

Preschool Teacher Preparation in Hawassa College of Teacher Education: A Critical Look into the Student-teaching Experiences

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Abstract

This paper is aimed to explore preschool teacher preparation in Hawassa College of Teacher Education in light of the student-teaching experiences. Teaching practicum experience is one of the major opportunities for prospective teachers to advance their understanding about the profession. Colleges of Teacher Education in Ethiopia have generally given credibility to the student-teaching experiences. These experiences seem to be exciting, empowering and stimulating in many ways. However, the student-teaching experiences were also characteristically filled with lots of challenges beginning from the orientation program to the field supervision process and post-student-teaching activities. Yet, these experiences have never been examined and lessons not extracted so far. This study employs a qualitative research design particularly phenomenological approach. The participants of this study were 20 composed of 12 prospective teachers, 6 teacher educators and 2 officers. For the sake of reliable data, all of the participants were selected purposively. Findings of this study reveal that even though pre-orientation is given, there is no post-practicum conference. Practicum materials for pre-primary teacher training is not relevant to the program nature. The supervision trend and support provision is not well-organized. Both trainees and tutors face scarcity of transportation while conducting practicum. Time allotment, trainee assignment, mentor assignment, language of instruction and assessment technique still requires to be aligned with the purpose of the program. Researchers suggest that the participation of properly trained professionals should be considered in the process of framework development.

Key Terms: Orientation, Preschool, Student-teaching, Teacher Education, Teacher Preparation

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Introduction

1.1.1. Conceptualization of Student-teaching Globally

According to Grootenboer, P. (2006), student-teaching is a planned school experience of prospective teachers in which all the skills and knowledge being learned in the teacher education program is practiced under the direct supervision and assistance of the trained school teachers. School-based student-teaching is a fundamental component of all pre-service teacher education programs where prospective teachers get an opportunity to develop their teaching and knowledge in the real classroom circumstances.

It is one of the course activities in the pre-service teacher training program that is intended to fill the gap in teaching skills and values among newly graduating trainees by providing them with real experiences of school setting, schooling and school communities. The main concern of student-teaching is not putting training theories into practice like the old paradigm – teaching practice. It is rather development of communities of practice and reflective teacher education programs. The new paradigm urges Student-teaching activities to be a forum for developing communities of learning and practice that is supportive and promote provisions of feedbacks by various stakeholders to the trainees (Perry, R., 2004).

Student-teaching in other words is a means of preparation for the teaching profession that supports preparation of prospective teachers for the world of work, integration of the learned course theory with teaching practice and enabling prospective teachers to connect educational theory with the actual practice of classroom situation. This program is designed to help teacher candidates develop and exhibit the knowledge, skills, and outlooks that will enable them to become master teachers (Fekede T., 2009).

1.1.2. The Role and Function of Student-teaching in Teacher Education

Literatures confirm that teaching is a complex process, and the student-teaching is one of the most critical elements of the teacher education (Ong'ondo & Jwan, 2009; Banegas, 2018). Danyluk et al. (2015), discusses that student-teaching provides prospective teachers opportunities to achieve the purpose of the theory they have been studied in the institute including classroom management, pedagogical theories and teaching strategies in order to make them competent teachers.

Moreover, Cheng (2013) also states that pre-service teachers find opportunities to put theories into practice in the real school environment. According to Salvatori (2010, p. 6), the student-teaching lets teacher candidates “integrate theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge in the understanding of and resolution of

professional issues". Student-teaching might emphasize different ideas, aspects and qualities in different settings, and, therefore, student-teaching in teacher education is dealt with in different ways at different training institutions.

As stated in Grootenboer, P., (2006), school-based student-teaching program is an influential tool to shape pre-service teachers' understandings of teaching profession. Grootenboer in his study of the impact of school-based field experience concluded that school-based student-teaching practices build noteworthy positive changes on pre-service teachers in their affective responses. Hence, student-teaching program is seen as it has positive role in shaping prospective teachers' pedagogical skills and deliberation of subject knowledge. As cited in Grootenboer, P., (2006), Gustafson & Rowell 1995, discusses that student-teaching has the power to critically shape student-teacher's perceptions of teaching and learning.

Qazi et al. (2012), conducted a study on the role of student-teaching program in enhancing pedagogical knowledge and skill of the prospective teachers. It found that student-teaching helps prospective teachers to develop the skill of classroom management, lesson planning, preparation of teaching materials, and preparation of subject relevant learning environment. Also, the findings show that the school-based field experience enables prospective teachers to exhibit good professional skills such as teaching confidence, skill of keeping adequate records and skill of showing stable work habits through the school practice.

Some other researches reveal that student-teaching enhances prospective teachers to apply the theories that they have been learned in the teacher education institution in to practice in the actual classroom in the school setting. Nevertheless, for the program to take place and play its role successfully, teacher institutions and school communities need to work in collaboration. According to Brady (2006), due to the strong college-school partnership, knowledge and skill of the prospective teachers in applying theory in to practice is expected to be excellent. So, student-teaching has a fundamental role in shaping teaching profession and this is ensured through the active collaboration and commitments of the program participants.

Different models of student-teaching can be identified and applied to represent different views of how professional practice knowledge is best nurtured. Mattsson, Eilertsen, & Rorrison (2011), categorized them in to nine. These are: (1) the Master-Apprentice Model, (2) the Laboratory Model, (3) the Partnership Model, (4) the Community Development Model, (5) the Integrated Model, (6) the Case-Based Model, (7) the Platform Model, (8) the Community of Practice Model, (9) the Research and Development Model.

1.1.3. Objectives of the Student-teaching

Depending on the nature of the program, student-teaching possesses one or more of the following objectives as stated in Akbar, 2002.

- To provide the trainees with an opportunity to establish an appropriate teacher-pupil relationship.
- To provide an opportunity for evaluating the student potential as a teacher and suitability for the teaching profession.
- To develop personal relationship with others: administrators, teachers, parents and students.
- To provide the future teacher with practical experience in school to overcome the problems of discipline and enable him / her to develop method of control.
- To provide with an opportunity to put theories into practice and to develop a deeper understanding of educational principles and their implication for learning.
- To enable the student-teachers effectively plan and prepare lessons.
- To develop skill in the use of fundamental procedures, techniques and methods of teaching.
- To develop desirable professional interests, attitudes and ideas relative to teaching profession.
- To enable student-teachers to acquire desirable characteristics / traits of a teacher and to display appropriate behavior.
- To provide an opportunity for self-evaluation (discovering own strengths and weaknesses).
- To develop skills in future teachers related to teaching like fluent speaking, meaningful reading, using blackboard and other teaching material.
- To provide an opportunity to liaison with school environment, its functioning and with community and its resources.

Moreover, the following sets of objectives have been created for why of the student-teaching based on the National Universities Commission Benchmark (NUC, 2007) and the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE, 2015) as cited in G. Aglazor, 2017.

