and ideas. They may also be utilized to finish the scheduled instructional period. Teachers that care and maintain their students' interest and inventiveness have taken a keen interest in it. Teachers typically oversee and direct the learning process.

This idea was supported by teachers' responses as follows:

"*I will give instructions to the students to practice or discuss the knowledge they understand or obtain from a text and guidebook when I use an active learning technique, thus I have given the students a clue to develop their ability.*" (*E4, E5 and E7*).

"*Yes, based on my experience with the active learning approach, I will take into account the gender, disability, and academic accomplishment (high, medium, and lower) disparities of each student's background. Additionally, giving these children equal opportunities can help them have a better comprehension of mathematical ideas.*" (*E3*).

Theme 3: Children's Learning Difficulties

Children with learning difficulties may struggle with thinking, remembering, reading, writing, spelling, and/or working memory organization. By fostering their strengths, understanding their deficiencies, capitalizing on their talents, and training them to advocate for themselves, parents, teachers, and tutors can assist children and adults with learning difficulties in achieving such success. Finding and implementing modifications in the curriculum and including the use of assistive technology are crucial steps on the road to academic success. The participants explained:

"*Some of the children in my class do not respond as predicted to a synthetic phonics approach to reading and writing instruction that is evidence-based, systematic, and taught to the entire class. Others struggle with counting, following directions, and attending class regularly. As a result, individuals develop learning gaps and require targeted interventions to close them.*" (*All participants*).

"*Yes, without a doubt, because I can assist my students with their learning challenges by assessing them before, during, and after the lesson. I watch my students while they work in groups and provide more explanation if they run into difficulties.*" (*E6*).

3.2. Focus Group Discussion Analysis (Table 2)

Theme 1: The role of O-class in increasing children's school participation

Table 2. Themes and codes extracted from school principals and ECE experts view the success and challenges of the O-class program for children's school readiness.

Themes and codes extracted from school principals and ECE experts view the role of O-class for children's school readiness	
Themes	Codes
Increase children's school participation	Role-play
	Opportunities
	Engagement
	Attendance
Increase parents involvement	Collaboration
	Participation
	Communication
Themes and codes extracted from school principals and ECE experts view as the challenges of O-class program implementation.	
Lack of resource	Salary
	Playground
	Material
Large class size	Class size
	Teacher-child ratio
	Crowded classroom
Children background difference	Culture
	Family practice
	Inclusiveness

According to research, student participation in school, which is one of the fundamental principles of child development, has the potential to promote the growth of students' self-confidence and self-esteem, and its influence on students' positive perceptions of their school has been noted. Children's school participation has been linked to improved student health and well-being and may help to further improve favorable health outcomes. The learning and developmental outcomes outweigh the possible difficulties whether or not children are actively involved in setting up the early learning area. Children's personal development is initially reinforced with increasing involvement, which may be related to higher social-emotional outcomes, learning outcomes, confidence, independence, and autonomy.

One of the discussants explained:

"*Yes, I have observed kids acting out scenarios with their peers on the O-school grounds. They also actively participate in the early learning environment. In my perspective, children's school attendance would increase when the*

government implemented the O-class program nationwide, especially in rural areas."

Both between and within countries, access to early childhood education has been delayed and unequal. Even though it can have the biggest effects on them, vulnerable children are disproportionately kept out of high-quality pre-primary education around the world. Governments should establish policies that commit to universal pre-primary education and priorities the poorest and most difficult-to-reach children from the beginning of the path to universality, not the end, to ensure that no child is left behind. Children are free to explore and learn about their surroundings. Children's practical performance serves as the basis for the formal education system's promotion criteria. The ability of fundamental mathematical abilities should also be demonstrated by the kids. The child must use proper grammar when it comes to language. Additionally, the learner must transcribe the information into an exercise book while connecting letters, words, phrases, and finally paragraphs. The kids aren't allowed to start the official education system until these conditions are met.

