

The Self-Contained Classroom Set-up: What it is and What it is not

Alemayehu Debebe*

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American Primary Schools and Traditional Self-contained Classroom

The traditional self-contained classroom arrangement, which refers to a situation in which one teacher is held responsible for the total instruction of a given class of students for the entire school day, is not a new phenomenon in American education. Initially this practice came to 'being' as opposed to the departmentalized classroom organization. Departmentalized classroom arrangement, according to Good (1973:173), is a practice whereby each teacher teaches only one or two subjects in which he is a specialist. In this case either the teacher moves from room to room to teach various classes or pupils shift from room to room during the successive periods of the school day.

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century, according to Dawson and Lindstrom (1974:204-205), Americans started to question whether this practice was effective or not. Some insisted for change by saying the traditional self-contained classroom was a classic illustration that was conceived more than a century ago to fit the needs of a simple curriculum. The current increase in knowledge and technology demanded the curriculum to be up-to-date and its instruction to be approached accordingly.

Moreover, there has been a great deal of debate between educators and others in favor of or against the scheme as its resultant implication on children's education urged to be seriously dealt with. Consequently, this growing dissatisfaction led educators into the *pros and cons* group, whose rationales of argument are presented hereunder.

Argument for the Traditional Self-contained Classroom

The group that favored a traditional self-contained classroom forwarded four major advantages to support its argument. These advantages were *cost effectiveness, helping the whole child, integration of learning, and flexibility.*

Cost effectiveness

This refers to minimizing salary expenditure. Since one teacher is assigned in a class as responsible for total instruction, there would be no need to look for any more teachers in that particular classroom.

Helping the whole child

In a traditional self-contained classroom a teacher comes in contact with a limited number of children. This constant contact with a limited number of children helps him to know a child from different perspectives. According to Hamalainen, and Koompan and Snyder in Lobdell and Van Ness (1963:214-215), self-contained classroom is a *workshop in which the principles of child development come to play. It is a home away from home - a living room for learning, where a*

small group of children (ideally not more than twenty) work with one teacher who is considered to be the guide, counselor and coordinator of most meaningful experiences to children. Also because of the length of the time he spends with the children, the teacher has the opportunity to know and better understand their needs.

Integration of learning experience

Unlike the departmentalized classes the self contained classroom promotes integration of learning experiences across the subject areas. For Dawson and Lindstrom (1974:206), integration simply means the contribution of some common elements in one school subject that helps to understand the other. For example, children reading in mathematics class use the knowledge of their reading class.

Flexibility

The traditional self-contained classroom gives teachers and learners a considerable number of options in instruction. These options, according to Dawson and Lindstrom (1974:207), offer opportunity for flexibility. In such an arrangement once the teacher closes the door, he shuts out the rest of the world and becomes master of the ship. In this case the teacher can provide for individual differences. He can make his own arrangements to incorporate personal interest and do whatever the children may benefit from.

Argument Against the Traditional Self-contained Classroom

Those who were dissatisfied with the traditional self-contained classroom emphasize shortcomings of the practice. According to Anderson (1962) and Tickaher (1968), some of the major weaknesses underlined were *teachers' competence, teachers' perception, lack of variety in school day, problem of addressing adjustment difficulties, lack of models, and ethical question.*

Teachers' competence

Teachers in the traditional self-contained classroom are not equally competent and good at all the subjects they teach, therefore, the arrangement is no more considered good. Supporting this, Anderson (1962:253) writes, *only an extra-ordinary individual - a Leonardo da Vinci -could have an expert knowledge in all ... areas*. Elaborating further his dissatisfaction with the quality of learning offered through such an arrangement, Anderson added, American children were sent to school to be taught by teachers who were *a jack of all subjects and the master of none*.

Teachers' perception of their efficacy

In addition to others' view about teachers of the traditional self-contained classroom, the teachers themselves perceived that they lacked some element to accomplish their tasks successfully. For example, according to Anderson (1962:253), in the study that was carried out on 260 generalist teachers, 47 percent of them felt that they were *less than prepared* in content and method to teach all subjects. Only four of the 260 teachers considered that they were well prepared in all the subjects they taught.

