Short communication

Education in Ethiopia:
A Revisit to the Core Concerns of Quality

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Overview

This short communication is a personal treatise of education in Ethiopia originally presented in a conference organized by UniSA. I would first and foremost like to thank the conference organizing group for the honorable opportunity given to me to deliver what I call my key notes on education in Ethiopia with focus on revisiting some of the core concerns of quality that in fact hasheeded very little attention thus far.

The Role Education Plays

As Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world" (Future Africa News, Undated).It is a key to unlock the mysteries of nature;both the inner and outer space. Education furnishes the mind, cultivates the soul, refines the skills, and thereby shapes the course of humanity at large. It is a key to redressing gender inequality, reducing poverty, creating a sustainable growth, improving human condition and life expectancy, and promoting peace; just to mention only few.If properly tamed and customized, education can also become a new currency for nations to maintain global competitiveness and cooperation. Realizing that many countries were falling short of achieving theMillennium Development Goals (MDGs) of providing universal primary education to all and eliminating gender inequities, particularly for the 2015 target, the former UN Secretary- General Ban Ki-Mon once said:

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I can't imagine a better world without a global commitment to providing better education for women and youth and I urge all of us to strengthen our efforts to accelerate progress in improving access, quality and student achievement worldwide (Duncan, 2013).

In fact, as Ban Ki-Mon said, we cannot afford to waste the talents of a generation by depriving education nearly to an estimated 61 million out of school primary-aged children around the globe today. Yet, what is more worrisome to me is even that nearly 250 million school going children globally are finishing without basic literacy and numeracy skills, that is, they cannot read, write or count well while in school (Roster, 2021). In fact, I personally believe that 'no education at all' is even better than a wrong beginning in education as bad education would corrupt subsequent learning.

Ethiopia's Education and Challenges

Ethiopia, as a nation, is driven forward by the vision to becoming a middle income economy by 2025. Education is inalienably intertwined with this vision; ultimately enabling this dream come true. Pursuant of this vision, a number of measures were taken to eventually contribute a share in transforming this nation by transforming the education sector that was consistently critiqued for lack of quality (e.g..Tekeste, 1990, 1996, 2010;Tirussew et al., 2018). Massive educational expansion has been increasingly noted over the last couple decades or so beginning from higher education down the road to pre-primary education. This expansion has ensured access to scores of school-aged Ethiopian children for whom education was hard to imagine; leave alone to experience it. Massive resources were deployed from the already fragile national budget to building infrastructure, training personnel, as well as preparing,

publishing and distributing books.Beyond any level doubt, these efforts are promising developments advancing the cause of education in this country. Above and beyond these kinds of structural changes ensured through various school improvement programs, attempts were also made to infuse elements of modern pedagogy in to the educational system including, among others, the use of mother tongue education, free promotion for lower grades, student-centered teaching, continuous assessment, cooperative learning, teachers' professional development programs and many others. Obviously, then, huge progress has been documented in the last couple of decades; despite the fact that quality concerns still persist surprisingly in an era the dominant discourse in Ethiopia seemed allegedly shifting towards quality. In fact, a national response is currently underway to overhaul the entire education system of the country as we have witnessed through the public discussion forums on the education road map drafted by the task force mobilized by the MoE (MoE, 2019;Tirussew, 2018).

We have been making so many changes; yet we are apparently changing little, as a philosopher once said, "the more we change, the more we stay the same". Or if at all we change,it is like, what a development economist once said about development, "Development is simply substitution of one nuisance by another".

In the face of all these efforts of appropriating education in Ethiopia, if we are not witnessing a scenario in which these efforts are not bearing the necessary fruit, then it would be inhuman to continue business as usual of making changes without understanding what really needs to change not at a surface but rather at the deeper and the foundation. I think asking the write question at the right time now is better than giving correct answers to a number of wrong questions that only promise inappropriate courses of action in policy, curriculum and textbook designs, leadership and governance layouts, instructional and evaluation practices etc.

The Four Core Challenges

So, I would like to pinpoint major problems of our pursuit in educational practice and then appeal to your curiosity so that you may align your present discussions and possibly your future research along them.

• First is the problem of addressing quality and quantity in isolation. Obviously, quality is not friendly to quantity particularly for resource-scarce nations like Ethiopia. Yet, addressing one without the other is even more costly.