The FGD discussant described his experience:

"We occasionally saw that children's participation was improving. Beginning O-class in a rural setting encourages students to attend class and gives parents motivation to take their kids to school. It provides youngsters without access to preschool education with excellent prospects. The O-class provides an opportunity for kids to learn about their surroundings and display their aptitude for early literacy and numeracy."

Theme 2: The role of O-class in increasing parents' involvement

Parental participation in education is essential. Students with interested parents are more likely to have better social skills, better behaviour, higher grades and test scores, frequent attendance at school, regardless of their background or money, and to adjust well to school. According to research, parent involvement in schools is strongly associated with improved student behaviour, greater academic achievement, and improved social skills. Children are more likely to abstain from unhealthy behaviors when parents are involved.

The home environment plays a huge part in preparing kids for early learning. According to the findings of the empirical study, the success of young children's reading and numeracy skills is influenced by the SES of the parents as well as the characteristics of the home learning environment. Children's vocabulary, reading and comprehension skills, and arithmetic abilities are all enriched by parental home literacy and numeracy experiences. Children's advanced literacy domain development is aided by the amount of time spent sharing books, telling stories, and engaging in other literacy-related activities including counting letters, letter-sound correspondence, and letter/word writing. The development of children's progressive numerical dispositions also depends on home numeracy-related actions. Making youngsters participate in number-related activities at home and assisting them in developing their fundamental numeracy skills can help children develop later achievements.

Discussants made the following statements

"*The level of parental home numeracy involvement with their kids was a little better in my school. The total parental involvement in fundamental skill-learning activities at home with their kids encourages those parents to get involved in schoolwork. It was thought that the level of involvement was considerably higher.*"

"*Some of the parents claimed to buy books and other study materials for their kids, but few of them showed signs of being actively interested in their education.*"

Theme 3: Lack of resource affect the O-class program

The goal of early childhood learning resources is to provide a collection of creative, high-quality early childhood resource materials that will foster and promote young children's reading and numeracy development from birth to age six. These educational and useful resources should be appropriate for a variety of early childhood settings and show parents, careers, and professionals how to create stimulating environments for their young charges to take advantage of the most crucial time of rapid learning development.

Resources are the materials that a facility needs to increase productivity. Any educational program must have the necessary resources (human, material, and financial) to be implemented successfully. This is so that funds can be used to pay employees, buy appropriate instructional and learning materials, and provide a favorable environment for teaching and learning. Therefore, the capacity of the school system to conduct a given type of educational program would depend on the quantity and quality of resources available for that program.

Many early childhood education centers lack adequate facilities and tools for teaching and learning that are appropriate for ECE in their learning environment. These include a shortage of classrooms with enough ventilation, kid-friendly furnishings, and kitchen with safe, clean water, a playground, restrooms, and playthings. This suggests that the ECE curriculum cannot be properly implemented by teachers because they lack sufficient teaching and learning materials. This hurts the implementation of the ECE Curriculum because improving the academic performance of disadvantaged children is facilitated by creating a sustainable learning environment.

The discussant with ECE expert result explained:

"*According to my observations of a few selected O-classes, the lack of a thorough infrastructure is one of the most notable features of the existing O-class programs for young children away from the home. Undersized and extremely constrained play areas indoors and outdoors. What I saw was a poor, unlovely, and unorganized learning environment.*"

Play is crucial for all children's intellectual and emotional development, according to child development specialists. It gives kids firsthand exposure to materials including water, sand, plaster, mud, shells, and twigs. The play has several facets. However, it should be enjoyable for the youngster because play is a great way to learn numerous skills. Children gain social and relationship skills through

play, as well as establish morals and values. Always consider play to be a crucial component of a child's early education.

Functional play helps children to develop motor and practice skills. This kind of play is normally done with toys or objects that are stackable, can be filled with water or sand, or playing outdoors. Water play and sand play are favorites among preschool children and valuable teaching tools. These activities allow young children to develop creative expression, practice fine motor skills, and experiment with shapes, lines, and colors. However, the reality on the ground contradicts this concept.

