Missing Gaps: Early Childhood Care and Education and its Implication for Quality Education in Wolaita Zone, Sothern Ethiopia
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Background

The future of a nation is shaped by the quality (and indeed, quantity) of investment in its children (Mekonnen, 2014). In this context, Mustard (1997) argues that such targeted investment , particularly for early childhood education, brings about considerable tangible results, which include increased employability, as well as enhanced productivity and growth (Brookings, 2011). Therefore, according to International Labour Organization (2012), educating children may be seen as a human right and a critical area of investment for the future. In Ethiopia, children under the age of seven make up a significant proportion of the population (MoE, 2013). However, Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is one of the most neglected areas within the field of education nationally (Mulugeta, 2015, Sisay, 2016, Tefera, 2018). As stated in the *Annual Educational Statistical Abstract* (MoE, 2013), the gross national enrolment rate for pupils at *Kindergartens* (ages 4 to 6) was only 6.2%, and are concentrated in urban areas. Furthermore, research indicates that the quality of ECCE in Ethiopian remains sub-standard even when compared with that of other African states (UNESCO, 2006) and that, critically, none of the preschools inspected by the office met quality standards set by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (MoE, 2015/6).

The general objective of this study will be to examine the provision of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Wolaita, Ethiopia, with a particular focus on specific factors which shape the quality of the provision across this area.

The Specific Objectives of the Study will be to:
1. From a systems perspective, examine the provision of ECCE in Wolaita.
2. Investigate the major challenges affecting ECCE and suggest appropriate solutions to address such challenges in Wolaita.
3. Explore the role of parents as caregivers/primary educators in Wolaita.
4. Identify possible developmentally and culturally appropriate strategies to enhance ECCE in Wolaita.

