BRIEFING DOCUMENT

Early Childhood Education Quality and School Readiness in Ethiopia: Findings from the Baseline Assessment in Woliso and Addis Ababa

Commissioned by Children in Crossfire[1]

Third-Party Research Partners – Addis Ababa University, Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development; and ECD Measure

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1. Background

Children in Crossfire undertook a baseline assessment of Early Childhood Education (ECE) quality and school readiness in Ethiopia, focusing on Addis Ababa and Woliso. This baseline was conducted in partnership with Addis Ababa University's Center for Early Childhood Education and Development and ECD Measure, from December 2024 to March 2025. The study employed internationally recognized and standardized tools to comprehensively evaluate the landscape of early childhood education quality and school readiness. The IDELA (International Development and Early Learning Assessment) tool was utilized to gauge children's readiness for primary education, providing insights into their cognitive, social-emotional, and motor development. Complementing this, the BEQI (Basic Early Childhood Quality Inventory) was implemented to assess the quality of provisions and learning environments across various schools. This dual approach allowed for a holistic understanding of both the children's developmental levels and the quality of the educational settings they were engaging with, offering valuable findings for informing future interventions and improvements in ECE programs in Ethiopia.

This briefing document synthesizes the key findings from baseline assessments of Early Childhood Education (ECE) quality and children's school readiness in the Woliso and Addis Ababa areas of Ethiopia. While Addis Ababa is the capital of Ethiopia, the schools in the sample are representative of the most deprived areas of the city, covering 4 woredas (administrative units) in the peripheries of the city. Woliso is a woreda within the South West Showa zone of the Oromia region. This area is mostly rural, with Woliso town representing a small urban township. This area has experienced social, economic, and ethnic strife in the past few years and can be characterized as a fragile context. Both these geographies represent Children in Crossfire's intervention areas. In Woliso, the intervention reaches about 12,927 (6996 boys and 5,931 Girls) 221 teachers, and 88 school leadership across 85 schools targeting pre-primary provisions. In Addis Ababa, the intervention was launched in April 2025 and will reach about 13,699 children (6,490 boys and 7,209 girls) and 376 ECE teachers across 9 high-density schools with 174 ECE classrooms in Addis Ababa. These are all government schools and the intervention seeks to improve the quality of early childhood education in these schools. As evident from the numbers above, resource shortages and overcrowding are endemic features of the school system where classroom to pupil ratio is 1:78 which is almost triple the standard

ECE provisions set by the government. Similarly, limited access to cutting-edge training for Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers is a challenge, often due to technical and financial constraints.

2. Methodological Approaches and Sampling

The International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA): The assessment of children's holistic development and learning utilized the International Development and Early Learning Assessment (IDELA), a tool known for its strong psychometric properties and widespread use in low-income countries, with a version adapted for Ethiopia with two local languages (Amharic and Afan Oromo). The study employed a baseline comparative design across the Woliso and Addis Ababa areas. In Woliso, 29.4% of pre-primary (PP) schools were selected, resulting in a sample of 25 schools out of 85. From each of these schools, five children were randomly selected, yielding a total sample of 125 children. In Addis Ababa, the sample was drawn from 9 high-density schools, encompassing 134 classrooms. Again, five children were randomly selected from each classroom, resulting in a sample of 670 children out of 13,699 total populations.

Brief Early Childhood Quality Inventory (BEQI): To assess early childhood education (ECE) quality, the Brief Early Childhood Quality Inventory (BEQI) was employed. Trained enumerators conducted 90-minute classroom observations, gathering data on evidence-based practices and classroom characteristics across four modules. Complementing this, educators participated in 10-15 minute interviews to ascertain their background, knowledge, and attitudes towards ECE. In Woliso, 25 classrooms were sampled from a pool of 85 schools, considering variables such as rural/urban location and KG/Bu'ura Boru classroom type. A similar approach was used in Addis Ababa, where 24 classrooms were sampled across 9 schools, accounting for KG2/KG3 levels and Afaan Oromo/Amharic language classrooms. This comprehensive methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of ECE quality across diverse settings.

3. Key Findings of the Assessment

3.1 Children's School Readiness Outcomes (IDELA)

The finding shows mixed Performance with a Significant Need for Intervention**.** The IDELA baseline assessment reveals that while children in both Woliso and Addis Ababa show emerging developmental skills, a significant proportion are still categorized as "struggling" or "very much struggling," indicating a need for targeted interventions.

- **Woliso:** In general, mean scores across the domains and the IDELA total fell in the emerging category in the continuum scale of child development indicators. However, nearly one out of four children are in a very much struggling or struggling stage. Only about a quarter of the children showed a mastery of school readiness skills and the highest proportion (46%) was at the emerging level. The following graph shows the proportion of children on IDELA performance levels in four categories.

