

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rethinking Daycare in Amhara Region of Ethiopia: Bridging the Gap between Needs and Practices

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Abstract

The main aim of this research was to explore daycare practices, beliefs and challenges in two Amhara metropolitan cities. The study informed with qualitative approach in which data were gathered using interview and observation from caregivers, parents, daycare owners and government officials. Analysis revealed a common misconception: daycares were often referred to as “yehitsanat makoya” (children’s stay centers), despite variations in the understanding of the name. Additionally, the primary purpose of daycare centers (services for age six months to three years children), according to most participants, was to free up mothers’ time for work. It was found out that the primary focus of caregivers is on children’s personal care routines; age-appropriate daily schedules were not integrated and repetitive activities dominated. Parents’ responsibilities were limited to fulfilling material requirements such as providing food, clothing supplies and monthly fees. Respondents emphasized infrastructure as a key daycare element. Besides, lack of awareness, limited capacity building, and insufficient supervision and support from concerned bodies are major challenges for delivering quality daycare services. Based on the findings, it is recommended that relevant authorities should make close consultation with the daycare centers and create platforms to improve daycare service delivery in the cities.

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Background

The early childhood period, from birth to eight years old, is a time of remarkable development. This period, particularly the first three years encompassing infancy and toddlerhood, is characterised by rapid growth in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial domains (Baker-Henningham & Lopez Boo, 2010). These early experiences lay the foundation for lifelong development and makes it a critical period to invest ample resources (G20 Development Working Group, 2018). Empirical evidences also revealed that early investment in children produces 7–10 times greater returns as compared to later interventions (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003; Heckman & Masterov, 2007). It is not only more effective but also less costly than attempting to remediate developmental deficits later in life (Baker-Henningham & Lopez Boo, 2010).

Childcare services increase children's cognitive and socio-emotional skills, mothers' participation in the labour market and productivity, siblings' attendance in school, and household income and welfare. These benefits are even more worthwhile for the most vulnerable families. Recognising the significance of early childhood experiences, Ethiopia has ratified the Child Rights Convention and committed to providing quality early childhood care and education (ECCE). This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.2, which aims to ensure all girls and boys have access to quality ECCE by 2030 (UN, 2015).

Ethiopia's national ECCE framework emphasises the importance of health and early stimulation for children under three, recognising it as a crucial pillar of ECCE delivery (MoE, MoH, and MoWA, 2010a). The vision of this framework which is “to ensure all children the right to a healthy start in life, to be nurtured in a safe, caring, and stimulating environment, and to develop to their fullest potential” resonates with the concerns of this study.

Due to factors like the increasing participation of women in the workforce and the shortage of home care options, the demand for daycare services (for children from six months to three years) is rising, particularly in urban areas of the Amhara region of Ethiopia. In response to this demand, private daycare centres are increasingly being established and offer care services to infants and toddlers. However, there are concerns regarding the conceptions of daycare services. The Amharic term “Ye Hitsanat Makoya” (literary mean ‘children's stay centres’) may reflect a conceptualization problem with the nomenclature. This raises questions about whether these environments truly nurture and support children's development.

Inadequate information is documented in the literature to understand the situations of centre-based child daycare services (Chan, 2019; Megalonidou, 2020; Slot, 2018).

While a few studies have been conducted in Addis Ababa, they lack the scope and depth needed for a comprehensive understanding (Addis, 2014; Belay and Hawaz, 2015). Thus, there is a serious paucity of evidence related to beliefs, practices, and challenges about daycare services in Ethiopia, particularly in the Amhara region. Furthermore, the role and contribution of daycare services are not well investigated in sub-Saharan countries like Ethiopia. Hence, the study aims to explore the practices, beliefs, and challenges of daycare services in metropolitan cities in the Amhara region of Ethiopia.

Research Questions

1. How do caregivers, owners, parents, and focal persons understand the purpose of children's daycare centres?
2. What is the view of caregivers, owners, parents, and focal persons towards their roles and responsibilities in children's daycare centres?
3. What are the challenges impeding the delivery of children's daycare services?

