

# The correlates of mental health and preschool education school system at Amhara regional state, Ethiopia: curriculum, teaching style and children's engagement

\*<sup>1</sup>Meseret Getachew Tessema & <sup>2</sup>T.V.Ananda Rao

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of psychology and parapsychology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam (India)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of psychology and parapsychology and head of department, psychology and parapsychology, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam (India)

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## ARTICLE DETAILS

### Article History

Published Online: 10 February 2019

### Keywords

mental health, preschool education system, curriculum

### Corresponding Author

Email: meseretget73[at]yahoo.com

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## ABSTRACT

The curriculum should provide a variety of activities to encourage behaviors appropriate to children's age, background, stage of development and individual need so that children will learn and enjoy going to school. Otherwise, children could develop psycho education problems which further changed into mental health problems like anxiety, depression and mood disorder. The objective of the present study was to investigate the relationship between mental health issues related to psycho education issues and preschool education system in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the appropriateness of preschool education system in terms of culture, context and method of teaching were investigated. To achieve type objectives, qualitative design was employed for a sample of 12 preschool education centers, text books and their syllabus were investigated. The findings of the study indicated that the preschool education system has no a guide line that indicated the learning tasks and activities to be accomplished with in the centers .furthermore, there was no uniformity among all preschool centers. The teaching –learning was found to be teacher dominated and the schedule was overloaded by subjects to be taught with in the classroom like secondary school system which seem to fail to consider the developmental characteristics of children with in preschool education system. The contents to be taught and the method of teaching was not found to be age appropriate as per theories of development and education like ecological, constructivism, multiple intelligence and socio-cultural. These could make children suffer from psycho- education related mental health problems like anxiety, boredom, depression, losing interest to go to schools. Recommendations and conclusions were made in relation to the major findings.

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## 1. Background of the Study

Massachusetts Department of Education (2003) defined curriculum as everything staff do with children. A well-balanced curriculum supports the development of all children socially, emotionally, physically, and intellectually. The curriculum should be designed for active involvement by children in the learning process, recognizing that young children learn through play, active manipulation of the environment, concrete experiences, and communicating with peers and adults. The curriculum should provide a variety of activities and materials to encourage behaviors appropriate to each child's age, background, stage of development and individual needs. To do this, the curriculum of early childhood education system needs to be appropriate in terms of culture (values, norms morals and expectations of society, context availability of resources such as teachers, text books, child to teacher ratio and development (physical, cognitive, psychosocial). This is mostly practiced when there are inclusive curriculum and teachers with variety of teaching style that can make children actively engaged inside and outside classroom activities.

Developmentally, contextually and culturally appropriate curriculum allow children to participate at their own level, allow for flexibility, with no right or wrong outcome, encourage active learning through participation, encourage exploration and thinking, allow for socialization and interaction with others, enable children to learn through their senses, allow children to

experience things hands-on, give children choices, foster children's positive feelings about themselves, respect individual differences and cultural diversity. (Bredenkamp and Coppel, 1997; Sylva, 2005). In order to fulfill the principles of preschool education curriculum, teachers teaching style and children engagement is hugely important.

If children are not provided with appropriate curriculum in school systems, there is enough justification that children in preschool system will have the potential to suffer from common mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and mood disorder. Following this, it can **make everyday activities difficult, resulting in social isolation, sleep problems, changes in appetite and poor concentration.** Hence, having warm, responsive and predictable relationships with teachers /his or her teaching style, children's engagement/ is particularly important for a child's mental health in the early childhood period. **Therefore, the curriculum, teachers teaching style and children's engagement in and outside classrooms can be potential risk factors during early childhood period.**

Mental health difficulties are caused by multiple factors that interact in different ways depending on the individual child, their family and the environment around them. The earlier in life mental health difficulties are addressed, the better chance a child has of improving their long-term mental health and wellbeing.

In the early childhood period, having warm, responsive and predictable relationships with families at home and teachers in early childhood education is a particularly important protective factor for a child's mental health. Making some careful observations of a child can help families and teachers to work together on deciding the best way to support them.