- To expose prospective teachers to real life classroom experiences under the supervision of professional teachers.
- To help prospective teachers to translate educational theories into practice.
- To enable and provide prospective teachers opportunities to discover and address their weaknesses and enrich their strengths in classroom teaching.
- To familiarize prospective teachers with real school environment as their future work place.

- To provide prospective teachers with an opportunity for further acquisition of professional skills, competencies, personal characteristics and experience for teaching after graduation.
- To help prospective teachers develop a positive attitude towards the teaching profession.
- To serve as a means of assessing the quality of training being provided by teacher training institutions.

1.1.4. Principles, Approaches and Methods

Although Seagall (2002), claims that the practicum experience is the most valuable aspect of teacher education programs. Schulz (2005), and others who question some of the ways conventional practice are approached in teacher preparation programs, suggest alternative models. The technical model of focusing on skill development, mastering lesson plans, and classroom management should be, and continues to be, an important component, but it is not sufficient preparation for preservice teachers.

Schulz (2005) sees a need for a change towards a practicum experience that provides teacher candidates with opportunities for inquiry, for trying and testing new ideas within collaborative relationships, and for talking about teaching and learning in new ways. Zeichner (1996) suggests that instead of demonstrating instructional skills learned in methods courses, the practicum should be a time for growth and learning, where trainees come to understand the broader implications of being a teacher, and to appreciate the ultimate aim of teaching: to help children learn.

As stated in Liu, et. al., (2014), an effective student-teaching model is built on 5 key tenets that recognize factors influencing the success of the program.

- Practicum as an integrated part of a coherent program.
- It provides opportunities for purposeful supervision from experienced teachers/tutors.
- It allows pre-service teachers to develop their teacher competency through graduated responsibilities and opportunities for practice.
- It is assessed through clearly defined standards, not bounded by mere content knowledge.
- Practicum strives to develop thinking teachers with the use of planned and structured reflection, and focused professional conversations.

According to Bennie 1972 and Gronlund 1976 as cited in Belay Tefera (1993), effective student-teaching has the following basic principles.

- ✓ It is gradual and phase-based.
- ✓ It moves from simple to complex.
- ✓ It is experiential or practice-based.
- ✓ It is supervised, individualized clinical practice.
- ✓ It is formative, enriching, empowering than judgmental.

1.1.5. Phases, Supervision and Feedback to Prospective Teachers

A successfully coordinated student-teaching program passes through the following three basic stages as mentioned in Pennsylvania State University, Student-Teaching Handbook, 2014.

A. Before the Student-teaching

During the semester prior to student-teaching, prospective teachers and college supervisors meet for the first time. Information is collected and reviewed to help the supervisor find a suitable placement for the trainees. Only general information about the school assignment is shared, as specific placements haven't been made at this point. Next to that, concerned college supervisor, in agreement with individual school district protocol, seeks and procures specific school placements for each prospective teacher assigned to her/his cohort. Mentor teachers must be recommended by building principals and approved by school boards.

Every supervisor conducts an orientation session at the college during the latter part of the semester preceding student-teaching. At this orientation, the supervisor will provide trainees with information about the specific school placement, housing, transportation, important dates and other pertinent details. Then, at the beginning of the student-teaching, each supervisor conducts an orientation session for her/his cohort at a location central to the placement sites. In this orientation, the supervisor will detail program requirements and expectations and help trainees' complete administrative tasks. During, the first week of student-teaching, supervisor provides the orientation for mentors to ensure a collaboration in merging school and college curricula and expectations.

B. While the Student-teaching

One of the benefits of having full-time supervising faculty is the opportunity for frequent observations and conferences with each of the trainees throughout the student-teaching experience. The observation-conference-goal setting cycle is critical to the progress and ongoing professional development. The university supervisor observes trainees in a variety of teaching-learning situations on a regular basis during the student-teaching experience. The observation records are used as a basis for helping them to analyze the teaching-learning process.

Direct and regular feedback is provided through different types of conferences. The supervisor holds an

initial conference during the first week of student-teaching to discuss adjustments to the student-teaching. He/she conducts a conference as soon as possible after a teaching observation. Three-way conferences including the mentor teacher are scheduled when appropriate. Observation data are used to help identify appropriate goals for improvement. Self-evaluation is stressed to help trainee understand the impact of teaching behaviors upon students' learning and development.

The supervisor schedules a three-way conference (student teacher, mentor teacher, college supervisor) near the midpoint in the semester. The purpose of this conference is to review evidence about trainee's performance at this stage. Tutor will be asked to provide evidence of trainee's accomplishments in each domain and participate in setting goals for the rest of the experience. This evidence is also part of the trainee's portfolio conference held mid-way through the semester. A final three-way assessment conference is scheduled near the end of the student-teaching experience. trainees will be required to present evidence demonstrating the extent to which they have accomplished each of the standards of the Performance-based Assessment.

Two-way and three-way conferences are held as the need arises throughout the semester to help trainees become the most effective teachers they can become. The supervisor plans and conducts weekly seminars that focus on their needs and concerns, as well as current educational issues. Topics may include assessment, classroom management, instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, special education topics, etc. During the student-teaching, the supervisor acts as a resource for mentor teachers to assist them in their role as mentors.

C. After the Student-teaching

The supervisor or tutor ensures that student-teaching modules, the student-teaching checklist files, and final assessments completed by the prospective teachers and mentors are filed appropriately and correctly. Thanking the mentor teachers and the schools for hosting the student-teaching program is also done at this time.

1.1.6. What Does Research Say about Student-teaching in General?

Importance of the student-teaching has been one of the major areas of interest in the literature since the it is considered one of the most important aspects of a student teacher's education (Clarke & Collins, 2007; Farrell, 2008). As Karchmer-Klein (2007) points out that "Student-teaching placements have been integral components of the teacher preparation process for many years" (p. 121). So, many researchers attempted to define and clarify the meaning of student-teaching. Although there are different perspectives presented by the various authors, it is also possible to encounter some common points in these definitions.

According to Agustiana (2014), student-teaching is the activity of teaching practice in real classrooms and the students are required to fulfill this Student-teaching process during their training in Faculty of Teacher Education. Zeichner (1992) uses the term student-teaching to include all varieties of observation and teaching experiences in a pre-service teacher education programme – namely, field experiences that precede professional education coursework, early field experiences that tied to professional courses and student-teaching and internship experiences.

Manzar-Abbas and Lu (2013) also define student-teaching as a transition of roles from a student to a professional worker, and it links the theory to practice. According to Ong'ondo and Jwan (2009), student-teaching or teaching practice is a session that requires students to take part in a teaching experience in a school or any other learning institution where they can interact with actual learners. Darling-Hammond (2010, p. 40) asserts, "Learning to practice in practice, with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher of students with a wide range of needs".