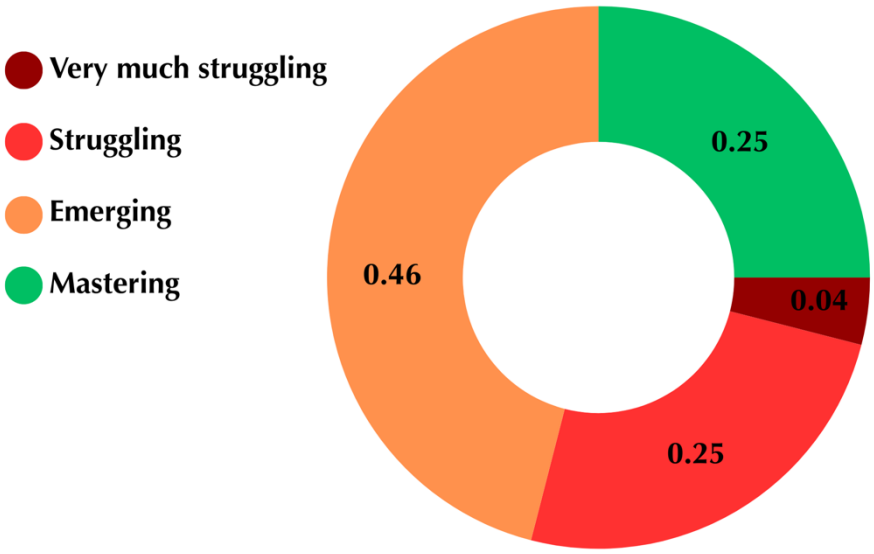

Figure 1: Proportions of children based on the four categories of IDELA performance levels in Woliso

- **Addis Ababa:** Children in Addis Ababa generally performed better than those in Woliso. Close to sixty percent of the Addis Ababa children achieved the mastery level (compared to only a quarter in Woliso). Despite this, 40% of children continue to need attention in Addis Ababa with outcomes in the struggling or very much struggling range as indicated in the following graph.

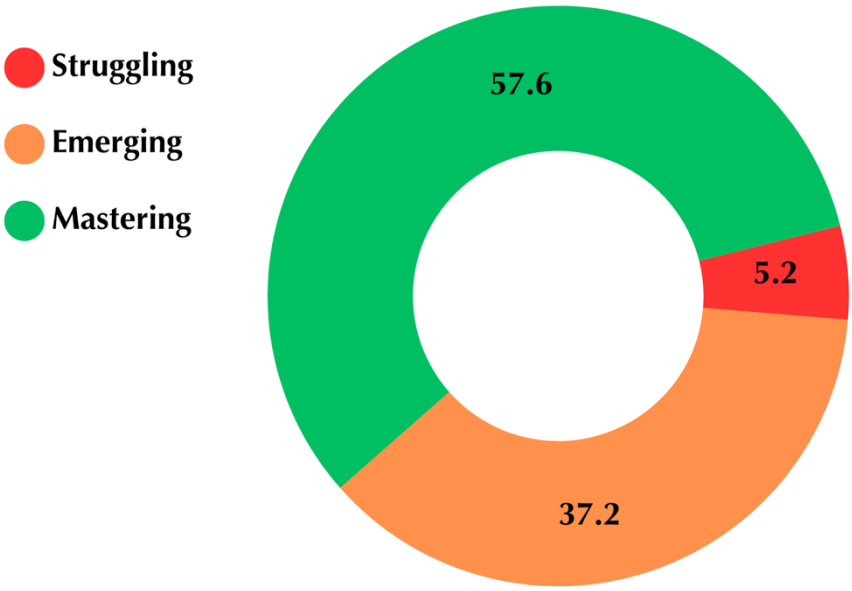

Figure 2: Proportions of children based on the four categories of IDELA performance levels in Addis Ababa

3.1.1 Performance across Developmental Domains

- **Woliso:** Motor skill development showed the highest mean score (75%), while social-emotional development had the lowest (52%). Early literacy and numeracy fell in the emerging category (55% and 60% respectively) as indicated in the following table.

Developmental Domains	N	Min (%)	Max (%)	M (%)	SD
Motor development	121	19	100	75	21
Early Literacy	120	8	98	55	25
Early Numeracy	121	11	97	60	23
Social-Emotional	113	3	100	52	21
Executive function	-			59	
IDELA Total	**110**	**20**	**96**	**61**	**18**

Table 1: Performance of Children by Developmental Domain and Total IDELA Scores (in %) in Woliso

- **Addis Ababa:** Motor skills again showed the highest mean score (82.9%). Early literacy (73.7%), early numeracy (74.2%), and social-emotional development (72.2%) were categorized as emerging levels, although significantly higher than in Woliso.

Developmental Domains	N	Mean (%)	SD	Min (%)	Max (%)
Motor Skills	662	82.9	14.9	28	100
Early Literacy	652	73.7	17.4	8	100
Early Numeracy	655	74.2	18.3	10	100
Social-Emotional	597	72.2	18.1	3	100
IDELA Total	**578**	**75.8**	**13.3**	**26**	**100**

Table 2: Performance of Children by Developmental Domain and Total IDELA Scores (in %)

3.1.2 Areas for Improvement on IDELA findings

- **Curriculum and Instructional gaps:** Within early numeracy, "simple problem solving" had the lowest mean score in Addis Ababa (49%), despite other numeracy sub-domains showing higher achievement. This suggests a potential curriculum or instructional gap. In social-emotional development in Addis Ababa, "peer relationship" had the lowest mean score (55%), while "self-awareness" was the highest (90%). This indicates a need for more play learning opportunities that encourage peer interactions among children.
- **Domain and Subdomain Asymmetries:** The assessment revealed inconsistencies within the children's developmental profiles, indicating that holistic development hasn't been adequately promoted. Specifically, there were differences in performance between various domains in Addis Ababa (motor skills (82.9% the highest), literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional (72.2% the lowest), and subdomains. In subdomains, for example in the Woliso finding, early numeracy, shape identification (38%), and simple problem-solving skills (41%) had lower mean scores compared to one-to-one correspondence (77%). These inconsistencies suggest a need for a more balanced approach to early childhood education that addresses all areas of development.

