

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Towards Reforming Ethiopian Education: A Few Remarks*

Darge Wole**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

As alumnus and long-serving staff member of the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, it is a privilege for me to make a few statements concerning the current state of Ethiopian education, particularly in relation to teacher education and development. My basic premise is that educational progress in the country can be enhanced through greater consensus, better governance and improved professionalism and social ethics.

In education, as in other sectors, consensus founded on rational and open debate is critical since it, more often than not, results in common ownership and commitment in joint endeavors. In some cases, however, the record in our education sector does not look good in this regard. For instance, it is hard to say that the previous decision pertaining to the integrated versus the add-on approach in the training of secondary school teachers was based on adequate consensus. To mention another instance which borders on the political, in spite of the importance of a national teachers' association in strengthening teacher professional commitment and well-being, apparently, so far, conditions have not been created so that all teachers whole-heartedly subscribe to one and the same association and engage more actively in the pursuit of excellence in educational provision.

Related to the observation I just made is the apparent lack of an adequate mechanism to promote the productive involvement of intellectuals in the Diaspora so that they can contribute more to our educational endeavors in an organized manner. In this respect, I feel that proactive measures involving wider political space and a consensual strategy can produce some useful results. Improvement of the working conditions of educators, both local and Diaspora-based, will help to encourage and maintain the motivation for a more concerted effort to tackle the educational challenges we are facing today. Lessons from countries like India and China concerning ways of attracting their Diaspora intellectuals can be adapted discreetly to promote the cause.

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Pertaining to governance, there are a variety of areas which need more focused attention to promote teacher recruitment, deployment and retention. In this regard, at the minimum, red-tape and irrational discrimination and injustice concerning such matters as selection of candidates for training at colleges of teacher education, performance evaluation of teachers, horizontal salary adjustment, transfer to other sites of work and hardship allowance should not be tolerated.

Besides salary scale, it appears that teacher motivation is also significantly influenced by the status the community assigns to teachers, by the opportunity teachers get for further academic study and by student discipline. Communities should therefore be mobilized even more strongly so that they increase their support, in as much as their resources and conditions permit, to the betterment of the working conditions of teachers. In connection with this, there may even be citizens or organizations that would be willing to make endowments for the cause. Teacher academic upgrading also needs greater attention. Student self-discipline which, as literature suggests, can be more important than intelligence in determining academic achievement, will not be guaranteed by rules and regulations and counseling alone. Students should be satisfied with the way the teaching /learning process is organized and with the relevance of their study for their future.

Mr. Chairman

I further feel that the school leadership can play a pivotal role in improving school conditions and performance since school leaders are better placed to marshal and properly manage resources from the community or from other sources. At the risk of sounding politically naïve, I feel that, other things being equal, it is professional competence that should be the over-riding criterion for the appointment of school leaders. In the same vein, school supervisors should be up to the task both technically and ethically. Despite the Ministry's efforts to address some of the kinds of issues I just raised, with the expansion of educational system, the need for rectifying the situation is more challenging and critical now than ever. We are today confronted not just with urgency but with accelerating urgency.

Concerning professionalism and ethics, academic corruption within and outside the educational system is making a mockery of our efforts and aspirations. From classroom cheating to impersonation in national exams, forgery of transcripts and cut-and-paste theses to fake graduation certificates, corruption appears to be spreading wide. Although ICT can be very helpful in educational practice if properly used, it seems that it has also turned out to be insidiously instrumental in promoting academic corruption. Corruption is infectious and sanctions are not enough to contain it. Other factors such as modeling by parents, school personnel, high-level officials, etc are essential to combat it. The

seriousness of the issue of corruption globally was highlighted in a UNESCO publication way back in 2007. A World Bank sponsored study regarding corruption in the education sector of our country which was reported in 2011 has further suggested that there is a medium to high risk of corruption in terms of, among others, forged transcripts, document falsification, and collusion with teachers. It is therefore high time that the Ministry of Education and all other stakeholders, individually and institutionally, take multi-pronged actions to fight the scourge.

Mr. Chairman

I realize that there are other ways of looking at our educational system aside from the ones I mentioned. I also recognize the many efforts that have been made particularly by the Ministry of Education and also by the general community, the private sector as well as by development partners to deal with our educational problems although the results have not been as satisfactory as one would have liked them to be. In my opinion, our task now should be to build on those experiences, our own experience and other relevant lessons from international policy and practice with a view to generate some elements to help in reviewing policy discussions and devising more effective implementation strategies. This is a tall order but I think this forum affords an opportunity to make an indent. In this connection, I wish to throw in an idea which is not entirely new for reflection.

I feel that it will be useful to create or organize a professionally strong and productive think tank that continuously maintains contact not just with the higher echelons of the Ministry and with development partners but also with the general community and generates or sifts out break-through ideas for tackling and forestalling existing and anticipated educational problems. The think tank may be realized by strengthening an existing and relevant unit or body in the Ministry of Education. Aside from the issues I mentioned earlier, focal issues that such a forum can dwell on include: how to make decentralization of educational services more effective, how to attract more qualified candidates to the teaching profession, and how to encourage the private sector to make greater contributions to educational provision.

Mr. Chairman

If I may now briefly turn to the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, it is gratifying to see that the new leadership of the College is urging all its staff to aim high and achieve high. But the College is only part of a larger system and the views and decisions of those in the corridors of power, including the Ministry of Education, will continue to influence importantly the type and level of its achievements. Still I believe it is important to remain positive and persist in exploring opportunities for further growth

and contribution. In this regard, the possibility of creating a university of teacher training buttressed by the long and rich tradition of the College and other experiences should not be ruled out.

Mr. Chairman

I am not a sage and I have not offered words of wisdom. But I hope that the issues I raised will contribute to the ensuing discussions in some way. In closing, I would like to express my appreciation to the College leadership for conceiving and organizing this forum and wish the forum notable success in its deliberations. I also trust that the outcomes of the discussion will open up new avenues for re-vitalizing policy and practice in Ethiopian education especially in relation to teacher education.

Thank you all for your attention.

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