



## **Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Ethiopia by Case Showing: Opportunities and Challenges**

**Tadesse Abera Tedla (PhD)<sup>1</sup> and Dereje Yohannes Feleke<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>PhD in Education with Inclusive Education Specialization, University of Gondar, College of Education, Department Special Needs and Inclusive Education

Email: [peace4ujesus@gmail.com](mailto:peace4ujesus@gmail.com), Phone: +251913245468

<sup>2</sup>MA in Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Hadiya, Education Bureau,

Email: [ydereje9@gmail.com](mailto:ydereje9@gmail.com), Phone: +251916763921

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### **Abstract**

*The main purpose of this study was to explore an inclusive early childhood education in Ethiopia with respect to O-class. A case study design was employed to achieve the study's goals. Parents, O-class teachers, school administrators, special needs experts, and early childhood care and education specialists took part in the study purposively and comprehensively selected. Interview, focus group discussion, and observation were used to collect data and were analyzed thematically. Results: The O-class was the new practice in the education system of the country to be taken as opportunity. Lack of teachers with the necessary training, funding, resources and facilities, parent's awareness and participation, parent-teacher networking, and up to the standard early childhood care and education programs were reported as challenges. The practice of an in inclusive O-class mainly for children with disabilities has to be celebrated that the children were all in all denied the right to education in these schools in recent years back; it is being challenged by several factors though. The government should employ O-class teachers who have received the appropriate training and allot a sufficient budget to meet the needs of children with and without disabilities in these schools.*

**Key words:** Inclusive O-class, Ethiopia, Early Childhood Care and Education, Challenges, Opportunities

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Most African nations, even those with higher levels of economic development implement Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in an unstructured manner, which causes children to lack social-emotional development in their skills, abilities, attitudes toward others, and negligence in social environments (Amnon et al., 2015; Bietenbeck et al., 2019). This leads to the unconsolidated and unorganized social and emotional development of children, which in turn impacts the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of a country (Mwamwenda, 2014; Richter et al., 2017).

Little attention has been paid in practice though Ethiopia's comprehensive education strategy acknowledges the value of pre-school education by setting the objective of the child's overall development in preparation for formal schooling (Ministry of Education (MoE), 1994). The Ethiopian government created a national policy framework for ECCE as a result, claiming that "it is during the early years that children learn and acquire

knowledge, skills, and attitudes swiftly and with minimal effort" (MoE, Ministry of Health, & Ministry of Women Affairs, 2010b, p. 18). Studies (e.g. Yalew, 2011; Teferra et al., 2018; Woldehanna, 2016) have stated that various government regulations are in place to execute ECCE at the national level, but in practice, it is very difficult for Regional, Zonal, or District Educational Bureaus and stakeholders to reach all children in their environmental contexts in an acceptable and accessible way.

MoE (2015) states that kindergarten O-classes and child-to-child programs are included in ECCE, also known as pre-school education. In the child-to-child program, older siblings or sisters instruct their younger siblings in the basics of letter formation. A program that gets children ready for primary school who did not get to go to kindergarten or other pre-school programs. The O-class is among the most popular local government answers for children who did not get the chance to participate in kindergarten programs (MoE, 2015).

According to the MoE (2015), even if

gross enrollment (GR) has improved in years, it is still insignificant. Thus, it is with this intention the current study was carried out to investigate the opportunities and challenges of implementing an inclusive O-class at Durame Town Administration to get insights about early inclusive education in Ethiopia.

Besides, all over the world, countries, governments, researchers, educators, NGOs, stakeholders, and parents are striving to ensure inclusive education and society for all irrespective of differences in disability, religion, sex, ethnic, color, religion, culture, geographical location, and the list is hectic (Ackerman, 2004; Amnon & Hyder, 2015; Gaffar & Campbell, 2021; Labuschagne, 2015; Tümen et al, 2021). However, these efforts and aspirations seem to be far from a reality to majority of the countries especially in the global south. Specifically, Ethiopia though for so long is hardly working to ensure inclusive education and is witnessing changes in this regard, but significant number children with special needs are out of the education circle (Gebregziabher, 2014; MoE, 2015; MoE, 2016a; Teferra et al; 2018; Woldehanna, 2016; Yalew, 2011; Yigzaw & Abdirahman, 2017). The country

particularly is working hard recently on early childhood care and education and quite lately on O-classes. However, there is gap of research reports how these schools are inclusive. Thus, the reports of the current research would be an informative one for policy makers, researchers, and stakeholders in the area internationally and locally.

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem

Ethiopia has made great progress over the past 20 years in the field of education. Expanding access to education at all levels of the educational system was a priority of the Ethiopian government. The nation took significant steps to meet the goals established by the 1990 and 2000 World Summits on EFA, UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, Education 2030 Incheon Declaration, and Framework for Action (UNESCO, et al. 2015; Teferra et al., 2018; Woldehanna, 2016). Consequently, primary education is now widely accessible throughout the nation. For instance, the country's Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) for Primary Education was 102.7%, and the Net Enrollment Rate (NER), was 94.3% respectively (MoE,2016a).

This shows that the nation has made significant progress, particularly in ensuring equity at this level and in ensuring that all primary school students have access to education. When it comes to growing pre-school programs, the nation's average GER was higher than the Sub-Saharan African(SSA) average, but it still lagged behind several other African nations like Ghana (115.1%), SouthAfrica (76.17%), and Kenya (73.79%). It is also responsible for GER global vengeance. While The SSA average was 21.87%, the global average was 44.04%. (World Bank Group, 2016). In this regard, the GER for Pre-school education in the nation was only 34.0% according to the Educational Statistics Annual Abstract of 2013/2014 (MoE, 2016b).