Although mental disorders are common among children all over the world, information on the extent and types of child mental health difficulties in Ethiopia is extremely limited. (Menelik, 2008).

The present researcher could not find any research done regarding the relationship between mental health and preschool education system (curriculum, teaching style and children's engagement) to be cited in Ethiopian context. As the result, one can hardly illustrate clear pattern of the relationship between mental health and preschool education system, particularly curriculum, teaching style and children's engagement. Therefore, it is the firm belief of the researcher that few studies were made on the prevalence rather than possible factors especially, psycho-education factors that can affect mental health of children. In addition, the researcher observed that no attention was given for the contribution of school environment to mental health in preschool education center such as curriculum, teaching style, children's engagement. This personal observation greatly consolidated the fact that some preschool children cry and complain when they go schools in the morning.

Therefore, the researcher thought that studying the relationship between mental health and preschool education system is logical.

## 2. Objectives of the study

- To investigate the relationship between mental health (anxiety, depression, mood disorder) and preschool education system (curriculum, teaching style and children's engagement).
- To assess the appropriateness of preschool education system in terms of culture, context and child development at Amhara regional state, Ethiopia.

## 3. Method of the study

The design, sampling techniques, instruments and method of data analysis were described on the method of the study part.

## 4. Design of the Study

In order to arrive at the stated objectives, qualitative research design was employed.

### *Sampling techniques*

Two preschool education centers were selected from six zone of Amhara regional state, Ethiopia. Finally, a total of 12 preschool education centers having KG3/the grade before joining formal education/ level were selected randomly. The corresponding 12 preschool teachers were interviewed.

### *Instruments*

In gathering data for the present study, curriculum materials such as syllabus, students' text book and teachers'

text book were investigated. In addition observation was made to assess teachers teaching style and children's engagement in and outside classroom. Finally, interviews were conducted with teachers about the appropriateness of curriculum, teachers and students' activity and method of teaching.

### *Methods of Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed qualitatively through narrations, descriptions and discourse. In general, the analysis of this study has two pillars, the preschool curriculum materials and their design and implementation on one hand and early childhood theoretical frameworks on the other hand. Thus, analysis and discussion was made on, curriculum design, teaching style and children's engagement. Finally inferences and implications were made on the contribution of school system to mental health difficulties (anxiety, depression, mood disorder).

## 5. Result and discussion

### **Analysis of the Existing Subjects and Contents in the Preschool Curriculum**

The data obtained from document analysis, observation and interview revealed that almost all preschool education centers did not have syllabus to be abided by. Different preschools formulated different objectives/learning outcomes/ based on the interest of schools, school owners and interest of parents. These objectives did not consider children's developmental needs and different sources of knowledge (subjects) which lack holistic and integrated approach.

The finding showed that objectives and learning outcomes were treated separately as different subjects like, environmental science, mathematics, language, aesthetics and physical education. In addition, students' and teachers' activities were not specifically and practically written in the teacher's guide. This in turn, made difficult for teachers to make their students achieve the desired behavioral changes.

The researchers tried to go through and evaluate the curriculum materials (teacher's guide, annual and lesson plans, instructional media and media utilization, children's text) that are used by preschool center. Different subjects were presented separately in a departmentalized way in contrary to the principle of holistic approach. It is well accounted that child development is from general to specific. This means, children can understand things, objects and concepts holistically, not in a fragmented and separated way. Thus, it is possible to report that the organization of preschool subjects and contents is in contrary to child development theories and principles. The whole part of the guide was presented in a fragmented way unlike the principle of child development. In addition to this, subjects and specific contents were not presented from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract.

Moreover, there was lack of uniformity in the subjects and content presentation of pre-school education. The researchers further analyzed content arrangement, teaching learning procedures and instructional media utilization. The collected data revealed that there was improper and irrelevant organization of contents, procedures and media in the teacher's guide. This will affect how a child learns, remember

and react to contents and issues in the teaching learning process. Therefore, the potential to develop common mental health problems of children like anxiety and disruptive behavior is high. (Suglia et al 2012; Shonkoff et al 2013; Johnson et al 2013, cited in Margaret Gleason).