The implementation of student-teaching is important to bridge the gap between what prospective teachers have learnt in the program and the reality of teaching practice in real classroom contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2006; cited in Sulistiyo et al., 2017). Student-teaching placements are essential for promoting cohesion between theory and practice in teacher education programs (Falkenberg & Smits, 2010; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; cited in Cantalini- Williams, et al., 2014). Ngidi and Sibaya (2003) define Student-teaching as a field experience when prospective teachers teach in schools and apply their learnt knowledge in the real situation, while Chireshe and Chireshe (2010) viewed it as a supervised and guided teaching experience of prospective teachers under an experienced mentor.

As Agudo (2016, p. 36) suggests, "The student-teaching process constitutes a fundamental experience for the professional preparation of every candidate teacher". It is necessary to emphasize that a well-planned student-teaching is crucial in teacher education programs, and according to Manzar-Abbas and Lu (2013), a well-planned student-teaching should provide a real field to apply the acquired knowledge, a real field to understand the real context of professional understanding, feedback for further development and an opportunity to become a reflective practitioner provides and the prospective teachers to observe and experience diverse contexts. From a different perspective, Cheng (2009) suggests that pre-service teachers' understanding of their professional and self-efficacy is shaped by student-teaching.

1.1.7. Student-teaching in Ethiopia

Teacher training programs are designed to produce effective classroom practitioners who are capable to address various challenges in classroom setting. The aim is to develop the knowledge, skills and attributes of pre-service teachers to prepare them to teach effectively in the schools' systems. Keeping this in mind, Ethiopia practiced different approaches to teacher education in the last decades. It recognized the importance of practicum or a school-based experience that teacher trainees have in the classroom to put theory into practice before they take on the full range of responsibilities required for teaching students. This is the context in which pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to grow and develop as future members of the profession, to apply their skills in the teaching practice, and reflect on what it means to them to be a teacher (MoE, 2013).

As stated clearly in the MoE document above, pre-service teacher training in Ethiopia has also recognized the importance of student-teaching for the teaching profession. In all student-teaching courses, trainees' major activities include continuous observation, reflection, and providing feedback for colleagues, which open up a room for trainees to learn from one another. It is also intended that skills learned from schools complements, the content knowledge acquired from college when put into practice by trainees during block teaching. Like any other Teacher Training Colleges in Ethiopia, Hawassa College of Teacher Education is providing an early childhood care and education teacher training. From the total of 42 courses, 4 courses are designed for student-teaching practice. It accounts about 10% of the courses taught in the college. The program is given due emphasis in order to improve prospective teachers teaching professional knowledge and skills (MoE, 2016).

Generally, as it is indicated on the course catalogue of the program, student-teaching program is aimed to endorse prospective teachers with the following activities:

- be acquainted with school instructional resources.
- to understand rules and regulations of the school;
- to put in to practice the theory and principles taught in the classroom;
- develop their pedagogical skills and subject matter knowledge through making practice in the actual class room situation with students and school communities;
- develop the skill of preparing lesson plan, classroom management, and teaching aides, record keeping, and teacher ethics through the assistance of their mentors and tutors;
- implement a lesson independently and confidently;
- to identify and address school problems which they will be joined after graduation
- recognize the structure, organization and the management system of the school; and
- to understand the full scope of teachers' role and responsibility.

In due process of observation, reflection and practice, college instructors and mentors at schools help trainees as the course activity guides. Before trainees go to school, they need to consult instructors assigned to assist them. Tutors explain to trainees how they do all tasks and activities in the course. In the school, trainees are placed to observe, student-teaching coordinators and mentors help them show where and how they get the information that helps them. Particularly, school mentors are very useful guides that trainees shall be ready to learn from them.

According to MOE (2003), trainees should go out to school for practicum and conduct specific tasks like observing experienced teachers, practicing lesson planning, teaching specific subjects, and performing school activities as their regular jobs of training with teachers at schools. Evaluations take place according to the content activities performed by the trainees in each parts of the course. School attendance, personal conduct, oral reflection on tasks assigned, portfolio report, and lesson delivery observation are some of the assessment mechanisms used to evaluate trainee's performances. They are expected to make regular contacts with school practicum coordinator and their college tutor to get advises and immediate feedback on how to organize their portfolio and oral reflection reports. To establish objectivity of assessment mechanisms, checklists and rating scales are prepared for all parts and thoroughly used.

1.2. Problem Statement

The student-teaching is an indispensable dimension of initial teacher education which is considered to be crucial in any educational context. Its experience in a teacher education context is a phase in which prospective teachers observe, get familiar with school context and pupils' learning styles and begin preparing their own lesson plans. Teacher candidates gradually develop the necessary skills and the knowledge for teaching during the student-teaching by doing observations and getting experiences in real classroom environments in contrast to the college environment. There has been a growing interest on the issue in the literature and as a result of it, the student-teaching has been extensively studied in recent years.

Teacher training worldwide has always erected with its two limbs: theoretical explanation of the tenets and contents of subjects to be taught, on the one hand, and the practical component in which trainees are exposed to the teaching act in a step-by-step manner. Teacher education colleges in Ethiopia have generally given credence

to this student-teaching aspect by providing four interrelated courses that begin with school visits, continue with classroom observation of the teaching act, and then involve in co-teaching with the main classroom teacher and finally engage in an independent teaching replacing the main teacher. These experiences seem to be exciting, empowering and stimulating in many ways. However, the student-teaching experiences were also characteristically filled with lots of challenges beginning from the orientation program to the field supervision process and prost-student-teaching activities. Nevertheless, these experiences have never been examined and lessons not extracted so far. This paper attempted to make a modest attempt trying to examine the student-teaching experiences in Hawassa College of Teacher Education all the way from the beginning till the last phase of the student-teaching.

Therefore; this study was intended to answer the following basic research questions.

1. What is the early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching practice in Hawassa College of Teacher Education?
2. How do prospective teachers perceive the effectiveness of the supervisory experience of student-teaching practice?
3. What extent does student-teaching practice impact trainees' professional understanding?

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate an early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching practice in Hawassa College of Teacher Education.

Specifically, it was intended to;

1. identify the state of early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching practice.
2. examine the early childhood care and education trainees' perception of the effectiveness of supervisory experience of the student-teaching practice.
3. explore the impact of early childhood care and education student-teaching practice on trainees' professional understanding.
4. present professional suggestions that can promote the right understanding and implementation of the program.

1.4. Significance of the Study

As it was stated earlier, the foremost purpose of this study was to see the insight of early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching practice in Hawassa College of Teacher Education. Student-teaching in Ethiopia has a long-time history starting from the beginning of the teacher training program. In contrary to that, early childhood care and education teacher training has nearly a recent historical trajectory in which little is investigated about its practice and implementation. Student-teaching practice in Ethiopia has been studied in the past few decades though there is no clear information about the early childhood care and education regard.

Therefore; this study was believed to bear the following significances.