The National Policy Framework and other study findings have made it abundantly evident that pre-school education programs are crucial for children's future harmonious development in particular and for their social, cultural, and economic growth in general (Lemma, 2014). Additionally, the National Policy Framework views the ECCE program as an essential tool for improving primary

school enrollment on an equal basis, productivity growth, cost savings for both families and the country, poverty reduction, minimizing gender disparity, increasing opportunities for parental and community mobilization and empowerment, and protecting children's rights (Ethiopian ECCE Policy Framework, 2010).

Practically, in terms of addressing the needs of the growing population of pre-school-age children with and without disabilities, pre-school education programs are only partially provided. The GER of Pre-school in 2004 was 2%, the lowest among African nations. MoE (2006) the number rose to 2.3%, and by 2010/2011, it reached 5.4% (MoE, 2016b), but it was very difficult to put out here quite recent data. However, over the past years, there has been an increase interest in expanding pre-school education across the nation as a result of issues with primary school quality on the one hand and the requirement to implement children's educational rights outlined in the World Summits on the other.

In particular, USAID's (2010) findings on

the academic performance of grade 2 and grade 3 students nationwide urged the nation to reconsider the issue and act immediately to address it. The problem with South Nations and Nationalities Peoples Regional State (SNNPR) of the country is more significant (USAID, 2010). The primary contributing element was identified as a lack of pre-school education. Since then, O-classes have been introduced in primary schools and other public settings (MoE, 2016). In addition, a diploma-level program for preparing pre-school teachers was introduced in College Teacher Education (CTEs). Consequently, enrollment has increased somewhat. The GER grew in SNNPR, rising from 3.9 in 2006/2007 to 47.7% in 2015 (SNNPR Education Bureau, 2015).

The GER of SNNPR, on the other hand, was 3.0 and increased to 57.0% in 2015, according to data from the MoE Annual Abstract (2006–2007), yet it was difficult to provide here a recent data that we are unable to get. Despite the discrepancy between national and regional figures, both data showed that pre-school enrollment in the region is increasing. However, there are

huge problems with the availability of access, maintaining equity, and guaranteeing the quality of education for all students in the area (Gebregziabher, 2014; MoE, 2015; MoE, 2016a; Teferra et al; 2018; Woldehanna, 2016; Yalew, 2011; Yigzaw & Abdirahman, 2017). Despite a relative expansion, the region's educational opportunities still fall short for over 50% of pre-school children.

In the Durame Town Administration, there are 12 public and 8 private pre- and primary schools respectively that accept children with and without disabilities (CWWODs). Irrespective of their disability, social, ethnic, or economic background, children are expected to have equal opportunities to engage in school without any discrimination in the Kembata Tembero Zone or throughout Ethiopia. Therefore, as there are scarcity of previous studies on the issue raised, and particularly in the study area, it was found to be a justifiable pulling factor to conduct a study on whether the country's aspirations to have an early inclusive O-class is going well as planned by taking the case of Durame Town. To meet the objectives of this study the following

research questions were raised:

1. How are the school physical environments accessible for children with and without disabilities attending O-class?
2. Is there skilled human power assigned for O-class?
3. How are teaching and learning materials necessary for O-class children with and without disabilities and teachers?
4. How are parents of children with and without disabilities participating in the implementation of an inclusive O-class?

## 2. Review of Related Literature

The equipment in a room and its arrangement can affect the behavior of learners and give them cues or messages to act on. To provide learners with adequate stimulation, the learning environment needs to be developmentally appropriate with a variety of apparatuses. A safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment that provides for differences in learners' ages, abilities, and developmental levels is crucial for achieving maximum stimulation. Both

indoor and outdoor environments play an important role in stimulating learners according to their developmental needs (Marotz, 2009 as cited in Labuschagne, 2015; Bietenbeck, 2019).

The strategic guidelines of the MoE (2010) stated that learning environments in pre-schools should have a wide variety of stimulating play and learning materials that promote not only simple but also higher thought processes, such as puzzles, riddles, guessing games, stories, fairy tales, and visually rich in color. The pre-school classroom should be organized into interest areas or centers filled with a variety of materials and equipment including blocks, dramatic play supplies, science activities, books, and art supplies. Children must have the time to experiment with measuring, counting, pouring, and making predictions using available indoor materials. Papers, scissors, markers, puzzles, and other hands-on-materials that foster children's thinking and problem-solving skills should be readily available. Outdoor spaces should contribute to physical, intellectual, creative, emotional, and social development and offer a variety of stimulation for play and exploration. MoE (2010) also stated in a strategic document



that outdoor play equipment must be well maintained, clean, and developmentally appropriate, which can provide ample opportunities for the creativity and development of different skills.

Play equipment for outdoor as suggested by Jackman (2001) include: permanent and take- apart climbers, sturdy wooden crates and barrels, railroad ties surrounding sandbox, tire swings with holes punched in several places for drainage, slides, inner tubes, balance beam, tricycles, wagons, other wheeled toys, plastic hoops, chimneys, rubber balls of various sizes, mounted steering wheel, sturdy cardboard boxes, etc., can be used in a pre-school setting. The teacher should think creatively of new ways to bring indoor activities outside and outdoor activities inside, while at the same time keeping in mind the skills to be developed. Safety is the primary priority in outdoor play.