3.1.3 Factors Influencing School Readiness (IDELA)

- **Language of Instruction (Amharic vs. Afaan Oromo):** While a formal comparison is noted as not feasible due to linguistic differences, the mean scores showed generally higher performance in the Amharic group across all domains. This suggests that within the same school, children attending the Afaan Oromo sections will need more support.

- **Contextual Factors:** The assessment highlighted significant contextual differences between children in Addis Ababa and Woliso, as well as within the Addis Ababa group itself. Children in Addis Ababa generally outperformed those in Woliso indicating that contextual and its associated factors (access to training for teachers, parental involvement, class size, teacher-child ratio) influence school readiness. This tells us interventions should be tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of children in different contexts and with varying backgrounds.

3.2 Early Childhood Education Quality Inventory (BEQI

A brief Early Childhood Quality Inventory (BEQI) is a tool used to assess the quality of Early Childhood Development (ECD) environments and practices in classrooms. It measures evidence-based practices and classroom characteristics across four modules: Play-Based Learning, Learning through Conversations, Promoting Strong Relationships, and Safe and Stimulating Environments. The BEQI assessment involves a 90-minute observation checklist and a 10-15-minute educator questionnaire. The findings presented below provide insights into the quality of sampled preprimary classrooms in Woliso and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

3.2.1 Woliso BEQI Findings

In Woliso, the BEQI observations were carried out across provision modalities such as Bu'ura Boru (satellite centers) and KG (formal preprimary attached to primary schools), covering rural and urban areas. The findings indicate variations in quality based on different characteristics.

In the Play-Based Learning module, **only 44% of classrooms showed children having some choice** in their activities. While "Children go outside" was observed in a high 88% of classrooms, engagement with specific materials like Pretend Play materials (64% engagement) was higher than with **Math Materials (36% engagement)** as detailed below.

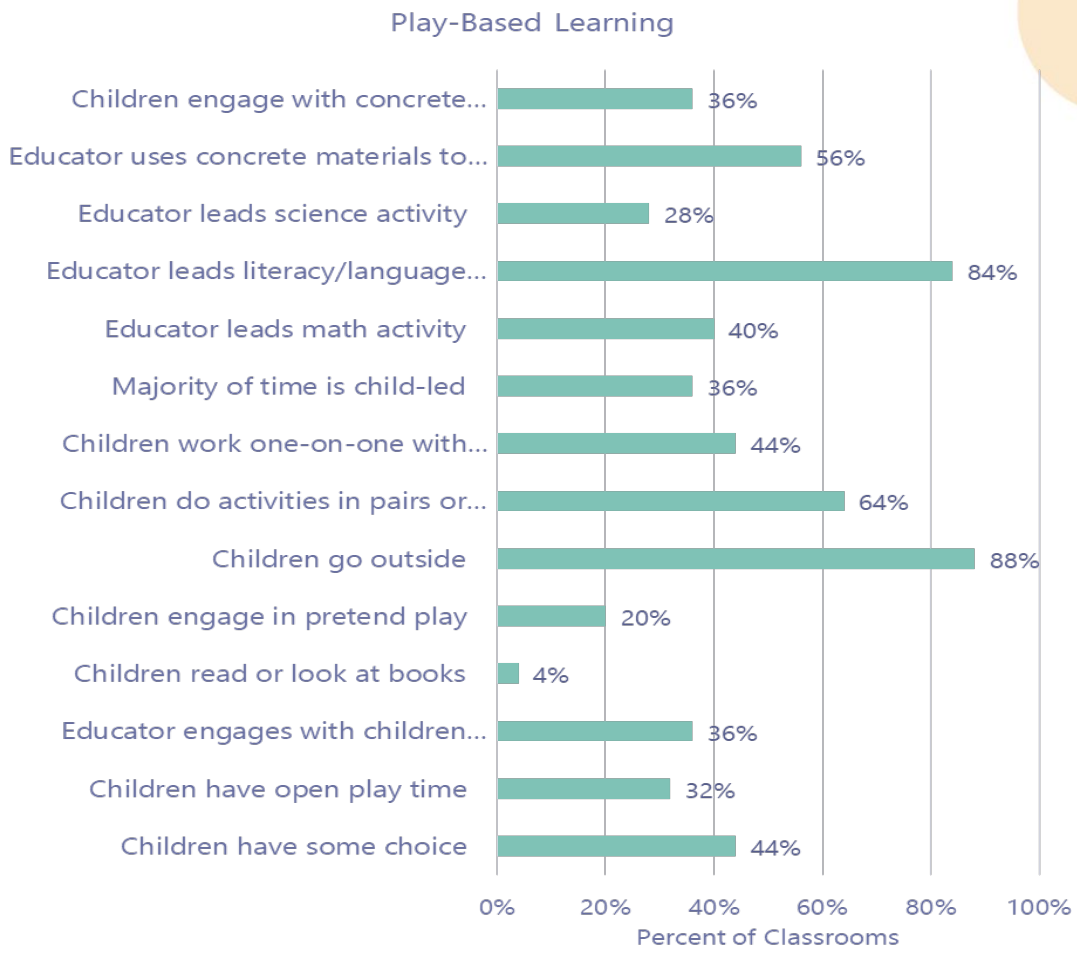

Figure 3: Play based learning results in Woliso

Within the Learning through Conversation module, 60% of classrooms showed the "Educator checks for understanding," and 56% showed the "Educator engages in back-and-forth discussion". The Promoting Strong Relationships module showed positive findings with 96% and 100% of classrooms observing that the "Educator does not physically punish" and "Educator does not have negative verbal interactions" respectively.