- ✓ It presents the real experience of early childhood care and education student-teaching practice of teacher training colleges in Ethiopia.
- ✓ It helps to provide short-term trainings that can support development and implementation of early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching experience.
- ✓ Promote the right understanding of the early childhood care and education trainees' student-teaching practice among the program developers and implementers.
- ✓ It may help professionals who will be interested in conducting further studies in the area to pose some questions that can lead them to reach to certain conclusions.

Research Methodology

In this section, five main issues are raised namely; research design, data sources, sampling technique, data gathering tools and method of data analysis and interpretation to be employed in the study. Besides to that the rationale why research method to be used is preferred is discussed. Besides, all procedures and related issues that were followed during the study are clearly informed.

2.1. Research Design

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the early childhood care and education trainee's student-teaching practice in Hawassa College of Teacher Education. In order to accomplish this study, researchers used qualitative research design specifically phenomenological approach which would help them to realize the practice and implementation of the program. Among several paradigms, interpretive/constructive paradigm that claim reality is created as a result of social construction was followed. In this paradigm, there is no single reality that is waiting to be discovered according to (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) as cited in (Mertens & Mc Loughlin, 2004).

2.2. Research Site

This study was conducted in Hawassa College of Teacher Education found in Sidama National Regional State. The study addressed an early childhood care and education teacher training through purposive sampling technique. This research site is selected deliberately due to the researchers' prior experience and exposure.

2.3. Research Participants and Selection Criteria

The core participants of this research were an early childhood care and education teacher educators and trainees who were engaged in and exposed to the student-teaching practice. The criteria to select these participants was the program nature and level of involvement in it. Participants rich in information were those from which the researcher can earn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of this study. Student-teaching coordination officer, TELDA core process owner and few teacher educators from other departments were also took part in this study.

Scholars underline and argue that, there is no need of sampling to represent population in qualitative research. That is why the researcher in this kind of research always describes implication of the findings for the similar population. There are 54 early childhood care and education prospective teachers, four ECCE teacher educators and 6 teacher educators from other departments who teach ECCE courses. As there is no generalization in qualitative design, researchers selected the participants purposively. Thus, the total number of selected participants in this research were 20 from which 12 of them were early childhood care and education trainees, 6 were teacher educators and 2 were officers. They all were selected purposively.

2.4. Data Collection Instruments

The researchers used document analysis, semi-structured interview and focus group discussion to gather data. Individual interview was conducted with the officers and department representative. Trainee participants were collected within their classrooms and discussed on similar oral questions that help them to discuss in group. Questions during the interview sessions were more of open ended. Interview guide was prepared in local language and was used for both individual and group interview. The researcher used tape recorder for both individual and group interview. To assess the practice of student-teaching, researchers used a series of questions that would help to gather data through triangulation. For this matter, researchers had note taking book so as to record participants' responses.

2.5. Method of Data Analysis and Interpretation

As this study is qualitative, the researchers tried to analyze and interpret all the data while the data gathering process was going on. Most of the issues raised during the interview sessions were analyzed in to meaningful statements as the respondents provided. All data were interpreted in to words that would be paraphrased from the respondents' perceptual response. All information that was gathered using series of questions were discussed in to clear statements. Data gathered from policy documents, guidelines and legislations with regards to student-teaching practice was critically digested and discussed as it the messages it conveys.

2.6. Ethical Consideration

Regarding ethical issues, the researcher provided a letter of consent for all participants included in the study. The researcher used commonly understandable language based on the context of the participants. They were asked to participate voluntarily that they can with draw at any time regarding inconvenience. They were told as the researcher will not publish their names, personal addresses and any issues than their opinion. Again, the researcher told them the data they would provide will not be used for any other purposes and they will be informed about the progress of the study if necessary.

Data analysis and Interpretation

3.1. Demographic Information

Participants	No.	Sex	Age	Educational Background	Position
Officer 1	1	M	35-40	PhD in Biomedical Science	V/A/Dean
Officer 2	1	M	35-45	MSc in Biology (Botany)	Prac. Officer
Teacher Educators	6	F	30-40	MA in Social Psychology	Dep. Representative
		M	30-50	MA in ECCE	Lecturer
		F	30-40	MA in ECCE	Lecturer
		M	30-35	MSc in Mathematics (Algebra)	Lecturer
		M	30-50	MA in Linguistics	Lecturer
		M	30-40	MA in Curriculum & Instruction	Lecturer
Trainees	12	M/F	19-26	3 rd Year ECCE Trainees	ECCE Trainees

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

As it is indicated in the table above, participants were intentionally selected because of the professional exposure they have in order to give relevant information about the phenomenon. The sample involves all the concerned individuals that involves trainees, lecturers and officers.

3.2. Student-teaching Courses Catalogue

All of the ECCE student-teaching courses are distributed in the academic semesters as below.

S/N	Course Code	Course Title	Cr.hr.	Year	Semester
1.	Prac. 112	School Observation	1	II	I
2.	Prac. 221	Critical Classroom Observation	2	II	II
3.	Prac. 232	Assisting the Classroom Teacher	3	III	I
4.	Prac. 341	Independent Teaching	6	III	II
5.	SACR 322	Seminar on Action Research	1	III	II
Total cr.hr.			13		

Table 2: List of ECCE Student-teaching courses (MoE, 2014)

The table above indicates that ECCE prospective teachers begin the student-teaching work during first semester in the second year. Prac. 112 which is named as "*School Observation*" is the first student-teaching course. In this course, trainees visit a nearby school and observe the actual setting and working conditions of the school. The visit lasts for 3 successive weekly rounds a day each week.

In each of the 3 days trainees stay at the school they are assigned to for about a minimum of 4 hours, a total of 12 hours. During these days, trainees are asked to gather relevant information on school environment and school administrative activities. Furthermore, they are encouraged to assess co-curricular activities and school-community relations. Before they go to school placement, the department is expected to provide orientation about the program.

Prospective teachers' assessments are made based on the reports submitted and presented to the college tutor. At the completion of the activities in each round trainee are expected to reflect what they have observed and done. The two individual oral reports each out of 30% account for 60% of the assessment score, written reports are 40% of the total mark (MoE, 2016).

The second course is *Critical Classroom Observation* which is represented by Prac. 221. In this course, prospective teachers are placed into one of the nearby schools and work under the mentor they are assigned to. They are expected to observe critically all activities done by their mentor and class students in classroom they are assigned. They are also expected to develop their own annual lesson plan and prepare learning aids. During their school placement, the role of the mentor is paramount as trainee work under his/her close supervision to understand how to plan and conduct lessons. Thus, the trainees need to listen to the mentor's all advises attentively.

Trainees are eligible for this course if and only if they score at least "C" for the previous course. It runs for the 3 weeks rounds for a minimum of 4 hours per a week having spent working for a maximum of 6 hours under the mentor in the school. Procedures and tools of the assessment seem almost similar to the first course except the value of percentage shares for activities and assessors. Mentor's assessment accounts 20%, portfolio report covers 30% and the rest 50% is evaluated through oral reflection as stated in MoE, 2016.