The most appropriate materials for inclusion in a classroom are open-ended materials that can be used for multiple purposes. Manipulative materials that may be put together in many different ways and incorporated into other activities are a good example of open-ended, multiple-use

material (Miller, 1996, as cited in Gebregziabher, 2014; Gaffar & Campbell, 2021). Books should be available to be “read” by children individually, in pairs, and in small groups. Books should also be available for teachers to read to children. In addition to regular books, stories on tape, filmstrips, and movies provide alternative modes for children who do not attend regular books.

Jamil (2019) confirmed that educators should be guided by a curriculum framework based on the child development theory. Not doing so could lead to inappropriate practices in children's classrooms as well as decisions that could be harmful to children. A well-planned and coordinated curriculum is crucial. Therefore, it helps promote quality service across age groups of students, support professional staff in their practice, facilitate communication between staff and parents and ensure pedagogical continuity between pre-school and primary school (Sosina, 2013). According to Orkin et al (2012), the national ECCE curriculum and national grade 1 curriculum do not align. The national ECCE curriculum envisions play-based, mother tongue ECCE instruction. By contrast, the

National Grade 1 curriculum currently anticipates that children will learn basic numeracy and literacy in pre-school.

Parents know that their involvement is crucial in the education of their children but different factors prevent them from doing so (Smith et al., 2011). It includes frustrating poverty and its impact of struggling to make ends meet and mental health issues (Mayo & Siraj, 2015); parents' levels of education that they may not place value in education due to their own upbringing or lack of success in school themselves (LaRocque et al, 2011); and parents negative view of school from their own experiences (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

Thus, the role of pre-school teachers is challenging. Some of the major roles and responsibilities of pre-school teachers are planning, facilitation, observation, supervision, participation in activities with children, communication of parents, and encouragement of engagement of all children (Jackman, 2001). The pre-school teachers are expected to serve as educators, surrogate parents, and psychologists to mold students who are well adjusted and eager to learn. According to Miller (1999), as

facilitators, pre-school teachers are expected to be role models for children in any of their activities.

One of the factors that can affect the quality of pre-school education is the qualification of pre-school teachers. The more qualified the teachers are, the better they facilitate the learning of their children and evaluate the overall learning process (Early et al., 2017; Hatfield et al., 2016). High qualification of ECCE teachers is also essential for addressing pervasive and persistent educational problems such as low reading and math achievement, particularly in children from low socioeconomic circumstances (Ackerman, 2004). Similarly, results of the effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) study from England have shown that key explanatory factors for high-quality ECCE were related to teachers with higher qualifications, teachers with leadership skills and long-serving teachers; trained teachers working alongside and supporting less qualified teachers; teachers with a good understanding of child development and learning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010; as cited in Sosina, 2013).

Ethiopia has developed the Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for ECCE



that clearly states that pre-school teachers should hold a 10-month pre-school teacher training course certificate from the Teacher Education Institute or have attended a 2-month course to upgrade their skills and knowledge, especially in the field of active learning of young children (MoE, 2010; Teferra et al, 2018; Woldehanna, 2016; Yalew, 2011; Yigzaw & Abdirahman, 2017).

### **3. Methods and Materials**

#### **3.1 Research design and approaches**

A case study design which was an instrumental case study was used in this study. This research design was selected because it offers the opportunity to extend the in-depth understanding of participants engaged in certain phenomena (Creswell et al., 2013). It is a scientific investigation that tries to provide a pictorial account of an event, behavior, or situation (Creswell 2007). Thus, this design helped to see the selected four schools in holistic manners in terms of their inclusiveness to CWDs as these schools were the only schools having an attendance of CWDs, therefore the insights from these schools would be instrumental to all concerned in early

inclusive education in the country. Thus, a qualitative research method was used, meaning qualitative data focus on establishing patterns all about exploring issues; understanding phenomena (Nicholas & Walliman, 2018) helped to gaining insight in our case CWWODs in 0-class setting.

#### **3.2 Study area**

The Kembata Tembaro Zone is bordered to the South by Wolayita, on the Southwest by Dawro, on the Northwest by Hadiya, on the North by Gurage, on the East by the Alaba Special Zone, and to the southeast by an exclave of the Hadiya Zone. In addition, in the Kembeta Tembaro Zone, there are seven districts and four town administrations. Thus, the study area was the Kemebta Tembero Zone, specifically the Durame Town Administration.

#### **3.3. Sample and sampling technique**

According to Durame Town Administration's Education Office reports (2014), there are 12 governmental and 8 private primary schools that provide 0-class, totaling 20. Therefore the number of school principals, teachers, ECCE

experts, special needs experts, and parents in these 20 O-classes were 20, 30, 2, 8, 240 respectively. However, from these 20 schools only 4 schools (government schools) were having/teaching CWDs. Therefore, the criteria for selecting these 4 schools were attendance of CWDs. All these four O-classes accommodate 240 students without disabilities and 6 students with different types of disabilities (four students with physical impairment, one student with hearing impairment, and one student with partial visual impairment). Yet, it should be conceived that those students labeled without disabilities may and may not have invisible disabilities (e.g. heart attack, asthma, different disease types any way).

To select 4 principals comprehensive sampling technique was used that no criteria was needed as the principals must have been participated to give data about their schools. From the 2 ECCE experts, 1 was selected to participate in the study purposively, the criteria was work experience that the unselected expert was having only one year experience. To select 6 teachers from 30 teachers purposive sampling technique was used.