Methods

Research Approach and Design

This research used a qualitative research approach. This approach is believed to be appropriate for exploring the quality and conceptualization of child daycare centres since it has diversified variables requiring qualitative data. The basic research questions in the present research also allow and dictate that the researchers use a qualitative approach to better understand the issues of the study. Specifically, the research deals with the exploration of beliefs, conceptualization, and challenges of child daycare services. Therefore, the research implemented an exploratory research design.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

In Amhara region there are limited services for children, especially for, infants and toddlers (aged from six months to three services). Due to the absence of officially registered daycare centers in Amhara region, particularly the private ones, it is very difficult to get the accurate data about the total number of daycare centers, caregivers, children and parents in the study sites. Though there are no officially and clearly authorized numbers of daycare centers retrieved from the region, their total number in two cities is roughly estimated to be 28 (Gondar = 9 and Bahir Dar = 19) accommodating around 460 children (an average of 20 children in each daycare center), and 98 caregivers.

Daycare centres, owners, caregivers, parents, and focal persons working on children at city administration and regional offices of Women, Children, and Social Affairs were the

target population of the study. For the study eighteen private child daycare centres were comprehensively selected in two metropolitan cities (Gondar and Bahir Dar). Participants of the study were selected using purposive and comprehensive sampling techniques. In the interview, nine owners, three focal persons, nine caregivers, and nine parents, totally thirty one samples participated and each interviewee conducted an interview for one hour on average. An observation was made on eleven daycare centres for four hours in each centre.

Data Collection Tools

To address the stated research questions, semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis were employed.

Interview: interview items were developed by the research team after a thorough review of the literature. It was designed to generate data from caregivers, daycare owners, parents, and focal persons about issues related to their views on the purpose of daycare centers, their roles and responsibilities, caregivers' daily routines, regulatory mechanisms, and the challenges of daycare centres. In order to be flexible and accommodate the views of the participants related to the areas of concern, a semi-structured interview protocol was used with face-to-face interaction. A couple of approaches were used to interview participants: an in-depth interview and a key informant interview. An in-depth interview was conducted with carers and owners at the daycare centres. Parents were called to come to the centres for interviews. Besides, key informant interviews were organised with responsible government officials.

Observation: A pool of items was developed to guide the site observation of the daycare centres, besides making video recordings to generate information that is used to support the data obtained from the interview. It was prepared by the team for this research in consultation with the literature and the research questions under consideration. This tool was responsible for gathering data about the challenges facing daycare centres, such as infrastructure, play materials, safety and security, and daily routines.

To secure the validity and reliability of the instruments, items passed through proper inspection. Content and language adherence to the local context were thoroughly examined, and proper corrections were made.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the data collection process, the data were properly coded, transcribed, and translated. This was followed by securing the quality of the data through careful checking and cleaning of inconsistencies and gaps. Then, before the detailed data analysis process, important preliminary analysis was employed to assure whether the data met the basic assumptions. Data was repeatedly listened to, read, and edited, and finally, data gathered through interviews and observations were analysed thematically

and, of course, using narrations.

Results

Conceptualization of Daycare Services

One of the main intentions of this research was to explore the conceptualization of daycare services. To achieve this purpose, document analysis and interviews were used to generate data from owners (private), caregivers, parents, and government focal persons.

Daycare Nomenclature

Study participants were requested to report their beliefs about the Amharic name or nomenclature for daycare centers as 'yehitsanat makoya', which means 'children stay center.' This name is consistently (uniformly) given to both government and private daycare centers. The analysis of the data generated from interview participants shows the presence of variations or non-uniformity in understanding the given name of the centers. In connection with this, many of the respondents—daycare owners, caregivers, and parents—commonly agreed about the name 'yehitsanat makoya' and justified its provisional service, disregarding other important care services expected to be available or delivered to children at the centers. One of the caregiver stated her view as: "I think the name given to the daycare 'yehitsanat makoya' is appropriate, since it is a place where carers keep children temporarily until parents take them back home."

On the other hand, some respondents with relatively higher educational levels and experience showed the inappropriateness of the name 'yehitsanat makoya' as it is very shallow to represent all the child care services that should exist at the centers. In this regard, four of the respondents reported their view as:

Though we traditionally call the daycare as 'yehitsanat makoya', it is not appropriate to say so; rather, it is better to name it as 'yehitsanat kibkabe maekel'- children care centre (female, daycare owner, age: 39, education: 1st degree). Generally, it is difficult to internalise the concept of daycare. Some parents understand daycare centres only as a concentration or waiting place where children are kept. The name 'keeping' centre is less expressive (mother, age 35, education: medical doctor).

The name 'yehitsanat makoya' is too shallow and does not illustrate children's need to get close care and follow up at the daycare centres (male, child protection focal person, age 52, education: 1st degree).