Prac. 232 is the third student-teaching activity that lasts for the three block weeks in 3rd academic year, 1st semester. To be eligible for this activity, trainees are required to score at least, "C" grade on the previous student-teaching course. Prospective teachers begin to assist the school teacher through taking attendance, arranging class room seating, identifying and minimizing the classroom miss-behaviors, administering tests; providing home works and assignments, correcting assignments, preparing different visual aids appropriate for lesson presentation, conducting tutorial sessions for females and low achievers.

Finally, as it is indicated in the table above, independent teaching (Prac. 341) and seminar on action research (SACR 322) come together in the last semester of the study. Four important activities are simultaneously done in this course. First, prospective teachers begin to take part in pre-practice activities such as identifying their personal priorities and expectations before and after school. Then, conducting an independent teaching comes next. Here they get more exposure to the teaching profession by preparing lesson plans, producing and utilizing instructional materials and conducting actual teaching in classroom replacing the regular teacher. Additionally, they participate in co-curricular which require them involvement and contribution by joining different clubs and different professional school activities. Lastly, trainees are required to select research problem and conduct action research.

3.3. Data from Focus Group Discussion and Interview

Early childhood education prospective teachers were gathered together and asked to discuss on the series of questions. Teacher educators, department head, practicum officer and vice academic dean were also asked the

same questions during the FGD and interview session. Their responses in local language are transcribed in to meaningful statements as follows.

3.3.1. Orientation Before and After the Practicum

Prospective teachers during the focus group discussion argued on the orientation program they get before and after the practicum assignment.

SD1:

“ለፕራክቲኬም የምንወጣበት ጊዜ ስደርስ በት/ት ክፍላችን አማካኝነት ወይይት እናደርጋለን፡፡ የምንወያየውም ስለስምራቱ ሁኔታ፣ የፕራክቲኬም ዋና ዋና ይዘቶች፣ የምንመደብባቸውትምህረት ቤቶች እና ከእኛ ስለምጠበቁ ቁልፍ ተግባራት ነው፡፡”

Two student-discussants during the focus group discussion argued that there is a pre-practicum orientation program across the academic semester. SD1 informed they get a briefing orientation about the practicum through the department coordinator. The information they get is related to what, where, when and how of the practicum work. It also informs them about the roles and responsibilities of the prospective teachers during their actual work.

SD2:

“እህቴ ባንሳችው ላይ ተጨማሪ የማደርገው ይዘውን ከምወጡ መምህራን ጋር ትወውቅ ይኖረናል፡፡ ሌላውግን ስራውን ጨርሰን ስንመለስ ለመምህራኖቻችን ሪፖርት እናደርጋለን እንጂ ምንም ዓይነት የጋራ ወይይት አይኖረንም፡፡”

Another student-discussant agreeing on the idea of the SD1 added that pre-practicum orientation activity helps them to get introduced with their corresponding tutors. He also mentioned that there is no post-practicum orientation program and the only thing they do is one to one report presentation to their tutors.

3.3.2. Major Activities During Each Practicum

Prospective teachers were discussed on the major practicum activities they take part during each session. Teacher educators, practicum officer and vice academic dean of the college were also asked to react on the same questions. Their responses are:

SD3:

“ለምሳሌ የመጀመሪያ ዙር ፕራክቲኬም ከሆነ አጠቃላይ የትምህረት ቤቱን ወጭ ገጽታ አይተን እንመለሳለን፡፡ ወደየተመደብንባቸውትምህረት ቤቶች በግቢው ትራንስፖርት እንሄድና ኮሌጁ የምመድብልን መምህራን አብረውን ሆነ ውክትምህረት ቤቱ ማህበረሰብ ጋር እንተዋወቃለን፡፡”

With regard to the activities they take part during practicum session, student-discussant 3 exemplified that the first practicum course invites them to conduct general observation of the school's external environment including fence, buildings, play-field and etc. She added that trainees go to the school they are assigned by the College bus and get introduced with the school community with the help of their tutors.

SP4:

“በሁለተኛ ዙር ፕራክቲኬማችን የአክፍል ውስጣዊ ገጽታን፣ መማር - ማስተማሩን እንደሁም የክፍልና የክፍል ውጭ አደረጃጀቱን እናያለን፡፡ በሞጁሉ ላይ በተቀማጠው ጭክል ስት ማሰረት ክፍሉ ያለበትን ደረጃ እናይና ተመልሰን ለመምህራኖቻችን ሪፖርት እናቀርባለን፡፡”

Another student-discussant keeping the previous respondent's discussion pleasant, stated that the second-round practicum allows them to observe classroom setting critically. This involves the visit to “O” class indoor adjustment, approaches to learning and child-behavior management techniques. She added that the check-list found in the practicum module helps them to record and evaluate the classroom situation they observe.

SD2:

“እህቶቼ ያነሷቸው ሀሳቦች እንዳሉ ሆነው በ3ኛው ፕራክቲኬማችን ወቅት የት/ቤቱን ማራን እንደግፋለን፡፡ ለምሳሌ፡ ዕቅድ እና ዘግጅላቸዋለን፤”

ህጻናት እንዳይረብሷቸው እንቆጣጠር ለቸዋለን፤ አሁን በቅርቡ የወጣነው ፕራክቲኬም ግን ህጻናትን ማስተማር የተለመደበትና መደበኛ ማራንን ማሉ በማሉ የተካኑበት ነበር፡፡”

SD2 on the other side told that he shares the idea of the previous two respondents. The third practicum invites trainees to support the classroom teacher/mentor. The student-discussant disclosed that they support their mentor taking part in planning the lesson, and managing children’s behavior. During the last practicum they conducted recently, trainees fully replaced the regular teacher and practiced child care and support. The participant told that in such practicum, they assess the children and finally report the progress to the mentor they replaced.

Teacher educators were also asked to discuss on the activities that trainees perform during each practicum. They confirmed that like any other department, ECCE trainees begin their practicum work in the second year first semester. Discussants T4 and T2 conversed that the first two practicums are very simple as trainees observe both outdoor and indoor settings. However, the last two works are somehow difficult than the previous ones. Trainees practice child care and support provision independently. The most difficult thing here is that trainees are required to conduct action research based on the experience they get from the child care and support practice.

3.3.3. Mentor and Tutor Support in Practicum

During the FGD held with them, early childhood education prospective teachers were asked how do mentors and tutors support their practicum work. Teacher educators during the focus group discussion held with them were also asked how do they support early childhood care and education practicum work. Responses of both trainees and teacher educators are transcribed here below.

SD1:

“ከሌጃችን የምመድብልን ማምህራን ስራችን ምን እንደሆነና ፖርትፎሊዮ እንዴት አድርገን እንደምንሞላ ያስረዱናል፡፡ እስከ ት/ቤቱ ድረስ አብረውን ስለምሄዱ እየሰራን የምከብደን ተግባር ስኖር ቀርቦን እየጠየቅን ድጋፍ ያደርጉልናል፡፡”

Statements above reflect the student-discussant 1’s argument on the mentor’s and tutor’s support during the practicum activities. His argument is that tutors who are assigned by the College tell them what and how to do their practicum assignment. They also guide them how to fill the portfolio. His voice reveals that because tutors go to the school with trainees, they can ask any thing that needs clarification during the actual practicum.