Two criteria were used namely sex (only females) and teaching experience (years of teaching experience), to select 20 parents from 240 purposive sampling technique was used using being a mother of a child with disability and school networking experience as a criteria. Those net-worked parents with the schools were selected.

### **3.4 Data collection instruments**

Three types of data collection instruments were used. Interviews, Observation, and focus group discussions (FGD) were used to collect data. They were developed by the current researchers from the comprehensive literature reviewed for the study. Two types of the interview, structured and semi-structured were used. The interview sections included topics not limited to: Background information of all interviewees, issues related to instruction and curriculum, materials and facilities, social and physical inclusion, parental involvement, and challenges and opportunities of inclusion in the schools. Interview sessions were audiotaped (using an IC recorder) with the participants' permission to fully capture their opinions on the issues. Every interview session lasted between 40' and an hour.

Participatory observations in and outside of classrooms to examine the school's physical environments and the process of the teaching-learning process, whether they are conducive for CWWODs attending O-class, were made twice in each schools using 20-item checklists. The observation items include not limited to: Background of the school, curriculum/syllabus and guideline documents, physical environments (play fields, toilet, first aids kits, marry-go-round play machine, and balls), and classroom psychological and physical environments of the schools.

FGD, is highly suitable for knowledge because it focuses on the feelings, thoughts, perceptions, sensitive matters, experiences, and knowledge of the research participants (Tümen et al., 2021). Four FGD, with a total of 20 participants, were included in the study. In each group, five parents participated in discussions. During the discussion, the participants used both Amharic and the local language kembatisa and translated them back into English. The discussion was recorded using IC records and notes. Each discussion lasted for 1 hour. The FGD items covered topics not limited to: Knowledge about O-class, inclusion

opportunities and challenges in the schools, stake holder involvement, and accessibility of environments of the schools.

### **3.5. Methods of Data Analysis**

The data collected through the tools listed above were organized, described, conceptualized, classified, and categorized based on the research questions raised at the beginning of the study and were analyzed through manual techniques. Thematic analysis was used to present the findings.

### **3.6. Ethics**

Regarding ethics, Creswell (2007) suggests that any researcher should be careful not to harm even a single participant during attempts to dig deeper data. Therefore, consent, anonymity, and confidentiality measures were taken, and the findings were made only for the academic purposes.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

**Table1. Teacher characteristics**

Item	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (100%)
Age	Female	6	100
	Male	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	6	100
	20 to 30 years	3	50
	31 to 40 years	2	33
	41 above years	1	17
	<b>Total</b>	6	100
Educational background	Certificate	5	83
	Diploma	1	17
	Degree	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	6	100
Work experience	0 to 10	3	50
	11 to 20	2	33
	21 and above	1	17

As indicated in Table 1, all the 6 (100%) teachers were female. Showing the assignment of these teachers in O-class is in line with the standard of pre-primary education is preferable to be females that they will be having motherly caring and loving nature. The teachers 5(83 %) sampled have certificates, with only 1(17%) diploma

and no degree holder. This means the education level of teachers is not up to standard (that they are also grade 10 complete). The minimum standard of MOE (2010) states that pre-school teachers' education level has to be at least diploma certificate.

**Table2. School principals' characteristic**

Item	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Female	1	75
	Male	3	25
	<b>Total</b>	4	100
Educational Background	Diploma	-	-
	Degree	4	100
	Masters	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	4	100
Experience In school leadership	1 to 10	3	75
	11 to 20	1	25
	21 and above	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	4	100

As Table 2 indicates that educational background of school principals' all of them 4(100%) are degree holders and 3 (75%) of the principals are having below 10 years work experience. It is possible to infer that the principal leadership role in O-classes may not be sufficient.

**Table3. ECCE experts and special need experts characteristics**

Item	Category	Frequency (F)	Percent (%)
Sex	Female	4	66.6
	Male	2	33.3
	<b>Total</b>	6	100
Educational background	Diploma	1	33.3
	Degree	1	33.3
	Masters	1	33.3
Working experience	1 to 5	1	33.3
	6 to 10	1	33.3
	11 and above	1	33.3

As indicated in in Table 3, ECCE experts and special need experts education levels seem to be good except for their minimal work experience which was found to be below five years. Thus, their expertise and consultative power might not be as helpful and powerful as they work with O-class teachers and principals.

**Table 4. CWDS characteristics**

Item	Category	Frequency (F)	Percent (%)
Sex	Female	6	100
	Male	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	6	100
Disability Type	Physical impairment	4	66.66
	Hearing impairment	1	16.67
	Visual Impairment	1	16.67
	<b>Age</b>		
	8	4	66.66
	7	1	16.67
	6	1	16.67

As can be seen in Table 4, CWDs attending in the O-class most 6(100%) were males, which may indicate to some extent, female children are not coming to the schools. Besides, the majority 4(66.66%) of the CWDs in the O-class were beyond the expected age of pre-school that they are 8 years old. In Ethiopia, age 8 is the time for the child to be in grade 2 in primary school.

#### 4.3. Entry age of CWWODs Attending O-Class

The Durame Town Administration Education Office has pointed out that children in different age groups attend O-classes in government primary schools.

For instance, 63% of children attending O-class in 2022 were 6 years old, 20 % were 4 years old, 15% were 5 years old and the remaining 2% were 7 years old.