I feel that the term doesn't represent the services we have rendered at the center. The services we provide at the centre are beyond 'Makoya'. So, the name should be changed. For instance, children of ages 2 to 3 are in preparation to start preschool, so we make them count letters and

numbers (female, age 25; education: certificate in ECCE; experience: 6 years).

Some of the respondents also equated the name 'yehitsanat makoya' with 'yehitsanat mawaya' or 'mewale hitsanat' that is, the local name given to kindergarten. For this participant, both 'yehitsanat makoya' and 'yehitsanat mawaya' can be used alternatively to represent the daycare centers. Besides, one of the caregiver indicated that she did not want to be called as 'mogzit' since she perceives it as a 'legal home servant.' It was also understood that there are differences in naming the daycare centres in research sites. For instance, daycares in Gondar are named 'Yehitsanat Makoya', whereas in Bahir Dar they are divided into two: 'Yehitsanat Makoya', a centre for abandoning children, and 'Yehitsanat Mawaya', a centre for daytime stay for children without parents.

Purpose of Daycare Centers

In identifying and exploring the main objectives of establishing daycare centers and the intention to accommodate children in these centres, data were taken from document analysis and interviews. The Amhara Region Women, Children, and Social Affairs Bureau (WCSAB) developed a manual or guideline for daycare service delivery in 2017 (2010 E.C.). According to this manual, the main purpose of establishing daycare centres in organisations and institutions is to reduce females' work load and stress, increase their productivity, enhance their capacity, and upgrade their decision-making and management capability. Meanwhile, it helps children get proper care and protection and holistic development. The guiding manual is supposed to guide civil service offices, government development organisations, industries, and similar institutions in establishing daycare centres to decrease the burdens of female workers, increase their productivity, and provide enough care and protection for their children.

The analysis of the guiding document indicated the following major intents. The primary purpose of the bureau for opening daycare is to create a comfortable working environment for mother workers and make them give full attention and capacity at work rather than being concerned with children's safety, protection, and care. It is also aimed at enhancing female workers' participation in developmental activities and increasing their productivity, while creating an enabling environment for children (infants and toddlers) to get proper care. Secondly, the guiding document identifies the beneficiaries of the daycare services as only children's of female workers, ignoring children's of male workers. This poses the question of the inclusivity of all children that require child care services. Finally, the scope of the manual is limited to guide daycare centres already established and/or will be established in civil service offices, government development organisations, industries, and similar institutions. It does not clearly include private and non-government-owned daycare centres.

In the same vein, the interview data from daycare owners, caregivers, parents, and focal persons reported that the primary purpose of daycare centres is to provide an enabling environment for mothers to get enough time to work (minimise the burden on mothers).

One of the daycare owners expressed her view as follows:

I believe that the main purpose of the daycare is to decrease the burden on mothers and give them leisure time.” Similarly, one mother respondent expressed her intention as: “I bring my child to the daycare centre since I have no person or home servant who can care for my child so that I can properly accomplish my work.

On the other hand, the child protection worker (focal person) reflected his view as: “Parents use daycare for work or a break, not because they fully understand its benefits. It’s more about solving childcare needs than exploring daycare’s potential for their child’s development.”

Some respondents also showed that parents send their children to daycare centres to solve their food appetite problems. On the other hand, very few of the parents and caregivers indicated that children come to the daycare to get proper care, learning, and disciplining. A parent interviewee reported her view as: “I send my child to a daycare centre for some purposes, such as to get proper care, learn discipline, and feed properly.”

Activities, Roles and Responsibilities

Participants were interviewed to report the activities children (infants and toddlers) perform in the daycare centres and the caregivers’ roles and responsibilities. In this regard, parents, caregivers, and owners reflected a variety of roles and responsibilities that they expect from daycare centres. Some daycare centres teach children letters and numbers, whereas others never allow doing so. On the other hand, some owners, carers, and parents reported that the activities of children and caregivers’ responsibilities at the daycare centres include performing personal care routines (meals, napping, diapering/toileting, safety practices).

One of the carers expressed her experience as follows: “The child care centre does not have developmentally appropriate services for children; the centre simply feeds them, helps them with toileting and sleeping, and protects them from harm.”

One parent interviewee stated her view as: “I don’t expect any more activities or services if caregivers feed my child on time and keep it until I return from work, and I don’t expect the daycare centre to teach my child discipline, numeracy, and literacy.” Furthermore, a daycare owner interviewee expressed her view as follows: “We do not teach children literacy and numeracy; we teach them how to play with their peers, how to sleep, eat, and be disciplined.”