Children's motor and practice skills are developed through functional play. This type of play is typically done outside or with toys or objects that can be filled with sand or water or that can be stacked. Sand and water play are popular activities for preschoolers and effective educational tools. Young children can practice their fine motor skills, express themselves creatively, and experiment with shapes, lines, and colors with these activities. The reality on the ground, however, runs counter to these ideas.

One of the discussants explained:

"*Playing outside does not improve learning and creativity in the O-class or maintain health and fitness. Some classes don't allow for daily outdoor play for the kids. For children to relax and feel comfortable, their physical environment must be soft.*"

Not only individuals who work in early care and education are affected by low salaries for early educators. Also, children are impacted both now and in the future. Early educators who experience financial strain and subpar working conditions have more difficulty engaging in high-quality teacher-child interactions that are crucial for promoting children's learning. This has an impact on children now and in the future. Poor pay makes it more difficult to hire and keep early educators, and without enough skilled early educators, there can be no reliable delivery of the early education services that parents need for the stability of their work. This has an impact on both parents and employers.

One of the comments from the discussants backed up this assertion.

"*The most essential and fundamental component of a good early childhood education is qualified, well-trained, and committed teachers. To succeed, they need to be encouraged and well compensated. According to what I know, the O-class teacher makes an average salary of* $450 *per year. This number is so low when compared to other jobs that it nearly seems demoralizing. A further source of stress for the teachers is the imbalance between their compensation and effort.*"

Theme 4: Large classes affect the O-class program

The potential for children to be heard and make decisions in the classroom is impacted by the size of the class and the teacher-to-child ratios. Preschoolers in Ethiopia were found to admit the enormous class size, stating that the presence of too many children prevented them from having any control over what occurred in the classroom. Researchers have focused a lot of their emphasis on the

teacher-to-student ratio about the challenges that face the teaching and learning process. Education for young children has not been overlooked. The growing number of students in their classes makes teachers uncomfortable.

A participant in focus group discussions elucidated:

"*In my opinion, there is a problem with class size. Since there are three levels of students in the same large classroom at the school where my baby attends, I don't feel at ease when I visit. When you walk into the classroom, there is complete chaos because one part is reciting a poem while another is singing or counting. I once questioned a teacher at the school if the students understood what she was teaching, and she responded in the affirmative. Although I didn't want to quarrel with her, I was aware that the noise was making it impossible for the kids to concentrate.*"

The physical environment in a classroom can make or break effective learning. Class size concerns educators for various reasons because learning can only occur positively when lessons are under appropriate conditions both for the students and teachers. The classroom size has an impact on facilitating or hindering activities of teaching and learning.

The physical environment of the classroom can make or break successful learning. Teachers are concerned about class size for a variety of reasons, including the fact that courses can only be effective when both students and teachers are in the proper learning environment. The size of the classroom can either help or hinder teaching and learning activities.

Participants in the discussion said the following:

"*Teachers of O-classes have an excessive amount of homework to grade. It becomes nearly impossible to provide everyone with useful feedback. Developing rapport and close personal ties with the children is challenging. Not have the chance to get to know their kids.*"

"*Teaching in large classes is exceedingly challenging for both teachers and students.*" *In crowded classrooms, it might be challenging to control the youngsters. According to my observations, each class has an average of sixty-three children, making it exceedingly challenging for teachers to maintain order in the classroom.*"

Theme 5: Poor considerations of children's background difference

Preschoolers frequently have a grasp of how they should speak, move, behave, express themselves, and engage with other kids and adults when they arrive at school. These ideas about how they ought to act are mostly influenced by the cultural backgrounds of their family. Most families' practices of culture, ethnicity, and religion influence how members view themselves. Some young kids might be able to describe their race or ethnicity. Others might not yet have the necessary vocabulary.

Participants in the discussion said the following:

"*Some teachers at my school may not feel the need to acknowledge the significant impact that children's cultures and family customs have on their attitudes and conduct. When a youngster calls them by their first name and they perso-*

nally adhere to these customs, they may view it as disrespectful or intrusive. Even though they might not have the same cultural customs as the kids in their class."