Lack of variety in the school day

As noted by Anderson (p. 257), not all children respond equally well to every technique and approach of teaching. The more techniques and approaches are practiced in a class, the greater the probability that some of them would be particularly well suited to each child. Also, the uniform environment of a traditional self-contained classroom is dull and would not make the school interesting for a child.

Problems of addressing adjustment difficulty of all children

For Anderson (p.257), *no teacher, no matter how wise, mature, and emotionally suited for teaching, gets along with all pupils*. There are some pupils with whom the teacher has little patience. Therefore, he

should find it easier to be patient with those pupils for a half day than for a whole school period.

Lack of models for identification

According to Anderson (p.257), it is believed that identification with significant adult figure is important in socialization of the child. For one reason or another, a child may not identify with a certain teacher. However, the traditional self-contained classroom does not offer chances for selecting a model for his future life.

Ethical question

It is not ethical and fair for a school to impose a single adult personality, a single set of values, a single way of thinking upon a child. The child must be permitted to get alternatives for choice. Because every teacher attempts to mold his pupils in his own image, it is not safe at all to assume that one teacher will offer children live moral, emotional, and intellectual options (p.258).

Innovation of Expanded Self-contained Classroom

The growing seriousness of the debate between the *pros and cons* of the traditional self-contained classroom practice gave rise to a nation wide movement in 1950s to re-visit effects of the scheme. The evaluation result, according to Tickaher (1968:173) and Amberber (1985), showed that the American education was confronted by critical problems of:

- acute shortage of teachers both in quality and quantity to manage a highly increasing enrollment.
- higher rate of attrition of teachers than ever before. During early 1950s about 300,000 teachers left teaching looking for better job opportunity. The major reason for their evacuation was bad working conditions related to a one-teacher-per-class practice.

- growing dissatisfaction of the public with the traditional self-contained classroom teaching, which was lagging behind the advancement of knowledge and technology.

Thus, the idea of improved staff utilization became the call of the day. According to Tickaher (1968:95), the initiative of searching for solution of the problem was taken up by members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Fund for the Advancement of Education and the Ford Foundation were the two financing agencies. As a result, according to Tickaher (1968:102-104), the collaborative efforts of members of the National Association for Secondary School Principals, the schoolteachers and parents at large resulted in the innovation of the *expanded self contained classroom practice*. This type of learning environment involved the responsibility of two or more teachers for all or a significant part of the instruction of the same group of students.

This innovation emerged as a remedy for problems created by employing the traditional self-contained arrangement. It allows the improved staff utilization through the use of a team of teachers to teach a larger group of students than it was in the traditional self-contained classroom set-up. According to Tickaher (1968:103-104), the innovation is considered to be more advantageous than the traditional one due to its merits both for the learner as well as for the teacher. Some of the advantages include the following.

Advantages for Teachers

The expanded self-contained classroom:

- makes possible professional interaction among teachers, which had no room in the traditional approach. This promotes exchange of ideas about how effectively they manage their work.
- makes possible share of instructional work based on one's special talent, interest and professional strength based on the teachers' individual differences.

- encourages teachers to offer the best they have for the benefit of students and their own work satisfaction since they are placed where they are qualified in.
- helps new teachers obtain professional and in-service growth through the guidance of experienced and able teachers.

Advantages for students

The expanded self-contained classroom:

- makes the service of superior teachers available for more students.
- gives an opportunity to pupils taught by more than one teacher so as to avoid educational loss when students worked for one whole year with a less talented teacher.
- Helps pupils to associate themselves with teachers of different point of views, different experiences, and different backgrounds.

Unlike the traditional self-contained arrangement, the expanded self-contained classroom practice emphasizes teacher specialization and use of teacher aide. Teacher specialization refers to the depth of knowledge that a teacher has in an area he teaches. In this case, instead of being trained for a general purpose to teach in elementary school with a shallow or superficial understanding of a set of disciplines, one can be qualified for more than one discipline in the fields such as Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. Specialization, according to Anderson (1956:54), *should make it easier for the teacher to keep in touch with developments in teaching method, materials, equipment, and the professional literature of the one's specific area of study and interest.*

Self-contained Classroom in Ethiopia

The Traditional Self-contained Classroom in 1960s

The attempt to introduce the traditional self-contained classroom practice is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopian primary education.