Interview and observation results indicated that daycare lacks age-specific plans. Kids of all ages (6 months to 3 years) follow the same routine (feeding, sleeping, playing, toileting) despite developmental needs. One care giver confirms her experience as: “There is no schedule for different activities. All kids (4 months to 4 years) do things in one room.”

On the contrary, some respondents indicated that carers teach children literacy, numeracy, and discipline in daycare centres in addition to helping children with eating, napping, and toileting. In explaining the intention of bringing her child to the daycare centre, one of the parents described her view as:

I send my child to the daycare centre to learn letters, numbers, rules, and communication so that she can be prepared to begin kindergarten. But I don't know how much the caregivers are trained or professional to take such responsibility.

In support of this finding, a caregiver stated her experience as: “I teach letters and numbers (Amharic and English) twice a week, plus discipline and social skills.”

The study also investigated how daycare owners, caregivers, parents, and government representatives perceived their roles and responsibilities within the daycare system. Interestingly, interview data revealed a common understanding of these roles across the groups. Parents, in particular, consistently reported their responsibilities to provide for their children's basic needs, including food, clothing (including sleepwear), hygiene supplies (such as tissues, diapers, and wipes), and monthly daycare fees, and to ensure their children arrive and depart from daycare on time.

Supporting this, one of the parent respondents pointed out her view as follows: “I do not have any responsibility except sending my child to the daycare with food and other requirements and bringing them back home on time.”

Similar to this, one of the carers expressed her view as follows:

While some parents seek my guidance on their children's diets, a concerning number don't seem worried about what their children eat. They often disregard our advice about the importance of a balanced diet, dismissing it as a non-essential luxury. This lack of concern is a major challenge we face.

Parents reported positive relationships with daycare caregivers. However, there is a lack of formalised consultations or meetings to discuss children's development in detail. While communication happens informally, parents don't have a structured way to receive updates on their child's progress or discuss areas for improvement.

Supporting this, one parent and respondents, respectively, reflected like:

While I have friendly interactions with the caregivers during drop-off and pick-up, there isn't a formal system for discussing my daughter's progress in detail. I haven't been involved in any daycare committees or

activities, and honestly, I'm unsure what opportunities exist for parent involvement at the center. (Mother, 35, Master's Degree)

Similarly, one of the caregiver interviewees expressed her experience as follows: "Our interactions with parents are limited to drop-off and pick-up times. We lack a more formal relationship to discuss children's individual needs and development" (Female, 27, Bachelor's degrees in Engineering and Accounting).

Daycare Service Challenges

The study explored the key obstacles hindering the delivery of quality daycare services in the study area. Accordingly, participants identified four main challenges: awareness, materials and resources, staff training, and supervision and support.

A common concern raised by daycare owners and caregivers was a lack of understanding or negative attitudes towards daycare centers, identified in some parents and even some caregivers themselves. One of the daycare owners reflected her view as follows:

Limited understanding of daycare services can lead some parents to use daycare as a threat ("don't disturb or else I'll send you to daycare"). This highlights the importance of educating parents about the positive and nurturing environment a daycare can provide. By fostering trust and awareness, parents will feel more comfortable entrusting their children to our care.

The other daycare owner also raised concerns about negative attitudes among some caregivers. Related to this, she expressed her observation as: "I observed that some caregivers may not fully appreciate the importance of their role, viewing it solely as a means to earn money. This lack of passion can be detrimental, especially when society already undervalues the daycare profession."

On the other hand, one caregiver stated her view as:

A lack of understanding creates challenges with some parents. They bring sick children despite knowing their illness or send lunches that aren't well-balanced. When we try to discuss these issues, we sometimes encounter resistance. Unfortunately, this lack of respect extends to some parents and even officials.

Discussion

This research highlights the critical role of shared understanding between parents, caregivers, daycare owners, and government bodies in ensuring the well-being of children in daycare centers. The quality of care and service delivery ultimately depends on everyone involved having a clear and consistent awareness of and attitude towards

daycare's purpose and function. To understand these perceptions, the study explored how participants viewed daycare centers. There was a lack of consensus on the appropriate terminology. Many participants saw daycares as simply places to leave children (baby-sitting centres), while others equated them with kindergarten. This highlights the need for a clearer understanding of the unique role daycare plays in a child's holistic development.