"*According to what I've seen, some teachers fail to acknowledge that kids come from different backgrounds and have varied life experiences, which means they don't all learn things at the same time or in the same way.*"

Elders share proverbs, tales, and examples of that particular ethnicity's culture with kids. Children are told to pay close attention when elders are organizing cultural sessions. Parents and other adults assess children's comprehension of the tales told and exercises completed by asking questions and directing the young ones to apply the skill in a real-world setting.

One of the discussants spoke about:

"*My opinion is that youngsters are taught to master cultural rhythms, proverbs, and stories that are performed at various life events, such as songs sung during a parent's or a family member's passing, and other cultural rites like circumcision and marriage. Some mothers or other elders take on the role of passing down the customs because not all fathers are knowledgeable about the culture and their attitudes toward it.*"

4. Discussion

This study explored O-class teachers', school principals, and early childhood education experts' perceptions of the O-class program for children's school readiness. The current investigation addressed two basic questions. The researchers measured teachers' perceptions towards culturally responsive and locally available resources in the O-class through interviews and school principals and ECE experts perceived the success and challenges of the O-class program for children's school readiness through focus group discussions. From the analysis, the following eight themes emerged. "lack of teaching resource matters"; "teachers' experience in multicultural teaching"; "children's learning difficulties"; "the role of O-class in increasing children's school participation";" the role of O-class in increasing parent involvement"; "lack of resource affects O-class program"; "large class affects the O-class program"; and poor consideration of children's background differences". The first three themes emerged from teachers' interview responses and the remaining derived from focus group discussions.

Lack of resources influences children's school readiness

The Ethiopian early childhood education system faces a variety of challenges, including issues with access, equity, and quality. However, this study was designed to be detailed, and the issue with resources was mentioned as a big concern. This issue can be conceptualized as a quality, resource shortage, parental and child attendance, disparities in the children's backgrounds, and learning disabilities.

Our research supports the findings of studies done in Ethiopia, such as the study done by (Fantahun, 2016). Preschools may not be able to afford to offer

high-quality preschool education because Ethiopia is a developing country and investing in preschool education is expensive. In most cases, poor parents in Ethiopia send their kids to preschools, and the preschools themselves are more likely to be of low quality. According to Taylor (2009), low-income families must enroll their children in preschools of low quality. Preschool environments, physical facilities, and whether or not the setting is stimulating for growth are of poor quality. For instance, the majority of O-classes in the Wolaita Zone work in unappealing settings with inadequate indoor and outdoor spaces for children to explore, play, and practice life skills (Fantahun, 2013). Most O-classes lack resources that encourage problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. According to Hoot et al. (2006), the classrooms were overcrowded and had a student-teacher ratio of 1:30 or higher. Preschools also don't have kid-sized restrooms, adequate and orderly playground equipment, and crammed classrooms, according to Teffera et al. (2009).

Similarly, high-quality interactions between teachers and children are facilitated by having fewer children in a classroom and more staff. The maximum class size that is considered acceptable by common professional standards is 20, with a student-to-staff ratio of 10:1. However, there is little study on the optimal number. Class sizes and staff-to-student ratios are low in programs with exceptionally high child outcomes, such as Perry Preschool and the Abbott Preschool Program in New Jersey. Classes at Perry Preschool included a maximum of 12 children and two teachers. The Abbott Preschool Program in New Jersey permits a maximum of 15 children per classroom along with two teachers (Steven Barnett et al., 2004).

In addition, Jalongo and her colleagues (2004) made recommendations for the qualities that should be present in a preschool setting. They suggested that the preschool environment's physical layout be planned to accommodate children's safety, physical health, intellectual stimulation, and social support. Materials should also be directly tied to the goals of a high-quality preschool program that realizes children's full potential. Cultural, geographic, and economic circumstances will determine the quality of the space and the materials. Environments for early children should always demonstrate consideration for the physical, intellectual, social, and emotional development of the child. Preschoolers should have a setting and resources that promote social skills, emotional safety, and respect for the child's cultural and familial experiences. It is essential that the transition from home to school not be so abrupt as to put young children under high academic pressure or impose rigorous timetables, protracted periods of inactivity, cramped surroundings, or unsafe equipment (Jalongo and others, 2004).