Primary school principals and O-class teachers expressed children are expected to attend classes at the age of 3 *and 4 years*. However, as found in this study, children at age six were found to be new entrants, just a year before joining primary school, which is too late to receive benefits from an O-class inclusion. The worrying point is, in the interview with teachers teaching in O-class and the principals it was crystal clear that there were a considerable number of children aged 7 and 8 years. Answering the question as to why the schools were admitting students at and above six years old at the beginning of the school year, the school directors and O-class teachers revealed that, *“They were admitting children above six years old to O- class due to high pressure and demand from parents.”* They also associated the admission of children under and above six years old to the O-class with their right to access education. The researcher probed whether these

students were grouped based on their age (ages:- 4-5, 5-6, 6-7, and 7-8) and learned in different classrooms accordingly. One of the school’s principals reported:

Owing to a lack of classroom space and qualified O-class teachers, all age groups of CWWODs in this school were learning together in one classroom. Additionally, the Durame Town administration does not provide the necessary support to address student needs in a variety of ways that would not allow the school to accept all sorts of children in accordance with the inclusive education policy (School Principal 2 (SP2))

Admitting children in different age groups to O-class is not in line with the Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for ECCE (2010b), which states that O-class is initiated principally to create access to education for those children who are disadvantaged and did not receive three years of pre-school education at six years of age.

It is impossible to meet the developmental needs of children in various age groups by teaching them in the same classrooms with the same educational resources and teaching



techniques. Categorizing and teaching children of different age groups in the same classroom may cause negative effects such as high dropout rates, poor academic performance and development, and display undesirable behaviors in school and/or at home. One expert on special needs said,

Schools are required to accept children of different ages and diverse requirements, without taking into account their talents or capacities and are forced to compete in their academic activities in the same way as their peers (Special Need expert 1)

Despite the fact that schools admitting different age groups in the same class practically affect the teaching strategies and classroom hours of teachers to balance their course syllables with the age differences of the children attending the same class.

#### **4.4 School physical environments accessible for CWWODs attending O-class**

##### **Site and playground of O-class in primary schools**

The findings of the observation indicated that from the four O-classes, only one

school was relatively conducive to those CWDs. In the remaining three, the playing ground is very small and there are stones, breakers, and accumulated sands near the main road.

It is possible to infer that due to a lack of Montessori resources, lack of furniture for classrooms, and play spaces, lack of rooms, damage to the classroom ceiling, and lack of a skilled workforce, the school campus is unsuitable for O-class CWWODs.

##### **Indoor environment**

Observations conducted in primary schools with O-class participants in this study showed that the schools were not properly equipped with indoor materials and equipment. The children sat on oversized chairs at some schools. Classrooms are very small in size and fractured, chairs are not suitable for children, and the teaching materials are not well organized.

Children who sat on chairs of inappropriate sizes felt uncomfortable, and some of them even stood to see teachers and blackboards. Concerning the

classroom size of O-classes, teachers probed whether the sizes of the rooms were proportional to the number of children in the classes. Teachers from one of the O-classes pointed out the following.

The rooms in which the O-class students attended classes were constructed for the primary students' classroom purposes. However, the classes accommodated more students than their standards (Teacher 4 (T1)).

Teachers from the other two primary schools with O-classes disclosed that classrooms in which the O-class students were learning were not built for classroom purposes. These classes were built for stores, registrar offices, and other purposes.

The number of children in the O-class was higher than the number of students expected to be accommodated in one class. One school director stated that, *“According to the guidelines in one O-class around 40 students is appropriate or 1 teacher to 40(1:40) student ratio is advisable.”* However, observations conducted at the schools helped to identify that the number of O-class students pursuing their schooling in a

single class was more than 50 and the classroom space was inadequate in all schools.

### Outdoor environment

Primary schools are not separated by a fenced playground for O- class students. The compound is not well equipped with the necessary materials that are mandatory for O- class students' future social and psychological development. It was observed that there were outdoor play materials, such as marry go rounds, climbers, balance beams, and swings in the playground separated for O-class students but most of the outdoor playing materials were not functioning because of a lack of maintenance.

The inadequacy of outdoor playing materials in primary schools with an O-class has a negative effect on students' physical, intellectual, creative, emotional, and social development. This limits children's opportunities to investigate and explore their environments, learn to live with peers, and interact freely with available materials and equipment. It would also limit children's possibilities for playing, exercising, and developing

physical skills, to build self- confidence and competence, which are the main goals of pre-school school education programs.

Regarding the presence of separate toilets for O-class students, the primary schools lacked separate toilets for O-class students. The O-class students shared the same toilets with primary school students. The toilets lacking potable water, were not child-sized or clean, and could not invite students to use them.

#### **4.5 Skilled human power assigned for O-class, O-class teachers' training and experience**

Teachers' training, experience, and benefits play a major role in delivering quality education for students attending schools in general and in O-classes. Five of the teachers responded that they were 10th grade complete with no teaching or other work experience when recruited as teachers for O-class students, but they were made to take short-term training on student-centered teaching methodology for eight months in different teachers' training colleges found in the region. The selection mechanism of trainers depends on those who have low matric results in

grade 10 scores and who are unable to join preparatory school (Grades 11 and 12). After getting eight-month training they were hired by the town administration without any criteria.

Yet, the other O-class teacher said that she had a college diploma in the language stream and had above 21 years of experience in teaching in primary schools and now she was assigned as an O-class teacher and O- class coordinator.