Similar to research conducted in Addis Ababa (Addis, 2014; Belay & Hawaz, 2015), the present study found that many parents and caregivers view daycare centres primarily as places to keep children, rather than environments that nurture development. The name "daycare" itself doesn't guarantee comprehensive care. This reveals a gap between what researchers suggest is best for children and how daycare services are currently perceived by those involved. Unsurprisingly, these differing viewpoints can contribute to incomplete and inadequate services within daycare centres.

Research by Fantahun et al. (2020) emphasises the core purpose of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centres, including daycares: to promote children's holistic development, ensure their well-being, and prepare them for school. However, this study reveals a disconnection between these goals and how daycare is perceived by many participants.

Most participants viewed daycare primarily as a way to lessen the burden on mothers, allowing them more time for work. This aligns with government guidelines, which focus on daycare's social and economic benefits for working mothers, particularly increased productivity. However, these guidelines don't strongly emphasise child safety, protection, care, or overall development. Additionally, the guidelines lack clarity regarding privately run daycares. This mismatch between intended purpose and perceived role suggests potential problems from the very beginning of establishing daycare centres in Ethiopia.

Daycare caregivers play a crucial role in fostering a child's development. As the Virginia Early Childhood Advisory Council (2013) suggests, they create opportunities for learning by incorporating activities that stimulate children's curiosity. They also provide warm and responsive relationships, building a sense of security and trust. Additionally, carers guide children as they explore their environment, encouraging them to learn and interact with the world around them. The present study aligns with previous research by Addisu (2014) and Belay & Hawaz (2015), who emphasised the importance of intensive care and supervision, particularly for infants and toddlers. Daycare workers are responsible for keeping children safe, ensuring their basic needs are met (feeding, hygiene, and sleep), and providing a nurturing environment that fosters healthy development.

This study explored participants' perceptions of parental responsibility in daycare. All groups (parents, caregivers, etc.) agreed that parents are primarily responsible for basic needs like food, clothing, supplies, and pick-up and drop-off. However, there was a gap in understanding regarding collaboration in daycare activities. The study also found a lack of awareness about the importance of parent-caregiver partnerships for a child's holistic development. According to the ECLKC (2006), parents should be active partners in

receiving updates on child development. Similarly, the Family Enrichment Network (2016) emphasises parental involvement in activities like volunteering and meetings. However, the current findings reveal a disconnection between stakeholders. Parents primarily focus on basic needs and informal communication with caregivers, tasks that could be handled by anyone. This suggests a low level of understanding of parental and caregiver roles in daycare, potentially hindering children's overall development.

In a nutshell, daycare centres in the study area face significant roadblocks to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for quality early childhood development. A major challenge is a lack of awareness about daycares among parents, caregivers, and the community. This aligns with Fantahun and Belay (2020), who found gaps in caregiver qualifications and knowledge of best practices. Furthermore, the absence of professional development opportunities for staff limits their ability to provide effective care. These shortcomings make it difficult to attain the SDGs' goals. To improve the situation, collaborative efforts are needed to raise awareness, invest in staff training, and establish clear standards for daycare operations.

Conclusions and Implications

There are misconceptions in child daycare services that are manifested in premature understanding towards the nomenclature and purposes of daycare centers, the roles and responsibilities of agents in child care centers, and the packages that should be included in daycare centers. Caregivers and parents narrowly and shallowly consider the daycare as a center for children stayed and kept than a center of children's stimulation for holistic development. Thus, the purpose of opening daycare centers seems to make parents more beneficial than children. This oversight the very essence/main agenda of daycare centers. Parents and caregivers have very partial/limited view about the packages that a daycare center should constitute, where their description particularly focused on some structural elements and missing interactional issues. The pressing challenge impeding the service delivery of the daycare centers are problems related to awareness, materials/inputs, capacity building, and supervision and support and professionalism. Caregivers' emotional interaction and psychological stimulation of children is a less visible ingredient in (both government and private) daycare centers. Caregiver-child emotional interaction becomes well when caregivers have better educational qualification, experience and training in ECC, salary and small number of children under caregivers' supervision.

Ethics statement

This study was investigated by the institutional ethical review board of the University of Gondar and found to be ethically accepted. All research participants provided their consent to the study. The study described has been performed in compliance with institutional guidelines, and the appropriate institutional committee(s) have approved whether the

privacy rights of humans were reserved during the study.

Declarations Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interests.

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