The current finding indicated that poor salaries of teachers are the major challenge in O-class programs. These findings in line with a high-quality workforce are critical for the provision of high-quality early childhood education. To achieve a high-quality workforce and to empower early childhood practitioners, the professional qualification requirements must be raised to be in part with those expected of primary teachers. Salaries should be commensurate with quali-

fications to encourage the upgrading of professional qualifications and to increase the attractiveness of the profession to potential recruits (Chan and Chan, 2003).

Moreover, the physical, psychological, and social components that make up the ECE environment work together as a whole. Young children require physical safety, social development, emotional reassurance, and intellectual stimulation in their environments. It consists of constructed facilities, the surrounding area, psychological and social contexts that are functionally linked to diverse situations, as well as a variety of tools and equipment. Both functional and aesthetic considerations should be made while designing the ECE environment. Children are encouraged to play, explore, move, act, and express themselves in a variety of ways in a healthy setting (STAKES, 2004). A good learning environment supports children's activity and self-direction while guiding their curiosity, interest, and learning motivation. It gives children opportunities for play, other activities, peace, and language learning.

The role of O-class in increasing children's and parents' school participation

Generally speaking, supporting parents' efforts to help their kids grow during the preschool years improves kids' school readiness, lowers children's classroom behavior, improves kids' social skills, and encourages academic achievement. Parental involvement enhances learning outside of the classroom, gives kids a better overall experience, and improves their academic performance. Parents must encourage their children's learning at home as well as in preschool settings. In the current findings, the role of O-classroom has increased children's and parents' school participation. This indicates that previously there was a lack of proximity in O-class and currently the majority of the rural Kebeles (lowest administration part) get O-class near their home. It encourages them to participate in school work and support their children.

Parental involvement in early childhood education can help children apply what they learn in school to everyday activities that take place at home. An informed parent may more accurately assess their child's readiness for kindergarten and identify the skills and abilities that still need to be developed. Finding better ways to involve parents in their children's education is one of the most challenging tasks facing early childhood educators. It can have a positive effect on a child's ability to learn by creating open lines of communication between the childcare center and the parents and making a concerted effort to include parents as a key partner in their child's education.

Our results are consistent with research by Varshney et al. (2020), which found that parent engagement has long been seen as a crucial component of programs that can enhance the success of early childhood interventions. By expanding learning time, enhancing student motivation and school engagement, and raising expectations for success and achievement, parental participation can improve children's outcomes (Varshney et al., 2020). Numerous literature reviews and study syntheses have reported on the benefits of parental participa-

tion. One line of inquiry focuses on the forms of involvement that preschool and home visitation programs encourage and the connections between this involvement and future academic performance for students. Parent participation can take many different forms, including reading to children, communicating with teachers, requiring parents to check and sign students' homework, and setting high expectations for their children's performance (Varshney et al., 2020).

According to research, effective program-family partnerships marked by mutual respect, open communication, shared values, and a commitment to the child's welfare frequently produce high levels of family engagement (*PDF*) (Caspe, Lopez, & Wolos, 2007). For instance, professional standards encourage respect for all families by recognizing the cultures of all families and using parents as role models. They also advise collaborating on continuing goal-setting for kids while working with families.

Similarly, the Participation of children in educational institutions is a collaborative effort. It happens in a secure setting where kids are aware that their needs are taken into consideration (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). The task of assisting the students in exercising and defending their rights is one of the responsibilities of teachers to ensure participation (Koran, 2015). Teachers must regard students as individuals, active citizens, and participants who have the right to voice their ideas. Participation is impacted by how often teachers consult with kids when making decisions, such as when deciding on classroom rules or when organizing activities (Moss, 2011).