The Durame Town Administration Education Office also indicated that the majority of O-class teachers were 10th-grade students and had no experience in teaching when they were assigned as teachers for O-class students. On the other hand, related to teaching CWDs, the office reported that the teachers did not have experience or received training on how to teach children in an inclusive manner.

One special need expert underlined further;

Theoretically, all schools must accommodate CWDs, but it is difficult to accommodate children at the class level because most teachers have no idea, and they have no training on how to teach in inclusive classes. It is too

difficult. The children were all mixed. For example, if a child with hearing impairment is in an O-class, it is difficult to support and teach them due to a lack of sign language ability, awareness, and assistive devices. This is the reality in most schools (Special need expert 2)

During interviews with school directors and town ECCE experts, they were asked, *“Why the Durame Town Education Office was not hiring qualified and certified teachers for O-classes?”* One of them said,

It is very difficult to get qualified teachers in ECCE in general and in O-class in particular, as there are few ECCE graduates in the market. There are no well-trained teachers in the O-class field. Professionally trained pre-school teachers in the region are in high demand for private pre-schools. The Durame Town Education Office has no adequate budget for hiring and assigning these professionals as O-class teachers (ECCE Expert).

During classroom and playfield observations, the findings indicated that the O-class teachers' experience of applying active learning methods and play-based approaches was not the expected standard. As observed, the focus of O-class teachers was on teaching

children formal/academic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic exercises.

#### **4.6 Teaching and learning materials for O-class CWWOD and teachers.**

##### **Availability of curricular and other necessary teaching-learning materials**

Essential O-class curricular materials such as syllabi, teacher's guides, text books, and other related materials that serve as a cornerstone to guide children's learning are expected to be available in primary schools with O-classes and accessible to O-class teachers. However, primary school directors and O-class teachers replied, *“The education office does not give us, but textbooks copied/duplicated from nearby private schools were used to teach O-class students.”*

This implies that the lack of essential educational materials available for O-class teachers forced the O-class teachers to use their personal experience and knowledge, making academic achievement and personal readiness of O-class students vary from class to class in the same school and from school to

school. Nevertheless, this does not mean that teachers' efforts are of no avail. For example, During FGD, one of the parents of O-class students commented:

*My son joined O-class, he brought so many changes in concrete areas. I mean that most of the time he retrieved pictorial things such as designs of homes, trees, wild animals, and so on. Sometimes most of his homework focuses on the art and the drawing of musical instruments (parent 6 (P6)).*

During classroom observation, the researchers critically observed and analyzed the content and lesson topics of environmental science textbooks copied from nearby private schools. It was learned that some of the examples listed under plants and animals were not familiar to O-class students and were difficult for O-class teachers to translate into the local language. In addition, some teachers have a gap in understanding the idea of the text copied from private school books.

#### **Availability of guideline for inclusion of children with disabilities to O-class**

The Ethiopian government is committed to bringing all children to school following the philosophy of inclusive

education. However, when the directors of primary schools with O-classes were asked about the availability and extent of implementation of guidelines for inclusion of CWDs, among the four schools, three school directors reported the following:

At the theoretical level, the schools' door is open for all learners without any segregation, but practically, there are several challenges regarding the school environment such as lack of materials for those who need support, lack of training, and skilled teachers on how to teach students with different types of needs (SP2, SP3, and SP4).

Furthermore, special need experts who are special need center coordinators of O-class, stated the following:

*The challenges regarding children with special need education in O-class is multifaceted. Ranging from lack of awareness and understanding about special needs education in the working environment and of community to the lack of infrastructures, teaching materials, and inaccessible classroom settings (Special Need experts 1 & 2).*

During FGD with parents, one of the discussants raised that the O-class does

not provide satisfactory education for CWDs, especially for students with visual impairments. One of the parents of the FGD stated that:

*My son was with visual problem and I asked my neighboring school to admit him and the school enrolled him, but later my son was dropout after one month because the school has not met my child's educational needs by providing the necessary educational provisions (P7).*

This finding agrees with the Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2007 E.C. (2014/15), which found that out of 2.9 million children attending pre-school only 4615 children with special educational needs were attending pre-school through the O-class and Child to Child Program, while others were left behind.

### **Budget allocation**

The allocation of budgets for certain activities implies the extent of focus given to the activity or the program. School directors were asked whether the local government allocated a sufficient budget for the O-class program. All directors of primary schools with O-classes participated in the study,

underlining that the local government did not pay due attention to the O-class program. As a result, no budget was allocated to the O-class program of the primary schools participating in the study.

According to the school directors, primary schools did not provide support for slice budgets to the O-classes that they had scarce budgets themselves. As a result, the schools were unable to provide the necessary indoor and outdoor materials for students attending O-classes. School directors and ECCE experts were asked why the local government was not willing to allocate a budget for the O-class program. The school directors and ECCE stated the following:

*We have been asking this question since the commencement of O-classes in our schools. The response we get from the Education Office and Office of Finance and Economic Development of the Durame Town informed us there was no a separate budget for the program.*

Therefore, it is possible to suggest that O-class programs run under the charity of primary school budgets. Thus, they are not allowed to function in a full-fledged manner as an independent education



system.

#### **4.7 Parents of CWWODs participating in the implementation of an inclusive O-class**

Parents' awareness of and participation in the implementation of the O-class program are very important for schools and children attending it. In the interview and FGD parents explained that O-classes were open for children from low-income families who could not send their children to private schools. Parents explained that their children were very happy, active, and sociable since they joined the O-classes. During the FGD they shared their ideas about the O-class, underlining that the O-classes met their income level.