Rationale
Several gaps continue to exist in the development and implementation of high quality ECCE across Ethiopia. Firstly, there is a need to understand the forces (both push and pull) that shape access to ECCE, especially in the context of the recent rapid transformation of Ethiopian society (Tefera and Hagos, 2016). Secondly, the educational landscape is also evolving within this wider social transformation. Consequently, a deeper understanding of these societal changes would highlight the need to recognise, accept and adopt contemporary discourses (and the practices they imply) within this specialised field of education. (Sisay, 2016). Thirdly, the impact of current national and international policy and strategies on ECCE needs to be assessed in order to consider how best to (re)structure ECCE at a systems level. (MoE, 2010).
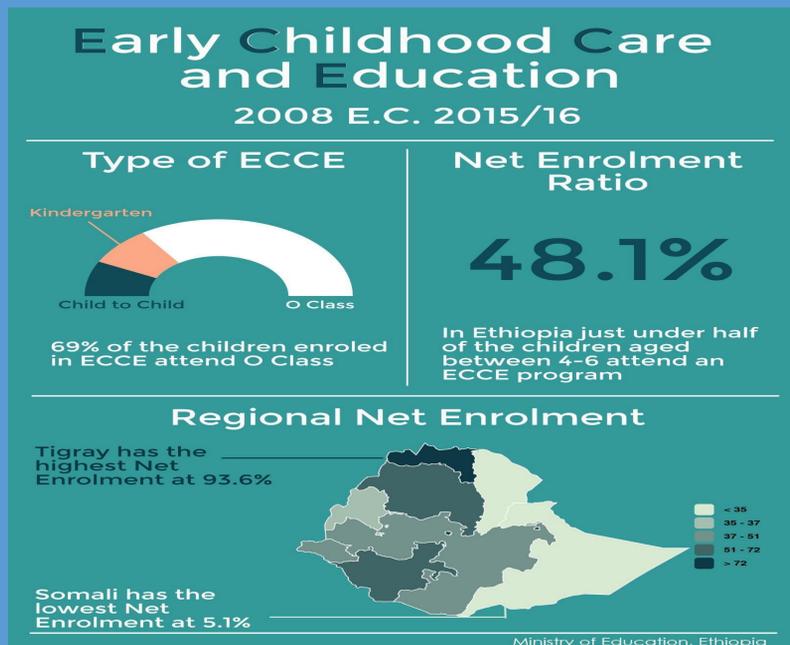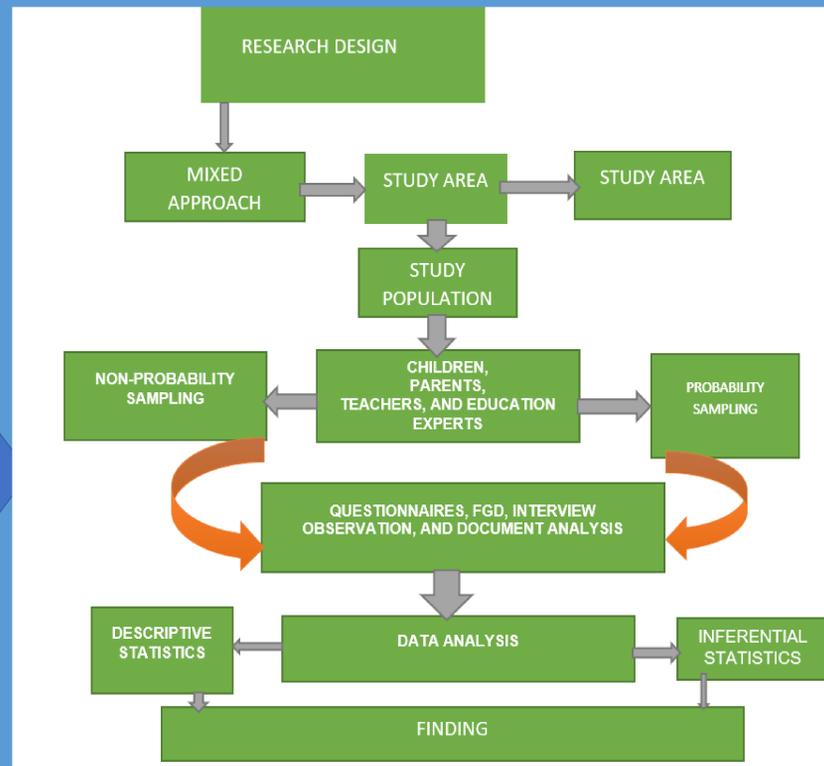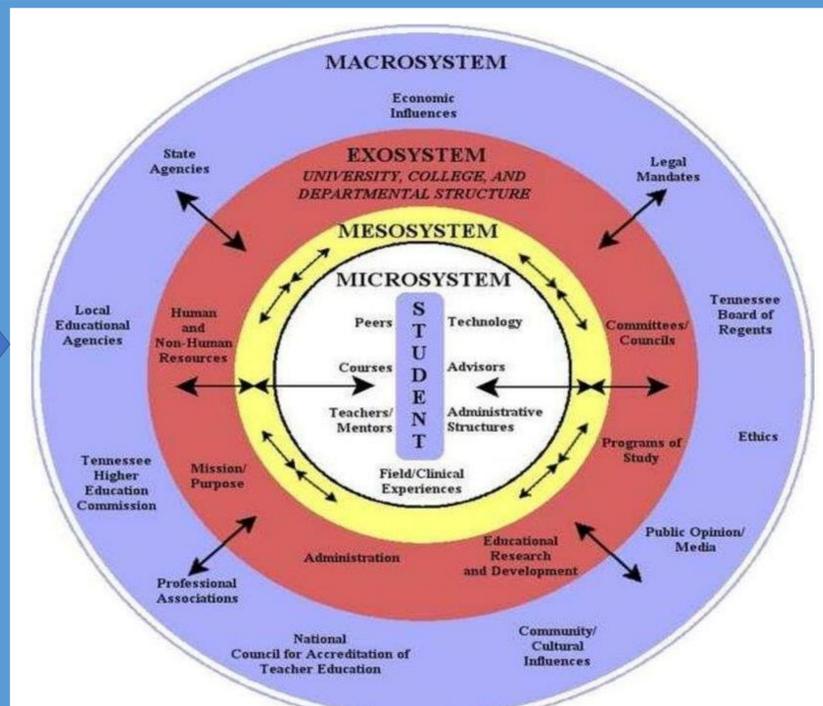
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