Ministry of Education and Fine Arts (hereafter MOEFA) declared its plan to introduce the self-contained classroom approach in July 1963 and directives were issued to elementary schools to put the plan into action in October 1963. This agreement was reached during the educational administration conference that was held from July 15-22, 1963.

As indicated in the final report of the conference (MOEFA 1963:150), *by October, 1963, arrangements should be made for every first grade level in the empire to be organized on the self-contained classroom basis. One grade should be added each year thereafter until all classes in the (primary) schools are organized on this basis.* But the reality of implementation was not as smooth as the decision passed upon the matter. The plan was to cover the entire primary school grades (from grade I through 6) in 1968. Despite the wish of the then officials, according to the assessment made by Elefachew (1972:3), out of 23 government elementary schools in Addis Ababa, after nine years of introduction of the self-contained classroom, the arrangement was put into practice in:

- four schools for grade one only
- five schools for grades one and two only
- two schools for grades one, two, and three only
- the remaining twelve elementary schools did not use it at all.

For Elefachew (1972:49), the major hindrances disclosed by school principals in implementing the new arrangement were mainly attributed to the following reasons:

- lack of competent and qualified teachers to handle the self-contained classroom
- teachers' lack of interest in being responsible for the total instruction of a given classroom for the whole school day and for the whole academic year

- parents' objection to the assignment of a one-teacher-per-class to teach their children all subject areas that the teacher may not be a specialist in.
- lack of equipment in the schools to promote self-contained classroom practice.
- inability of the educational administration to provide help regarding difficulties related to proper implementation of the proposal

Some of these points had similarity with those raised against the traditional self-contained classroom in America. For example, lack of competent and qualified teachers refers to what Anderson called *teachers' competence*; teachers' lack of interest may be related to teachers' perception of their self efficacy and demanding working condition which results from being assigned in one class for the whole day and for the whole year; parents' objection may be related to an ethical question, or lack of a model, or lack of a variety in a school day or all, in addition to their dissatisfaction with the competence of the teacher. Obviously lack of equipment may not be as such a big issue for Americans as it is for Ethiopians, who have meager resource to support the education system. Inability of the educational administration to offer help may be related to the degree of commitment that administrators attach to promote the new practice. This may occur also due to lack of information about what was going on since the strategy of implementation was a top-down one. It could also be the kind of resistance through silence by lower level managers for the reason that they did not participate in deciding whether the new practice would be helpful or not.

On the other hand, while the introduction of the traditional self-contained classroom was made to the Ethiopian education system, its failure had been proved in American education. It was during the late 1950s that the innovation of expanded self-contained classroom organization was suggested as a remedial action for problems resulting from the traditional self-contained classroom. It was also after five years attempt of implementing the traditional self-contained classroom in Ethiopia that Tickaher (1968:177-178) recommended:

The problem situation present in Ethiopia today, as far as the teacher shortage is concerned, resembles the problem situation facing the United States in the 1950s ... Therefore, it is wise for Ethiopia to attempt to benefit from the American experiences in staff utilization.

This recommendation, which was made while the traditional self-contained classroom was under progress, may give us a clue about the limited effect of the traditional practice towards the desired end. However, before any impact assessment was made or without any signal to do so, the entire exercise of the approach was abandoned following the Ethiopian Revolution in 1974.

Back to the Traditional Self-contained Classroom in 1990s

In 1994 after about 20 years of abandonment of the traditional self-contained classroom in the Ethiopian primary schools, the Ministry of Education announced the resumption of the previous practice. In fact, it is good to look for new ways of doing things to attain quality and maintain quantity in education. But a couple of questions may need to be answered to see whether we are in the right track to achieve our goal of improved staff utilization by resuming the abandoned arrangement of the traditional self-contained classroom. The questions are:

- Is there any lesson that we learn from our previous attempt of the practice?
- What do we learn from the American education crisis which resulted from the use of the traditional self-contained classroom?