### **Content, Contextual and Developmental Appropriateness of Preschool Curriculum**

In this part of the study, the present researchers were able to analyze how preschool education delivery may go in line with content, contextual and developmental appropriateness. Here, we analyzed how text books in general and contents in particular were organized and written by taking into consider children's contextual and developmental stages and tasks. One of the issues that the researchers raised was that; were activities/teaching style of the teacher written in the text book appropriate to children's development/cognitive, physical, psychosocial/.

The data collected from document analysis, observation and interview showed that the objectives/learning outcomes/, teaching learning procedures, activities and stated media lack clarity. In turn, this affected teachers planning and plan implementation. When we look through the teaching learning procedure, it seemed like formal education and it was fully teacher dominated teaching style. Children were passive listeners and all in all the teacher was the source of knowledge. Children did not have the right to move here and there in the class, they were expected to do lots of class works and home works. Even the assessment was formal and paper pencil test. All these activities are not in line with children's physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial development processes.

Scholars like Bickart Etal (2004) indicated that, there are seven broad principles reflecting developmentally appropriate practices of contents and contexts emerged from the theoretical perspectives and experiences. These are: Holistic Learning and development, active learning, interactive learning, integrated learning, learning through play, partnership/relationship for learning, and authentic assessment. Taking into consider these principles, preschool education system was found to be in a low quality of teaching learning process. Most of the time, teacher - child interaction is teacher dominated and not interactive. In addition, most of the preschools especially, government owned, were poorly furnished, improper classroom condition and imbalance teacher child ratio (1:40, in private preschools and more than 1:50, in government preschools). To this point, Heller et al(2012,cited in Margaret Gleason ) found that teacher-child interactions showed significant improvement in emotional support and classroom organization . Zeanah & Zeanah(2001) indicated that early childhood mental health is highly related to the optimal social and emotional development within the context of secure and stable relationships with caregivers and teachers

Most of the preschool centers were devoid of various activities and sources of knowledge and wisdom that could make children actively thinking, investigating, experimenting and discussing. The dominant source of knowledge was the

teacher and interaction was unidirectional. The learning environment was not interactive and the teacher's guide and text books did not invite interactive teaching learning process. As the researchers found out through document analysis the guide was full of factual information as information flow from one source to children. In general, the teaching learning approach was still traditional and teacher centered. However scholars like Diamond A etal (2007) indicated that making children actively engaged in preschool education system is best way to enjoy learning. This in turn decreases mental health difficulties of children like anxiety, depression and mood disorder.

Boyden and Dercon (2012), Davies(2004) and Eva(2007) stated that early childhood care and education must reflect all domains of development, which are interrelated by including the physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional and moral. Provision of preschool education must be made for children's holistic development of knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes.

Most Preschool education centers did not have enough and various playing materials. Even students were not allowed to play during class time rather than break time. The curriculum materials like the teachers guide and texts did not have sufficient examples of child play. There were no folktales and riddles in the guide and text books. So that children could not be able to play properly. The teaching learning process was dominated by counting numbers and alphabets rather than play.

On the other hand, formal techniques of assessment like, class work, home work, and written tests were emphasized which have less relevant for preschool education assessment. Moreover, assessment results were used for only decision purpose by the teacher and even to rank students. Authentic assessment was not implemented in preschool education systems with its basic principles. Thus, preschool education system was not in line with the required principle of children's assessment.

### **Appropriateness of Subjects and Contents in line with the Contemporary Early Childhood Development Theories**

A variety of theories and child development principles, current research and contemporary curriculum approaches are developed and considered as a basis for preschool education. These perspectives and principles will assist teachers in decision-making about curriculum planning, including assessment and teaching strategies, which in turn inform young children's learning and development. These theories, research and contemporary curriculum approaches consider the child as a learner, the various roles of the teacher and the pedagogical practices that make up the curriculum landscape (Eva, 2007)

Among the different theories of child development and children's learning, the major ones are discussed below in relation with the present research findings.