SD5:

“እኔ ማጠቃለያ የምፈልገው ማምህራኖቻችን አብረውን ስለምሄዱ ከትምህርት ቤቱ ማምህራን ጋር የምያገናኙን እነርሱናቸው፡፡ የትምህርት ቤቱ ማምህራን ደግሞ የምንፈልገውን በማሉ ይተባበሩናለ፡፡”

Student-discussant 5 also added that tutors take them to the school they are placed to and introduce them with the regular teachers/mentors. Then, mentors collaborate for every action trainee would like to take part. They give them information about the school location, map, students profile and other important data necessary for the completion of the practicum.

From the information given above, one can understand that tutors assigned from the College are close to the practicum work trainees perform. Starting from the first contact, tutors support their advisee in providing information about the activity they are going to take, introducing them with the school teachers/mentors, evaluating the trainee’s day to day performances and consulting them for any additional support they would like provide.

Yet again, mentors or school teachers collaborate in the practicum work through directing the prospective teacher’s daily activities such as observation, recording events, planning the lesson, practicing the child care and support as well as communicating with the children. Both mentor and tutor evaluate the prospective teacher’s performance during the practicum. Sometimes they discuss about the strengths and limitations of the respective trainee so as to acknowledge the capacity and potential he/she has.

3.3.4. Practicum Evaluation Mechanisms

This question was presented to the teacher educators during the focus group discussion. They conversed in a critical way as follows.

TD3:

“It is well-known that all practicum modules consist evaluation checklist at the end. Based on the

criteria listed there, we, teacher educators evaluate prospective teachers' portfolio and oral reflection. Sometimes trainees come up with the result from their corresponding school mentor and we will add it to our evaluation.”

From the discussant's clear argument, one can understand that practicum evaluation takes place between the school mentors and college tutors. Most of the evaluation is made by the tutor and only few percent is measured by the school mentor. Mentors evaluate trainees based on the performance they exhibit during the regular class activities. Nevertheless, tutor's evaluation consists not only the actual classroom performance but also portfolio arrangement and oral reflection on what the trainees did. TD2 supporting the idea of TD3 added that in some cases, trainees bring most of the evaluation score from their mentor assigned replacing the college tutor. For such trainees, what the college tutor might do is collecting the scores and adding his/her value judgement on the general performance based on the oral reflection they conduct.

3.3.5. School Support and ECCE Practicum Implementation

The other question raised for teacher educators during the focus group discussion was how primary schools support and cooperate to the practicum. In addition to this they were asked about the current status of the practicum implementation. They reacted as follows.

Teacher-discussant 1 debated that early childhood care and education practicum is like any other practicums. The only difference is the pre-orientation ECCE department provides for its trainees. Teacher educators support their advisee in a way that things could be easy and possible for them. As a result of this, all prospective teachers will be graduate in the expected time.

For teacher-discussant 2, the difficult thing in early childhood care and education practicum implementation is the way tutors assigned for the last practicum work or independent teaching. Trainees need to go to their village and schools they prefer. Because college tutors may not be able to reach far rural areas, sometimes trainees come up with the unrecognized and deliberately equal evaluation result.

Teacher discussants (TD3 and TD1) uncovered that there is an introductory orientation session for primary schools' principals and supervisors before the beginning of the actual practicum. Immediately after the briefing and awareness creation orientation, letter of support will be presented to each selected school. Both discussants added that working with the nearby schools during practicum is very common. Therefore, schools which are selected for the practicum assignment always respond positive and provide professional support for the prospective teachers sent from the training institute.

Participant 1 (VAD) while reacting to the interview question discussed disclosed that both pre-primary and primary schools are cooperative to any information, activity and collaboration that the college would like get from them. He added that the college even gives them a lot of laboratory equipment, reference books and any other important materials the catchment schools apply for. This shows the vise -versa support system encourages both the college and the schools feel free to collaborate. As the interview reveals, most of the schools selected for the practicum implementation are familiar with the activity due to their previous exposure.

3.3.6. Effect of the Practicum on ECCE Profession

Trainees were asked about their opinion on the effect of practicum on ECCE profession. The target of the discussion was to explore the interest of the prospective teachers on practicum.

SD2:

“አዎን! በኮሌጁ ቆይታችን የምንማራቸውን የትምህርት ዓይነቶችን በተግባር እንድናይ ያግዛናል። ስራውን በትክክል ከተወጣነው ህጻናትን እንዴት መቻዝ፣ መንከባከብና ማሳደግ እንዳለብን በማግኘት እንዲነሳ ይረዳል። ስለዚህ ፕራክቲኬም የዋናው ስራችን ነጻ ብራቅ በመሆኑ ጠቀሜታው ባለ አይደለም።”

SD2 supports the assumption that practicum work is a very important tool to practice the early childhood care and education profession. It helps trainees to practice what they learned theoretically. The activity by itself when accomplished properly enhances the understanding of how to care and provide support for young children. Therefore, participants agreed that practicum is a mirror for their future profession.

SD6:

“በተጨማሪ ጥሩ መምህራን ከጋጠሙ በፕራክቲኬም ጊዜ የምንሰራቸው ስራዎች ተመርቀን ወጥተን ምን እንደምንሰራና እንደምናደርግ መሳመር ያሳየናል። ከሁሉ በላይ ግን የቅድመ-መደብ ችግሮች አደረጃጀት፣ አመራርና አሰራር

በገቢው መልኩ እንደንረዳ ያግዘናል፡፡”

Another participant (SD6) added that trainees get a lot of experiences if they are assigned to a good tutor with the early childhood care and education background. What they perform during each practicum work enhances their awareness about how to provide culturally, socially and age appropriate early childhood care and support after graduation. What trainees do during their actual school work is boldly practiced during the practicum. So, the participants voice confirms that the best experience in practicum activities enhance trainees understanding of the preschool learning environment, approaches to child learning, preschool management and coordination.

3.3.7. Relevance of the ECCE Practicum

The focus group discussion held with early childhood care and education teacher educators confirms that teaching practicum in preschool education is very important. However, practicum materials including modules lack professional arrangement. What makes this true is starting from the first-round practicum, activities suggested in all modules are related with the primary schools setting. Other materials are also not related with the working environment of the preschools.