• Second problem is that of taking top-down approaches of change that are not participatory and engaging major actors in many ways; thus leading to feelings of resentment against and lack of ownership of policies and curricula materials among implanting agencies.

• Third problem is the huge gaps observed between educational designs and their implementations. There are, on the one hand, interesting policy and curricula items and strategy issues at the top, yet there are, on the other hand, lots of problems in the process of implementation; thus resulting into poor educational outcomes.

• Fourth and most important problem relates to the issue of continuity and change. Anytime change happens in the education sector, we don't begin benchmarking performances and traditions on the ground and build on what we alreadyhave.But clingonto benchmarking what are felt best practices else where. This has resulted into instituting external solutions to internal problems, shifting from one extreme to another extreme, and also beginning from scratch anytime change happens. Institutional and national memories have been wiped out in successive regimes, local wisdom and knowledge have consistently been pushed aside; thus one regime not learning from the other. In a way, the past failing to inform the present. With

apologies for my harsh statements, I would consider this as an "intellectual and educational genocide.

External Orientation as a Persistent Concern

Amidst all the changes that we make in education, we are, however,far-fetched to my opinion and consistently the same only on one thing; i.e.taking an external orientation in our educational design and practice except for some little developments in some respect (e.g. Simegn, 2022). We are very good in bench marking international experiences; surprisingly these experiences not even international but merely western(Wuhibegezer, 2016; Belay & Belay, 2016, 2017; Teshome, 2017; Beide, Yigzaw, Belay &Fantahun, 2022).We are, however, not good at conducting needs assessments of local realities in our educational endeavors.I buy Professor MessayKebede's views of the problems of modernization in this country. In his book 'Survival and modernization: Ethiopia's enigmatic present- A philosophical discourse', Professor MessayKebede (1999) held that "no country has modernized itself by importation of westernization. According to him, the Ethiopian experience is that of mistaking modernization for westernization thateventually meant progressive dissolution of the Ethiopian mentality. The avenue for modernization to him is to anchor modernization on traditional values and beliefs of the Ethiopian people. According to MaimireMenessemay (2007), the consequences of an education system based on imported western educational practices have been catastrophic. A century of thoughtless embrace of western education has left Ethiopia with more poverty, corruption and tyranny than the country has ever known before its encounter with this imported education. This is not to condone education of one over the other. Rather, it is simply to underscore the issue of relevance of education to local realities and needs. Surly, one person's treasure is another person's trash and, hence, we need to heed to Aristotle's 'Know thyself' dictum so thatwe may not trash one's treasure and not to

treasure other's trash. I remain in faith to appreciate the renowned genius of science, Albert Einstein, who has beautifully expressed this:

> *Everybody is a genius. But, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its entire life believing that it is stupid.*

Self-knowledge does not only help not to trash one's treasure but it also helps not to treasure our trash and not to trash others' treasure as well. The former may lead to an inward orientation and the latter preempts an external orientation. Although both are healthy pursuits of development, taking extreme position is inappropriate as it inhibits either learning from others orfrom oneself because of excessive feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and self-rejection that uploads others into the portfolio of the 'self' to fill in the hiatus. Critical self-examination is of tremendous help safeguarding the 'self' from such inappropriate orientations. However, I am of a strong opinion that some of the Ethiopian golden traditions had faded away because of absence of such critical assessments that could possibly bring their treasures to light; and keeps away saturations from mumbo-jumbos of others. The role of early year's traditional education could be one such example. Although it flourished back in history, it is almost invisible these days. What is worrisome is not that it is becoming peripheral, but it could be pushed aside with its treasures unexamined and making the education enterprise becomes vulnerable to importations.

History has repeatedly shown that education in Ethiopia then seems like fitting a square page on a round hole as graduates fit neither to tradition nor to modernity. A major partin the making of this problem is, as I said earlier, the issue of educational relevance and feasibility in the countryat all levels; both in terms of content and form.

Closely intertwined with these problems of educational content and form is obviously the use of foreign language as instruction.