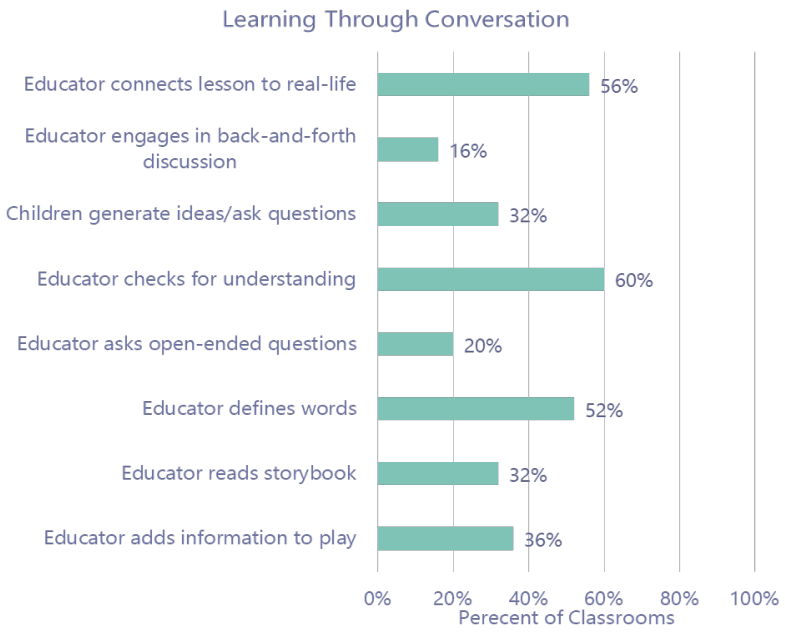

Figure 4: Learning through conversations results in Woliso

However, the Safe and Stimulating Environments module revealed that **only 36% of classrooms had sufficient indoor learning space**, although access to sanitary water (84%) and sanitary toilets (76%) were relatively high.

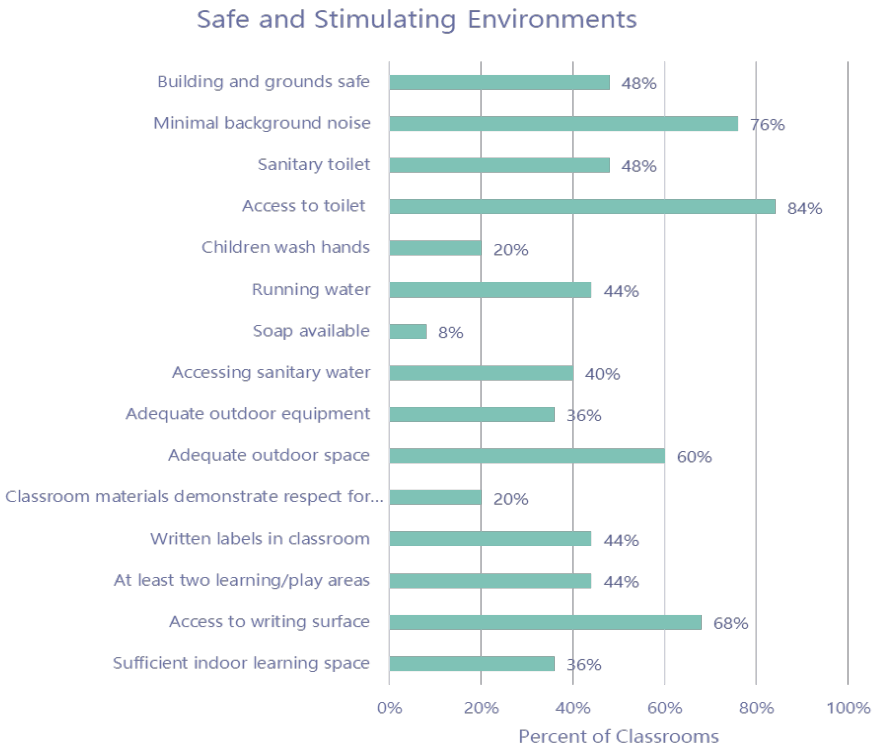

Figure 5: Safe and stimulating environment results in Woliso

Promoting Strong Relationships: A striking 100% of educators avoid negative verbal communication, and 96% refrain from physical punishment, indicating a strong commitment to non-aversive discipline. However, only 16% of educators talk about feelings. While 84% ensure children are not left alone, less than a third (32%) get on children's level. Around half of educators redirect misbehavior (52%), acknowledge positive behavior (56%), and re-engage children (52%). Respect for diversity, ethical guidance, and equal treatment are integrated in 60% of classrooms. Individualized feedback (24%) and inviting personal sharing (20%) are less common.