Lessons from Our Past Experience

As has been discussed earlier, the traditional self-contained classroom was introduced in Ethiopian primary schools in 1963. Though the plan was to implement the practice for grades 1-6 in six years time, the reality was found different. It was noticed that after 9

years of introduction of the practice, 45 percent of the schools in Addis Ababa did not attempt it at all. Even from among schools that tried to implement it, no school went beyond grade 3. The main reasons were *lack of teacher competence, teachers' lack of interest, refusal of parents, lack of equipment, and lack of support from educational administrators* (Elefachew, 1972). Here one can pose a question: even at present are we sure that the above problems are solved?

For example, the Ministry of Education (1996:7) itself confirms that *efforts to expand access to education and the quality of education require attention to teacher training ... Teachers already in the system fail to meet the system's minimum standards, ... a high proportion of teachers are either untrained or poorly trained.*

So, what response can we give for the question of teacher competence when we have many untrained and poorly trained teachers? Also no change is made regarding teacher training trend for primary schools. As commented by Amberber (1985:14), *the training program apart from being short in duration ... (one year) is over crowded with 17 courses. Thus, the situation is such that they may not have mastery over any one of them.* Equipping the classroom with learning tools is also another dimension that needs resource. There is no difference between the past and the present attempt to make the classroom resourceful so as to encourage *learning by doing*. Strategies employed are also the same top-down type in both cases. Thus, the innovation may face a problem of being not endorsed by the user system and practitioners at the grassroots level, if at all it is said to be useful. The current practice which makes one teacher responsible to teach the same group of children starting from grade one through grade four may worsen the situation as well.

Lesson from the American Education Crisis

Americans proved the failure of the traditional a one-teacher-per-class practice for three reasons. The first is that:

it resulted in acute shortage of teachers both in quality and quantity because this approach remained no more attractive to new graduates to join teaching due to its demanding nature. Secondly, it resulted in high rate of attrition of some 300,000 teachers in early 1950s due to bad working conditions related to a traditional one-teacher-per-class assignment. Thirdly, due to the growing dissatisfaction of the public with this traditional approach, which was lagging behind the advancement of knowledge and technology (Amberber, 1985; Tickaher, 1968; and Anderson, 1962).

These shortcomings of the traditional educational practice, according to Tickaher (1968:102), were corrected by the innovation of expanded self-contained classroom or team teaching. Tickaher (1968:178) also suggests that:

Ethiopia will be able to save money for educational programs by adapting the teacher aide or teacher assistant concept. Dividing the work or teaching into its professional and semiprofessional or non-professional task and supplying personnel accordingly is a rather intelligent way of combating the teacher shortage.

However, the practice we are attempting to implement is different from what is found to be useful in improved staff utilization in the American primary education system.

American education crisis of 1950s mainly emanated from the use of one teacher- per-class for the whole academic year. But currently in Ethiopia the arrangement is made in a way that one teacher, who started teaching in grade one, will remain responsible to teach the same group of children until the group completed grade four. In this case how serious would be the educational loss if a teacher with inferior talent is assigned to the group? Therefore we have to think whether we should take a lesson from others' failure or be condemned to repeat the same mistake.

Final Remarks

Though it is about seven years period that the traditional one-teacher-per-class arrangement resumed in Ethiopian primary schools, there is likelihood of abandoning this practice especially in most private schools in Addis Ababa. The underlying reason that principals used to report was a high pressure from their clients. Parents used to complain about quality of learning. In some parts of the country like Tigray and Southern Ethiopia the traditional self-contained practice has not been endorsed at all.

This state of affairs may be attributed to five basic reasons. First, *lack of clearly stated and agreed upon objectives to be achieved by introducing such a practice*. Second, *lack of involvement of practitioners in the field in deciding what is appropriate to deal with a given problem*. Third, *there is the lack of thorough investigation into the practice to know all about it*.

For example, the cost effectiveness of the traditional self-contained classroom may be achieved at the expense of the quality of learning unless proper study is made prior to embarking on the case in point. Fourthly, *paying little attention for small-scale trial in order to understand whether the new practice is adaptable into one's own environment or not*. Fifth, *either lack of data kept for reference or lack of interest to refer back to one's own experience of the past*.

Thus, if not late, now is the time to re-vitalize our stand on the traditional one-teacher-class arrangement.

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