Ethiopia has embarked on English language teaching since the introduction of 'modern' education in the country in early 20thor 1879. **The expansion of 'modern' education during Minilik II gave English language the leverage to gain prominence in the history of the country's education. English language teaching in Ethiopian higher institution, on the other hand, began with the launching of the first University College of Addis Ababa in 1950, the present Addis Ababa University.**To date, many universities have been established throughout the nation and English language has continuedto serving as the language of academia, study and research in higher education institutions; despite the disappointingly poor level of proficiency of the users even by African standards.

Even though English has been introduced as a subject and served as a medium of instruction from primary through high school and higher education**since the inception of 'modern' education in Ethiopia nearly over a century ago, research and experiences send a poignant message that** the learners' proficiency remains inadequate at all times; despite so many efforts to improve the statuesque. As many researchers reveal, the problem is not only lack of English proficiency of students; but many university instructors themselves suffer from a deficiency in English language skills. This makes it obvious that the problem is alarming and beyond any level of repair at the moment; obviously soliciting now an entirely different orientation to dealing with the problem.

One can certainly argue that it is only through and by languages that collective life and the world could be interpreted in integrative manner. So, I believe that the eventual replacement of English by Ethiopian languages is one of the factors that could strengthen quality of education. I submit to Alamin Mazruiwho says that the use of African languages could be the basis for an intellectual revolution. According to

Tekeste Negash, if such intellectual revolution happens, it would have the goal of enhancing the survival of Ethiopian society and consequently several of its value.

Tekeste argues, I also submit to this argument, that English is not only a language but it is a value system. Attending all classes in English is tantamount to the whole sale adaptation of the culture that the English language represents at the price of one's native language and the values that this language contains. In his analysis of the crisis of Ethiopian education, TekestNegash(2010) underscores the problem of using English as one of the problems, and in his subsequent writing of the paper on "the curse of English as a medium of instruction", he opts for the use of Ethiopian languages as a medium of instruction in universities; not only in lower grades as it has already been practiced today. He says:

> *I believe that it is imperative that Ethiopia makes the transition from English to Amharic and Oromiffa by about 2025…; 20 to 25 years is just enough to discuss the issue of the benefits of connecting to one's world view and of initiating the process for translation and reinterpretation of school materials as well as the development of both languages (Tekeeste, 2010).*

However, to the dismay of Tekeste and even myself, the localization of medium of instruction at higher levels has not become even a subject of debate among the academia; let alone a buy-in from policy makers for any concrete steps of implementing his proposal.

Grave Consequences of this Irrelevant Education

Obviously then, education that is replete with irrelevant content yet to be delivered in a language that is poorly mastered would hardly be engaging the learners. Students need to beagentic of their own development and learning (yet they are only struggling

to make sense of their learning), and use learned stuff to dealing with their environment (but are bridled by English not to speak and write). In academic terms, growing up in a context that encourages powerlessness, lack of purpose, and disengagement is commonly seen resulting in young people taking an external orientation in learning; that is, education for getting mere degrees, studying not for knowledge but for exam, and a lot of other ensuing behavioral problems including cheating during exams, plagiarism in thesis writing etc. In non-academic terms, having an educational practice that is disengaging also means thwarting and frustrating the inherent human desire for personal agency. When agency is not promoted, it obviously takes a negative route as it can't be stopped; it is like diverting the course of a river:

> *Students assume agency over their life pursuing what we call "problems" but what they call "their rights."Cases in point are so many young people in our universities today trapped with behavioral, character and ethical problems that at times seem to take a political overtone: college maladjustment, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior (Commercial sex, STIs, HIV/AIDS), violence of various forms, narrow sense of identity constructions that was found to be negatively correlated with national identity, compromised values and attitudes of education, lack of hard work and motivation for learning, as well as lack of methods and skills for independent and collaborative learning (Belay, 2018).*

Little Takeaways

So, I would conclude by saying this: Education without tradition and tradition without education, education without culture and culture without education, education without history and history without education, education without politics and politics without

education are just of little worth, relevance, and quality. Such education would tend to betray a nation than transforming it. Hence, I would like to take the privilege of inviting young scholars and education so that they may align their research, academic discourse and professional inquiries with questions like, "what is Ethiopian about Ethiopian higher education? What is our philosophy of quality and what is the quality of this philosophy? How would we venture out from within etc.?

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