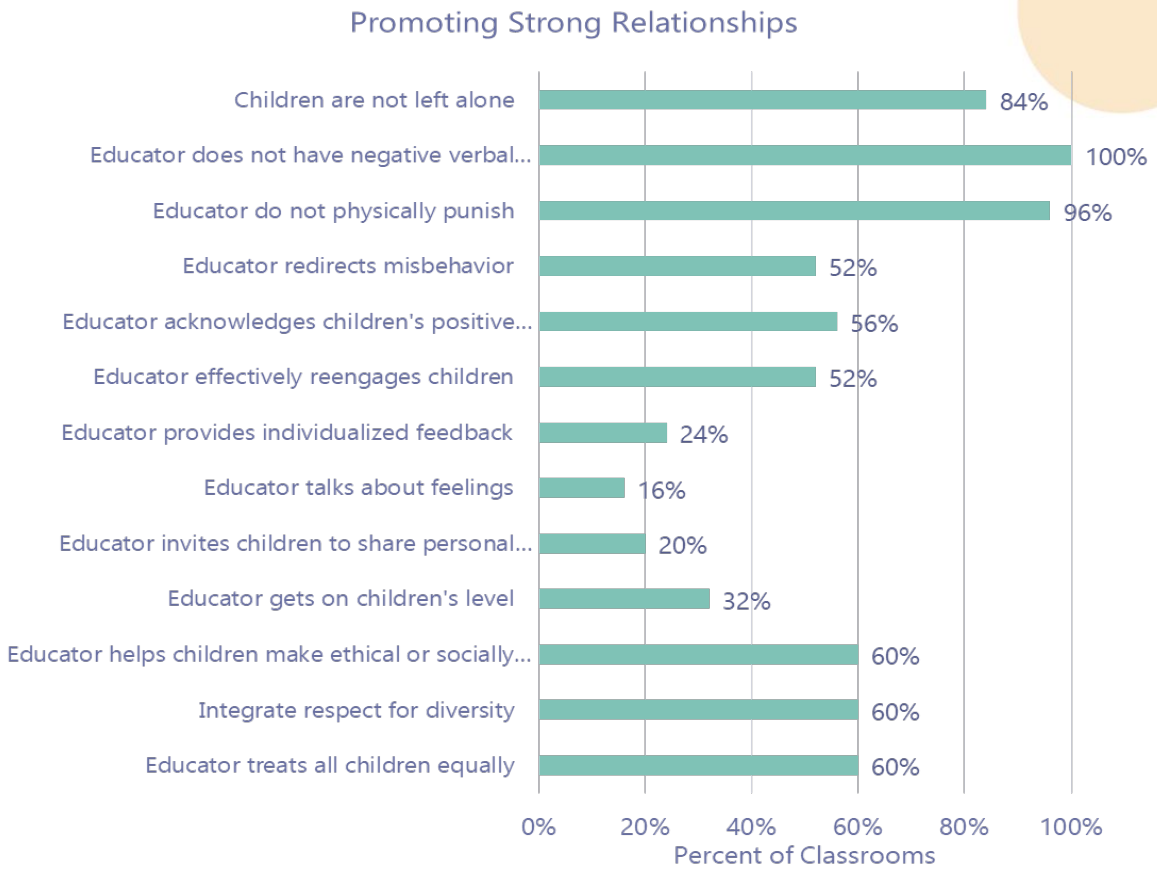

Figure 6: Promoting strong relationships results in Woliso

When comparing different types of centers in Woliso, **KG tended to have higher BEQI scores than Bu'ura Boru** across all modules. Geographically, **Urban centers had higher BEQI scores than rural centers**, with the most significant difference in Safe and Stimulating Environments. There was no difference in Promoting Strong Relationships scores between urban and rural classrooms. Regarding the child-adult ratio, the **highest Total BEQI scores were observed in classrooms with ratios between 20:1 and 35:1**. Educator questionnaire results showed that KG educators in Woliso had more average years of experience (6 years) than Bu'ura Boru educators (4 years) and generally demonstrated higher education levels and knowledge about ECD topics.

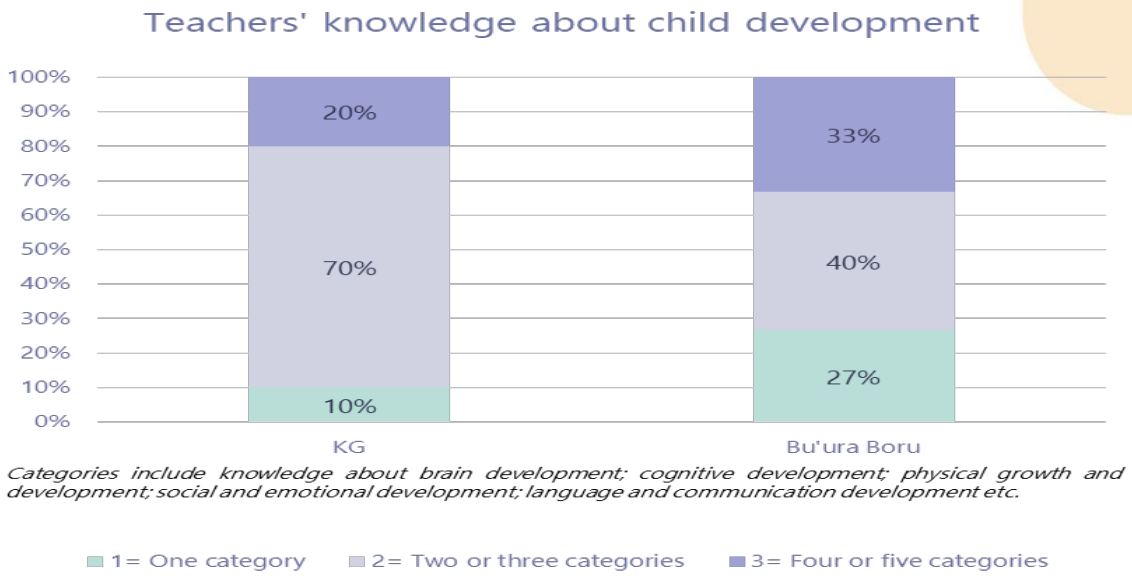

Figure 7: Teacher's Knowledge of Child Development across KG and Bu'ura Boru in Woliso