One of the discussants (TD5) told that;

“እህቴ ያነሳችውን ነገር እጋራላሁኝ፡፡ ነገር ግን ከፕራክቲኬም ሞጁሎች ጋር ተያይዞ ይሰጠውን ችግር ለመቅረፍ የትምህርት ክፍሉ በአሬንቴሽን ጊዜ ልዩ ትኩረት ሰጥተው ምን እንደምሰራ ለሰልጣኞች ማብራሪያ ይሰጣል፡፡ አንዳንድ ወደ ፕሮግራሙ ማስማማት የምረጥ ማጠይቆችንና ፎርማትን ቀይሮ በባለሙያ ማስማማትና የማሻሻል ስራ ይሰራል፡፡ ተማሪዎቻችን ግር የምላቸው ነገር ካለ እስከ ትምህርት ቤቱ ድረስ መወያየት እንደሚቻል ይነገራቸዋል፡፡ በዚያው ማሰራት ጥያቄዎቻቸው እየተሰተናገደ ስራው ይሰራል፡፡”

The discussion above reveals that the idea of practicum material irrelevance is commonly understood among the teacher discussants. Accepting the reality, discussant 5 argues there is a room to modify and adapt the practicum materials in the context of the preschool program. Formats and other questionnaires are adapted to the program nature and trainees are introduced with the new format during the pre-orientation session.

Participant 2 (PO) during the interview session confirmed that practicum materials differ in only modalities not in program. He added, the Adult Education Community Development and Preschool Education departments always question the nature of their practicum is quite different from the other practicums. Based on the request from their side, the college makes certain amendments on the modules and other related materials. This is done before the beginning the actual practicum session. Then, departments are informed to assign teacher educators who could contextualize the material very clearly. And finally, the adapted materials are requested to be submitted to the practicum coordination office for further process. Finally, after duplication, the material will be disseminated to the trainees with the help of adequate orientation.

3.3.8. Challenges of the ECCE Practicum Implementation

Both teacher educators and ECCE prospective teachers were asked to discuss about the challenges that they face during the practicum program. They responded:

SD7:

“እኔ እንደ ትልቅ ችግር የማይውለው ስራው የምሰጠው ጊዜ አጭር መሆኑ ነው፡፡ ከዚህ የተነሳ አንዳንድ ጊዜ ማድፈተና እየተፈጠንን ጭምር ለማስራት እንገደዳለን፡፡ ለአብነት ባለፈው በኮሎና ወቅት ፈተና ላይ ሆነን ፕራክቲኬም ወጥተናል፡፡”

SD7 on talking about the challenges of practicum implementation stressed that the time limit given for each practicum activity seems short. Participants discussed that sometimes they are forced to carry out practicum works overlapping the mid-semester examination. Specially during the Corona Virus Pandemic, trainees were asked to go to field besides to the mid-term examination. Not only that, they were assigned to the two consecutive practicum works simultaneously. This trend is being extended to the normal practice in Hawassa College of Teacher Education.

SD1:

“እኔ ማጠቃለያ የምረጠው የፕራክቲኬም ሞጁሎች በሙሉ በእንግሊዝኛ የተሰናዱ በመሆናቸው ሀሳቡን በቀላሉ ተረድተን ተገቢውን ምላሽ ለመስጠት እንችላለን። ት/ቤት ወጥተን የምንሰራው በአፍ-ሙፍቻ ቋንቋ ሆነው ስለረገጡት ስናቀርብ ግን በእንግሊዝኛ ብቻ እንድናቀርብ እንገደዳለን። ”

Another student D1 strongly claimed that all early childhood care and education training and practicum modules are prepared in English and they are not easily understandable. Checklists, instructions and ideas are stated in the language that is not the medium of instruction at preschool level. Almost all practicum activities are to be conducted in the local setting. Trainees talk to young children, communicate with the respective mentors and other staff members in the local language. But the working language during all practicums is strange to the local environment. For this matter; early childhood care and education prospective teachers are required to fill their portfolio, write reports and present it in English.

SD2:

“ሌላ ይኛውና ቀዳሚው ችግር ሞጁሎች በቅድመ-መደበኛ ትምህርት ፍልስፍናና ቅኝት የተሰሩ አለመሆናቸው ነው። የእኛ ፕራክቲኬም ከሌሎች ሰልጣኞች ፕራክቲኬም የተለየ አይደለም። ሞጁሎች ላይ ያሉ ማጠቃለያዎች የአንደኛ ደረጃ ትምህርት ቤት ገጽታና አደረጃጀት የምንጸባርቁናቸው። አንዳንድ ጊዜ በስልጠና ውስጥ የምንገረንና ሄደን የምንገኘውን ጽታ ይለያይብናል። ለምሳሌ የዕቅድ ፎርማት የአንደኛ ደረጃ መምህራን የምጠቀሙት ነው። ”

Student-discussant uncover that practicum modules supposed to be used by early childhood care and education trainees are not developed and organized in a philosophy of the preschool program. Even questionnaires and checklists in the module are directly taken from the primary school practicum. Sometimes what the department tells the trainees found totally different from the activity listed in the module. Lesson plan formats and other layouts of the material are not quite relevant to the preschool practicum.

SD8:

“አንዳንድ ጊዜ ይዘውን የምወጡ መምህራን በቅድመ-መደበኛ ትምህርት መያያዣ ስልጠና ይሆኑና ይዘውን ስወጡ ይቀልዱብናል። በጭቃ ነው የምናስተምርው ስንላቸው እንደ ሌሎች መምህራን ማስተማር አለባቸው ይሉናል። ሌላው ፍቅር ወረዳ የምመደቡ ሰልጣኞችን ከወረዳው የምመደቡ ባለሙያዎች ያለበቁ መያዣ እውቀትና ክህሎት ስለምንማኝባቸው ይቻላል። በመጨረሻም የትምህርትን የትራንስፎርሜሽን የምንሰራውን ስራ ስንገኝ በመሆኑ ችግር ውስጥ ሆነን ነው ስራውን የምናከናውን ውጤት። ”

As told by the student-discussant 8, the College assigns some teacher educators with little awareness about the early childhood care and education. And therefore, they make little effort to support the trainees work. The worst problem is that during the independent teaching (the last practicum activity), officers from woreda education office are assigned replacing the college tutors. They do not challenge trainees work because some of them may be from Chemistry, Biology, Physics, Educational Planning and Leadership as well as Geography background. Lastly, prospective teachers informed that scarcity of the transportation cost that their College provides specially during the last semester is another challenge of the practicum implementation.

This question was forwarded to teacher educators during the focus group discussion conducted with them. TD1 debated prospective teachers view practicum as a simple requirement for graduation not the activity that support teacher training. The discussant thought this is because of the large score they get from their school mentors. Always almost all trainees get pass mark on the practicum. Due to this reason, trainees think practicum work is not more than going to school and coming back to the college.

The other challenge TD3 mentioned was the problem related to transportation access. As stated by the discussant, sometimes placement may be in a very rural areas and if the season is rainy, they face difficulty to get back easily. Inability to use motor bicycle as an alternative vehicle forces them to go long distance on foot.