*Our children joined O –class in governmental schools we feel the schools are accommodating enough to our low- income economy. We are not able to afford for a private school, so economically governmental schools are very advantageous and cost-free (all parent participants).*

During the FGD, parents were also asked about the extent of their participation in the O-class to improve their children's learning. They revealed that although

there were times when the schools called for meetings to discuss the overall performance of the O-class students, very few parents participated in the meetings. In- depth interviews with O-class teachers also showed that the participation of parents in O-class activities was very low, mainly most had no practice observing children's exercise books when teachers gave homework to assess the progress of their academic performance. Issues in the academic performance of O-class students were left only to the teachers, implying that parents' awareness of the O-class teaching-learning process was very low. However, few schools show limited interest in inviting parents to participate in school activities to improve the quality of education. Possible to infer therefore there is weak interaction between schools and parents.

## **5. Brief Discussion**

### **5.1 Opportunities**

The opportunities to be discussed here below were drawn from general finding inferences and review of related literature. From the findings, the following things can be taken as opportunities: In the O-class the

teachers are females; CWDs are learning together with CWODs at early age which will facilitate their social interaction presently and will create future inclusive society; CWDs were found to engage in the outdoor play materials but with limitation yet it will have positive effect on their physical, intellectual, creative, emotional, and social development; though unprofessional in strict sense but the deployment of O-class teachers for O-classes paves the way in the future the need and urgency to produce O-class teachers in teacher training colleges and universities of the country; though things are not that much accessible CWDs are able to participate in the play fields which will have positive impact on their physical and cognitive developments; and CWDS the same with CWODs are able to access the same curricula and other necessary teaching-learning materials (syllabus, teaching guides, textbooks, and other related materials).

Most importantly, the most encouraging opportunity of the opening of O-class is to parents of CWDs. Mostly, in developing countries including Ethiopia, CWDs come from poor families. And in these contexts

the access to education is minimal and if available it would be minimal. Thus, given the negative attitude of the society towards people with disabilities, having a CWD who is out of school realm would cause incalculable negative consequences and burdens to parents. Therefore, the opening of O-class has much more contributions to parents. For example, psychologically, parents would benefit in believing in their children potential that they can go to school and learn like other CWODs and their future will be bright through education. In term of wining their daily breads, parents will use the time they used to devote to care their CWDs to works that can generate income. Parents would also get time to balance their work and social life and so on and so forth.

## 5.2 Challenges

Chowdhury and Choudhury (2002) stated that the site of ECCE centers should be in the neighborhood of the children served. The ECCE centers should also be located away from crowded areas of the town, cemeteries, and main traffic areas to ensure children's safety. MoE, the Ethiopian School Development Plan (ESDP) V (2015) also emphasized that the school environment must be accessible,

safe, and healthy. However, observations of the four sample primary schools with O-classes showed that only one school has a relatively conducive compound for those who have disabilities, and the remaining three were not. In their compound the playing ground is very small and there are stones, breakers, and accumulated sands near the main road. The physical environment of these pre-schools is not safe, accessible, or healthy. As a result, things do not support the physical well-being, intellectual development, or social development of children.

Indoor materials and equipment (e.g classrooms, seating arrangements, and materials) are essential for the implementation of ECCE. The effective usage of these materials and equipment makes the teaching-learning process more tangible and easily understandable. Pairman and Terreni (2001; cited in Labuschagne 2015; Bietenbeck, 2019) stated that early childhood indoor environments can be seen as an additional teacher because they speak to the learners and tell them what to do, where to do, and how they can work together with other

learners. However, the O-classes were observed to have several problems with their materials and equipment. Thus, it is possible to infer that CWWODs attending their education in O-classes are not learning properly. In other words, the social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of children may be delayed and the efforts of teachers to support these processes will be sluggish and discouraged.

Archer (2007; as cited in Labuschagne, 2015; Bietenbeck, 2019) stated that learners' outdoor play is limited by inaccessible environments. Limited access to outdoor play at home necessitates the importance of a suitable outdoor play area in schools where learners have sufficient opportunity to play and run around (Monkfield Park, 2013 as cited in Labuschagne, 2015; Bietenbeck, 2019). In the study area, primary schools were not separated by a fenced playground arranged for O-class students with the necessary materials mandatory for O-class children's social and psychological development in future life. Few schools had outdoor play materials, such as marry go rounds, climbers, balance beams and

swings in the playground but most of the outdoor playing materials were not functioning because of lack of maintenance.

This finding is contrary to MoE (2010), who stated in the strategic document that outdoor play equipment must be well maintained, clean, and developmentally appropriate which can provide many opportunities for creativity and the development of different skills. The inadequacy of outdoor playing materials in primary schools with O-class has a negative effect on children's physical, intellectual, creative, emotional, and social development. This limits children's opportunities to investigate and explore their environments, learn to live with peers, and interact freely with the materials and equipment available. It would also limit children's possibilities for playing, exercising, and developing physical skills, to build self-confidence and competence, which are the main goals of pre-school education programs.