3.2.2 Addis Ababa BEQI Findings

In Addis Ababa, the BEQI observations were carried out in formal KG sections of public schools including both Amharic and Afaan Oromo language classrooms. Similar to Woliso, findings highlight variations in quality based on characteristics like classroom language and child-adult ratio.

In the Play-Based Learning module, a notably **low percentage (8%) of classrooms showed children having some choice**. While "Children go outside" was observed frequently (79%), engagement with materials varied, with Pretend Play materials having the highest engagement (50%).

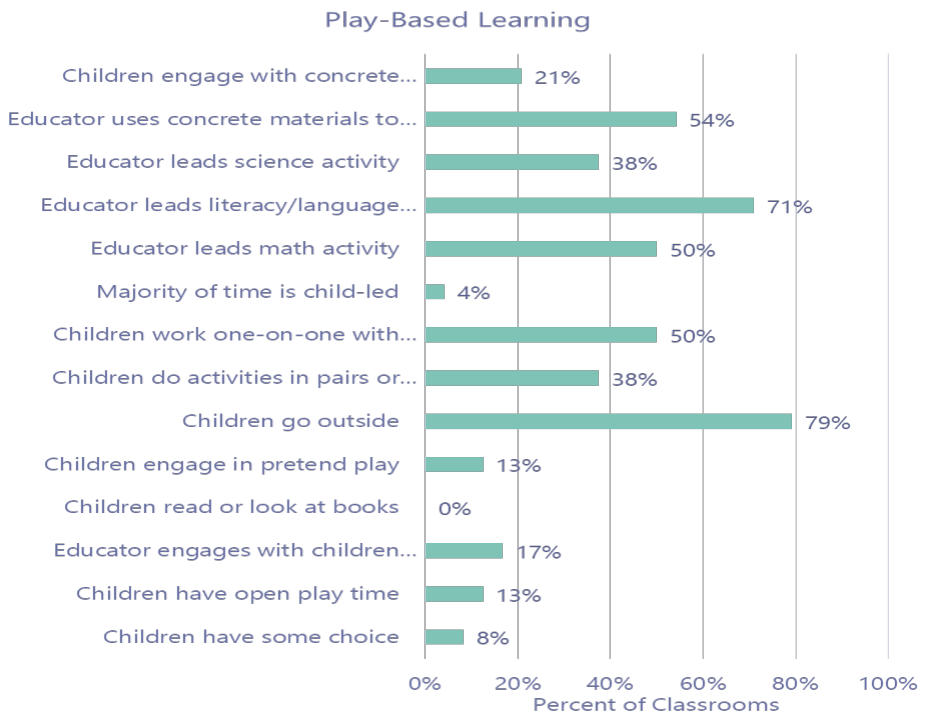

Figure 8: Play based learning results in Addis Ababa

The Learning through Conversation module showed higher observed rates for "Educator asks open-ended questions" (75%) and "Educator checks for understanding" (83%).

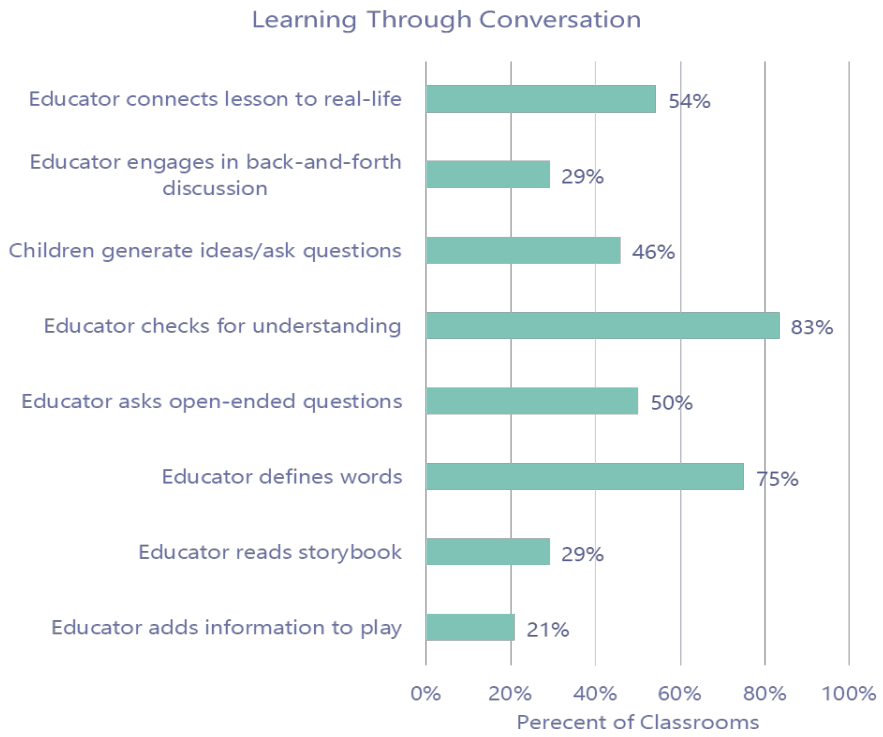

Figure 9: Learning through conversations results in Addis Ababa

The Promoting Strong Relationships module also reported positive interactions, with 83% of classrooms observing that the "Educator treats all children equally," and 88% observed that the "Educator does not physically punish" and "Educator does not have negative verbal interactions".