Background differences, learning difficulties, and children's school readiness

The term "learning difficulties" is used to describe a variety of academic issues. In addition to specialized types like reading, spelling, and arithmetic difficulties, it includes general learning deficiencies and poor academic performance, for example in the setting of disability. As a result, numerous distinct denotations attempt to distinguish between general and specialized forms or draw attention to the stability of the learning issue. The phrase "learning disability" typically refers to persistent, generalized learning challenges that are frequently associated with the field of special education. The phrase "learning disorder" refers to academic difficulties that contrast with a person's general aptitude (Lenhard Lenhard, 2013).

A high-quality preschool program uses a curriculum that supports learning and development in all of the following areas: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive, and is consistent with its aims for all children without learning disabilities. A high-quality early childhood program's curriculum is carefully designed using an evidence-based framework per the program's objectives, standards set by its governing body, and any relevant legal requirements. It is sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences, supports appropriate expectations for young children's learning, and is consistent with those expectations (MSBE, 2005).

In the current findings, some children faced reading and writing challenges.

Teachers shouldn't consider such kind of problems in their teaching-learning process. Some teachers in the school may not feel the need to acknowledge the significant impact that children's cultures and family customs have on their attitudes and conduct. This finding is different from the Children with identified special needs should also participate in the preschool program since this has the benefit of integrating them with their peers without special needs, which facilitates socialization (Jalongo et al., 2004). Children that require special help in preschool are those whose conditions for development, growth, and learning have been hampered by disease, disability, or diminished functional ability. The necessary steps for early detection, prevention, and rehabilitation are included in special support (NBE, 2001).

On the other hand, the inclusion of children with and without disabilities in early childhood education is a relatively new practice (Allen and Cowdery, 2011). Children with special needs must now be included in the preschool education system to receive their constitutional right to an education. Children with special needs may obtain high-quality assistance from the preschools they are attending if they are included in the educational system. Children with special needs typically do not have equal access to preschools (Fantahun, 2013).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, our study adds to the body of knowledge on pre-primary education of O-class modality in Ethiopia by demonstrating that, despite Ethiopia's dramatic increase in pre-primary enrollment, pre-primary education still lacks adequate resources. Our data also demonstrates that the O-class program increases parental and child attendance at school, which benefits children's preparation for school. This implies that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are still less likely to have taken part in the O-class program, do not have the same opportunity to advance in the first few years of elementary school. Overall, children's school readiness is impacted by resource limitations, background differences, and learning challenges.

Recommendation

The O-class programs in resource and finance must get assistance from all governmental and non-governmental organizations. The government ought to take pay raises and incentives for O-class teachers into consideration.

All members of the teaching staff, support staff, and unpaid staff (such as parents and volunteers) ought to have the training, experience, and access to staff development activities necessary to carry out their duties. A major element of a successful early childhood program is strong, knowledgeable administrative leadership (MSBE, 2005).

The evaluation of O-class programs has mostly focused on issues of results achieved and standards met. Measuring the results of participating children and families, particularly their cognitive outcomes, has been a major focus of early

childhood program evaluation (Walsh, Martin, & Schmidt, 2004).

Limitations and Future Study

Our study has some limitations. These include the generalizability and transferability of these results. Pure bracketing is not possible because the investigators interpreted the data based on their phenomenological world and experiences, despite our best efforts to maintain the descriptions true to the raw data. As a result, this approach might introduce investigator-induced bias into the study, but the researchers were aware of this, took note of it, and made an effort to prevent it.

Future studies must involve a bigger number of participants from a variety of backgrounds, as well as samples that are more diverse in terms of socioeconomic position, gender, culture, parental education, and people with disabilities.

Policy Implications

The findings of our study have some consequences for Ethiopian policy-makers who are deciding how to scale up O-class programs to reach the 2030 agenda's goal of ensuring that all girls and boys have access to high-quality pre-primary education by that year.

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Conflicts of Interest

Regarding the publishing of this research, the authors declare that they have no conflict interests.

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