Cognitive development theory indicated that children as constructors of knowledge; assimilate experiences and then

accommodate them within their current understandings. In doing so, children adjust and use new information continually to make sense of experience and perceptions. Constructivism theory, which is the extension of cognitive development theory, describes learning as active and constructive (Boyden and Dercon, 2012).

Both cognitive and constructivist theories emphasized that children learn best by doing and through play. When we analyzed the curriculum of preschool education systems in line with the cognitive and constructivist view, teacher's guide, students' text, lesson plans, and teaching style is not aligned with assumptions of those theories. The teaching learning process was not in a position to facilitate cognitive development since the approach was teacher dominated. This can be a factor that makes students develop negative attitude towards schools. This ultimately lead them develop anxiety, stress and depression in their school life. To this point It is becoming increasingly clear that children whose emotional and behavioral needs are being met are more able to concentrate and apply themselves to learning. (Department of education and skill, 2001)

Socio-constructivism theory developed by Lev Vygotsky considers children are actively engaged in social and cultural experiences and play leads development. There is skill and knowledge gaps that more knowledgeable person such as teachers and families can fill/help children to develop the area between actual and potential learning. Language is important in this theory. The attainment of objectives of preschool education is highly affected by interaction between children and more experienced others. However, the curriculum was not context specific and culture oriented. Most of the issues incorporated in teacher's guide and text books were foreign oriented, especially in private preschools. Thus, it can be concluded that preschool education curriculum and curriculum materials did not address ways and topics for accommodating and assimilating socio cultural issues.

Humanistic theory emphasis on children's physical needs that must be met first and children must feel psychologically safe and secure. On the other hand, Ecological theory considers that children living and learning in multiple social and cultural contexts influence their learning and development and learning as reciprocal (Davies, 2006). The present researchers found that most family and schools did not in a position to fulfill the needs of children as described and stated by various developmental theories. So that, children are suffering from lack of basic needs, security, love and belongingness in schools. Most of the teachers were autocrat who inhibits

children's rights of movement, interaction and physiological processes. As children have not sense of stability and security in their classroom, they gradually develop depression, anxiety, and stress. This is observed in their decline of interest and losing motivation to go to schools.

Multiple intelligences theory assumes human cognitive competence as a set of abilities, talents, or mental skills, which we call intelligences. Individuals differ in the degree or skill and the nature of their combination. Finally, Post-modernist theory emphasis on understanding children as capable learners is having a role and a voice in the decision making process, with diverse understandings, capabilities and dispositions. Understanding the contextualized and dynamic nature of practice is important in preschool education and it underlined understanding of the dangers of universalized practice. It recognizes many paths to learning (Beredekamp and Cople, 1997 and Sylva, 2005).

Children need to be supported socially, culturally and emotionally as they engage in learning environments. Generally, diversity is valued in this theory. Unlike the principle of this theory children in the studied schools are not encouraged to show their various potentials and abilities. Both teachers and parents see children's potentials and abilities narrowly, they devoid of diversity. Almost all preschools putt all eggs in one basket, by denying various eggs and various baskets. For instance, in most schools children are encouraged to be doctors, pilots, engineers, and other widely accepted professions regardless of various potentials, abilities, and intelligences and professions to be chosen.

## 6. Conclusion

The curriculum, teaching style and children's engagement in preschool education system negatively affect mental health, specifically anxiety, depression mood disorder and stress in Amhara regional state, Ethiopia. This is because preschool education system is lacking holistic approach, interactive and active teaching learning methodology, authentic assessments, and most importantly lacks play as mode of teaching and learning.

## 7. Recommendation

Preschool education systems have to create developmentally appropriate environments which has enough play grounds, toilets. Teachers and caregivers in the preschool education system have to be trained in a way that foster social-emotional growth of children. This may goes to training colleges of preschool teachers.

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