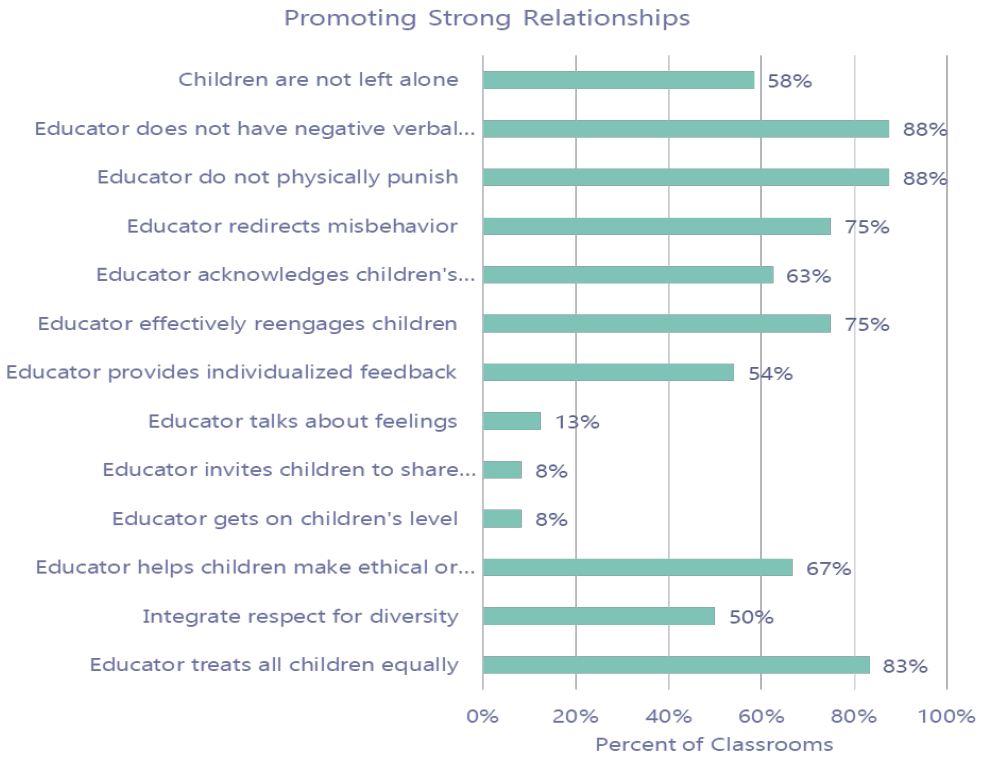

Figure 10: Promoting Strong relationships results in Addis Ababa

Significantly, in the Safe and Stimulating Environments module, the observations showed that only 29% of classrooms had sufficient indoor learning space, and only 25% of classrooms had access to sanitary water; although access to a toilet was high (92%).

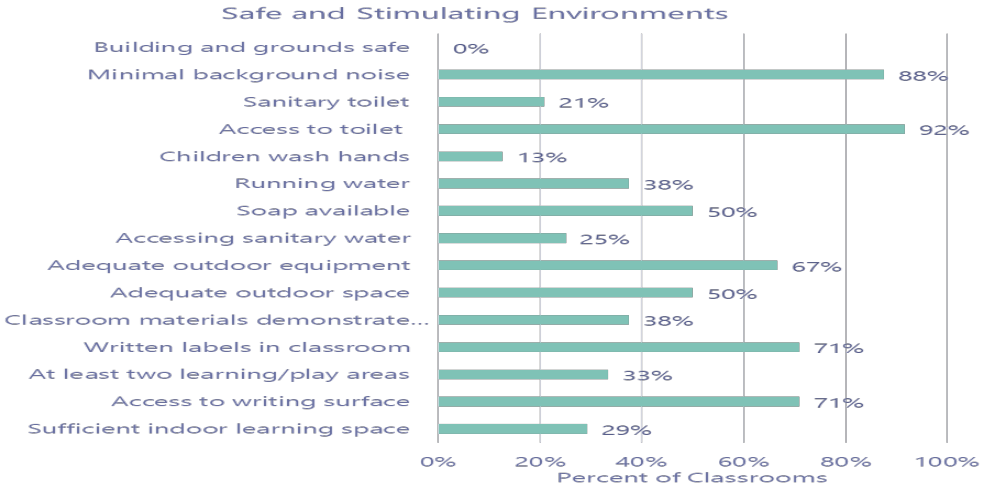

Figure 11: Safe and stimulating environment results in Addis Ababa

Comparisons within Addis Ababa showed that **Amharic classrooms tended to have higher BEQI scores than Afaan Oromo classrooms** across all modules and in the total BEQI score, with the most significant difference in Safe and Stimulating Environments.