TD5 on the other hand witnessed that trainees lack of preparation and readiness to conduct practicum is another important challenge. Based on the discussant's argument, prospective teachers do not fill the portfolio by themselves. They make others work on it and come up with no understanding. They could not be able to speak

even a single sentence from the written document. Most of the teacher educators feel the language of instruction is not easily understandable for the trainees to state their idea clearly. Teacher educators added that the number of trainees assigned for each tutor is about 15-25. This is a very large group that may not be manageable during the time of assessment.

The same question was forwarded for the vice academic dean and the practicum officer during independent interview. Participant 1 argued that practicum program in general has no such problem. But, in the last three years the college faced the program interruption due to the Corona Virus Pandemic. In addition to this he told that sometimes trainees claim the medium of instruction to be local. However, this is not the responsibility of the college. Another critical challenge discussed by participant 2 is the time constraint. In each semester, trainees are expected to take about 17-23 credit hour courses. On the other side, some practicum courses need up to 45 days. So, this may not be compatible with the methodology courses given in the same semester side by side.

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Findings

Data collected from teacher educators, prospective teachers, practicum officer and vice academic dean reveal that the sequence of the practicum activities is logically organized. Trainees start their first work practice from the observation of school's external characteristics, then proceed to the next practicum called critical classroom observation. Because of the bridging courses given for the first two semesters, the first practicum begins in second year of the study. There is a pre-orientation for the prospective teachers during every practicum. The program gives less focus on the post-orientation in all practicums. Preschool prospective teachers are forced to use practicum materials developed for the specialist modality such Special Needs Education, Adult Education and Community Development, Mother tongue and others. The content and arrangement of the modules or portfolios is totally similar with that of the primary school prospective teachers.

All participants confirmed that tutors and school mentors support the practicum work very well. However, they do not collaborate with each other to help trainees achieve in it. The problem with this is tutors from other departments who are assigned to supervise the practicum lack professional knowledge and skill. Teacher educators and trainees similarly discussed that some trainees are assessed by woreda education officers due to the challenges that placement sites have. Because of the lack of commitment among teacher educators, some of the trainees are asked to practice their work from where the tutors are available.

This research explores the challenges of practicum assignment such as teacher educators' attitude towards the program, thought it as an incentive not the responsibility of each teacher educator and the simple requirement everyone can pass it. Most of the teacher educators believe practicum is a very important aspect of the teaching profession. Assignment of untrained teacher educators for the practicum implies that there is a tendency to apply multidisciplinary nature of the preschool education wrongly. In addition to the statement above, preschool education practicum is not providing services in the language that young children use. Both teacher educators and trainees blame sometimes transportation also affects the practicum application.

Early childhood care and education practicum is directly affected by the lack of transportation if trainees are assigned to the remote areas. Sometimes moving from place to place using motor bicycle may not be easy and possible. Moreover, this study shows that trainees lack of interest is an additional challenge in practicum implementation. They never complete the assignment by themselves. Data from the participants confirms that most of the portfolios they present to their tutor are not self-completed.

Trainees are not fully aware about the importance and impact of student-teaching on their future profession. Responses from the participants reveal that early childhood care and education prospective teachers have no idea about the significance of what they do during each practicum session. They perceive practicum is a simple and minimum requirement for the completion of the program and then graduation. Another challenge told by the research participants is the number of trainees assigned for each tutor.

The last but not the least challenge is the time allotment for each practicum work. The study found that though the time given for all practicum is reasonable and justifiable to the extent to which activities last for each practicum, colleges are not applying it as suggested in the module. For some practicum works, enough time is given with the justification however the college itself limits to the maximum dates it could cover the cost. Some practicums are overlapped with the course works assigned to that semester. This means sometimes mid-term examination and practicum course may be given together intentionally.

4.2. Conclusion

One of the conclusions drawn from the findings extracted from the data analyzed is preschool practicum has no problem with the sequential arrangement as it presents all the activities logically from simple to complex. This helps trainees understand their actual profession through the practice they take place. The other one is, preschool practicum implementation gives less attention to the clear and supportive pre-and post-orientation that leads trainees towards the successful involvement and achievement. The module of each practicum course is not

professionally developed. It borrows both contents and adjustments directly from the primary schools. This shows an early childhood care and education professionals were not consulted in the process of the course material design and development.

There is a poor assessment technique used to evaluate trainee's performance in the practicum work. The reason for such practice may be the number of trainees assigned for each tutor. No trainee gets the score below average because almost half of the score is collected from their respective mentors. As some of the teacher educators push trainees to work on the practicum from where they are not placed, this reflects they are not charging the professional responsibility. In addition to this, the language of instruction and the practicum working language are not similar. Thus, working in the local language and reporting the progress in the other language made the program assessment very poor and ineffective.

The way practicum program is focused among the college community members made the prospective teachers inactive and less effective. The minimum grade given for all practicum courses is above C. Most of the trainees think they could get that score even if they are not able to do what is expected from them. It is common for all trainees to go to the practicum sites and get back to their college after a campaign like activity. This reflects the supervision made for each practicum is not supportive enough, well-organized and effective.

When documents are critically analyzed, the time given for each practicum is more or less proportional to the activity presented for them. But, the college limits it to the financial favor it could gain. Prospective teachers' poor interest on practicum activities is a result of the orientation they get and the way they are assessed. Problem of transportation is associated with the poor leadership and coordination of the program managers. Due to such reasons, quality of the activities assumed to be performed during all practicum sessions is compromised.

4.3. Recommendation

To make the early childhood care and education practicum program more effective and successful, researchers suggest the following major actions and implications. These are:

- The logical arrangement of the practicum courses is one opportunity to support trainees succeed in it. This implies that not only Hawassa College of Teacher Education but also other colleges of teacher education should give much attention on the activities that trainees perform during each practicum.
- Assignment of tutors and mentors for all practicum courses requires professional knowledge and skill considerations. Teacher educators with a relevant professional knowledge, skill and attitude promotes the right understanding among trainees.
- Early childhood care and education practicum must be differently prepared. Materials like portfolio, checklists and guidelines need certain kind of revision and amendment so as to incorporate program relevant activities and objectives. Therefore, Ministry of Education during material design and development should consult individuals with the relevant professional background.
- Colleges of teacher education should be programmed to provide a clear and constructive pre-and post-orientation program for each practicum. This helps trainees get familiar with the activity they are going to perform.
- Equal weight must be given for both the classroom and the practicum courses. This enables the prospective teachers to perform tasks in a way they get additional professional knowledge, skill and attitude.
- The performance assessment mechanisms suggested for each practicum should be aligned with the relevant guidelines and principles so as to help trainees succeed in their work. This implies that the existing supervision and monitoring approach also still needs modification. Trainee assignment for the tutors should not compromise the work quality.
- There must be a clear and regulatory rule that guides and forces all colleges of teacher education to use the maximum time interval suggested for each practicum.
- Lastly, all colleges of teacher education should establish model preschool centers that supports the practicum implementation providing practice-based teaching experiences. This may help them to minimize challenges related to the budget and transportation services needed for all practicum courses.

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