Adequate qualified O-class teachers were not assigned to primary schools with the O-classes under study. The National

Strategic Operational Plan and Guidelines for ECCE (MoE, 2010) emphasizes the ability and skills of teachers to work with and/or care for younger children. The O-class teachers were asked about their level of education and work experience when they were assigned as O-class teachers and most reported as they are 10<sup>th</sup> grade complete with no teaching or other work experience. The selection mechanism of these teachers depends on those who have low Matric results in grade 10 scores and who are unable to join preparatory school (grades 11 and 12). At the same time, teachers were not prepared to teach CWDs in an inclusive manner, nor did they have the support of special needs professionals, for example, sign language interpreters, in their classes to teach children with hearing impairment. This finding is in line with Yigzaw and Abdurrahman (2017) and Girma (2014) who reported that the majority of pre-schools in Ethiopia had no teachers with the required qualifications to teach pre-schools; however it is against the Early Childhood Care and Education Strategic Operational Plan and guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (MoE, 2010) which

requires all pre-school teachers to have a minimum certificate in ECCE or have attended a 2 months course to upgrade their skills and knowledge.

Essential O-class curricular materials, such as syllabi, teachers' guides, textbooks, and other related materials that serve as a cornerstone to guide children's learning are expected to be available in primary schools with O-classes and accessible to O-class teachers. However, the findings show the unavailability of these crucial and basic educational materials. The school directors and O-class teachers replied that, "*textbooks copied/duplicated from nearby private schools were used to teach O-class students.*" This implies that the unavailability of the O-class syllabus, teachers' guide, and other relevant educational materials in primary schools is not supported by age and pedagogically appropriate curriculum, which might hamper the expected steady learning process of children.

As for inclusive education guidelines, there was no real practice or sufficient level to practice inclusive education for

CWDs in the O-classes the fact that there were no enforcing guidelines prepared by the MoE. This finding is not in line with the main plan of inclusive education MoE's (2016) strategy, which sets a goal to equip teachers and school leaders with the knowledge and skills of children's special educational needs.

Parents' awareness and participation in the implementation of an O-class program are very important for schools and children attending O-classes. However, the respondent parents disclosed that they did not interact well with the schools. This implies that parents' awareness is very low and they do not support the inclusion process of their CWWODs.

The allocation of budgets for certain activities implies the extent of focus given to the activity or program. All respondents confirmed that there was no separate budget for O-classes. The O-classes receive the budget of the primary schools where they are annexed, showing the lack or absence of commitment and determination of the government or MoE of the country to the program, and CWWODs attending the program by implication. This finding agrees with the

findings of many researchers', for instance, Belay and Temesgen (2016), who in their study revealed that primary schools operating under a serious budget and logistic constraints were expected to host O-classes.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In terms of opportunities based on drawn findings and review of related literature, the following can be taken as assets for future full-fledged O-class in the country: the commencement of O-classes lately which was not the case before one decade; though the policy is not going to affect fully in the country the MoE education encourages O-class as a system of education; ECCE professionals are graduating in the country at BA, MA, and PhD levels and the same is the case for special needs and inclusive disciplines; parents are being introduced to and have started to acknowledge the benefit of O-class to their children; and O-class doors have started to be open for CWDs than it was not the case a decade ago even in some places; assigning of female teachers; CWWODs are learning together; CWDs engage in the outdoor play materials, CWDs are made to access the same curricula and

other necessary teaching-learning materials (syllabus, teaching guides, textbooks, and other related materials), and parents were able to send their CWDs to school and that they are happy their children are at school and that they are bale to spend their time in work and social activities.

Whereas, the challenges include not limited to; Inadequacy of standardized classrooms; inaccessibility of the school environment for CWWODs; inadequacy of appropriate indoor and outdoor playing materials (lack of restrooms, lackof water and child-size appropriate toilets, playing ground, and lack of pictures on wall which helps students rehearsing abilities); lack of position at district level to facilitate O-class education; lack of skilled workforce in the field of O-class teachers; lack of attention from the concerned body; lack of on-the-job training for O-class teachers; attendance of different age groups of O-class students in the same class; making low academic achievers to be O-class teachers; lack of adequate budget; lack of curricular and other necessary teaching-learning materials; absence of curriculum, syllabus, teachers' guide, and textbooks for O-class teachers ; lack of



experience and training for teachers how to teach a student with different types of needs; lack of active community/parental participation in the teaching-learning process; and lack of awareness about pre-school education.

Thus, it was concluded that the practice of an inclusive O-class mainly for CWDs has to be celebrated because there is no such practice in almost all parts of the country in which the children are all in all denied the right to education in these schools; it is being challenged by several factors.

Therefore, the recommendation is to capitalize on the available opportunities and reduce and remove the challenges mentioned. The latter includes hiring well-trained teachers, providing ongoing training, and improving the selection mechanism of college candidates based on their academic achievement, which means that high-ranking academic achievers must join O-class teacher training centers, increase the parental environment, and raise awareness about the importance of O-class education.

All children, particularly CWDs, have unique special needs thus when designing

and implementing policies, laws, and services, it should of interest to them. CWWODs have the right to access and be educated on their all-round development. Community participation in any program is crucial for the implementation of ECCE; thus, communities have to be trained and must have received training on the importance of O-class education in their child's future. Parents must participate in school activities, O-class teachers must share students' academic reports with their parents, and the Durame Town administration must provide awareness training for parents.

Finally, the researcher recommended that the Durame Town Education Office build pre-primary schools with Oclasses to the standard levels. The education office must allocate sufficient budget to the O-class. To reduce educational challenges, the Education Office must work to build capacity, and organize ongoing workshops, seminars, conferences, and pieces of training to enhance the professional competence of O-class teachers.

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## Conflict of Interest

There is no any conflict of interest.

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