Educator questionnaire results indicated that **Amharic educators had significantly more average years of experience (15 years) compared to Oromo educators (2 years)** and generally demonstrated higher education levels and knowledge about ECD topics. The average class sizes in Addis Ababa were high for both Oromo (69) and Amharic (71) classrooms. The data suggests a trend of lower BEQI scores with increasing class size. When looking at child-adult ratios, **classrooms with less than 20:1 ratio tended to have higher BEQI scores** compared to those between 20:1 and 35:1.

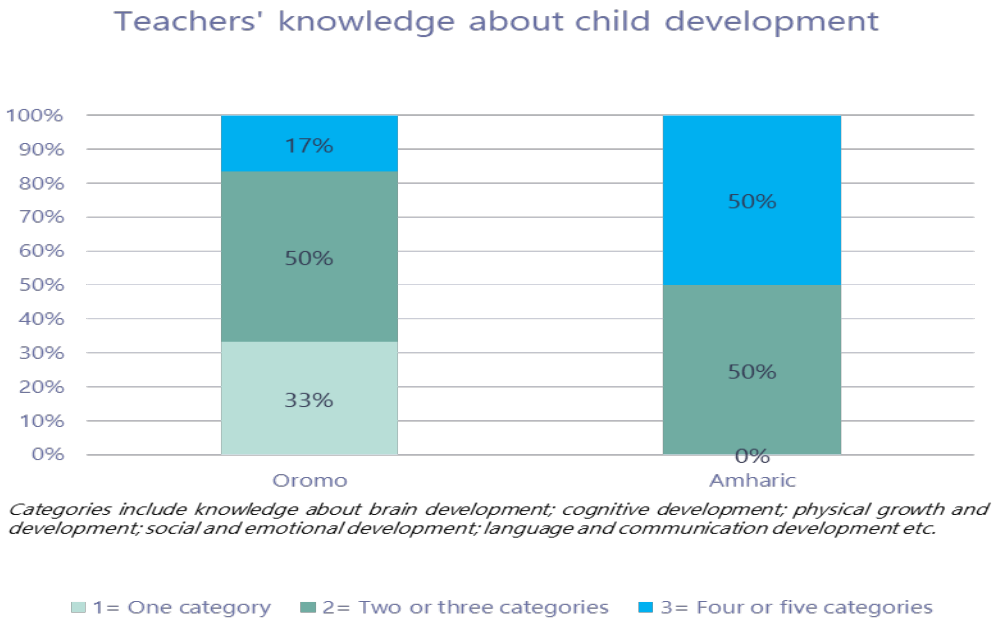

Figure 12: Teachers' knowledge about Children Development results in Addis Ababa

These BEQI findings provide a baseline understanding of the quality of early childhood education environments and practices in the sampled areas of Woliso and Addis Ababa, highlighting specific areas of strength and areas needing improvement.

3.3 Comparing provision across Addis Ababa and Woliso

- **Average Class Size:** In Waliso KG, the average class size is 39 and in Bu'ura Boru (BB) it is 41. In Addis Ababa Oromo classrooms, the average is 69, and in Amharic classrooms, it is 71.
- **Participation of Children with Special Needs:** In Waliso KG, 20% of classrooms have children with special needs, compared to 13% in BB. In Addis Ababa Oromo classrooms, this is 33%, and in Amharic classrooms, it is 67%.
- **Average Years of Experience:** Waliso KG educators have an average of 6 years of experience, while BB educators have 4 years. In Addis Ababa, Oromo educators have an average of 2 years, while Amharic educators have a significantly higher average of 15 years.
- **Teacher Education:** Data on teacher education levels (Grade 10, Grade 12, Pre-school Certificate, Diploma in Education, Bachelor's Degree) are presented for both Waliso and Addis Ababa, showing variations in qualification levels across locations and school types/languages

4. Conclusion

These baseline assessments provide valuable insights into the current state of ECE quality and school readiness in Woliso and Addis Ababa. While there are encouraging signs, particularly in Addis Ababa's higher mastery levels and the generally positive relational environment observed through BEQI, the data underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to improve ECE quality and support children's holistic development to ensure they are ready for primary school. The significant number of struggling children, disparities in environmental quality indicators, and certain domain-specific weaknesses require focused attention and resource allocation.

5. Recommendations and Implications:

- **Align Interventions with Identified Gaps:** Children in Crossfire needs to align its proposed intervention along the gaps noted in this assessment. This includes addressing the significant proportion of children in the "struggling" and "very much struggling" categories, particularly in Woliso.
- **Address Domain-Specific Weaknesses:** Focus interventions on areas where children performed less well, such as simple problem-solving in numeracy and peer relationships in socio-emotional development. The inconsistency in sub-domain performances suggests a need for teacher training on foundational indicators.
- **Share Findings and Collaborate:** Children in Crossfire should share the findings of this assessment with schools, system actors, and parents for better collaboration while conducting the school readiness interventions.
- **Improve ECE Quality:** The BEQI results highlight critical areas for improvement in ECE quality, including increasing indoor learning space, providing more learning/play areas, ensuring access to soap and hand washing facilities, and potentially reducing class sizes, particularly in Addis Ababa.
- **Support Teachers:** Providing teachers with adequate training on foundational indicators, need-based support, and skills for assisting struggling learners is crucial.
- **Consider the Impact of School Type and Schedule:** The differences observed in Addis Ababa based on schedule suggest that the duration and structure of the ECE program can impact learning outcomes.
- **Address Disparities between Locations:** The lower performance of children in Woliso compared to Addis Ababa indicates a need for targeted support and resources in rural and less-resourced areas.