The Role of The Supervisor in Improving The Elementary School Curriculum

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It is generally agreed that the curriculum for our elementary schools should be designed and, when necessary, revised by experts acting under the direction of the Ministry of Education. But this immediately raises the question: who are these experts to be? Are the elementary school supervisors to be included among them?

There is a feeling of disappointment, deep and bitter, among supervisors and supervisors-in-training at the inactive role which has been thrust upon them. Their ability to make a significant contribution to curriculum improvement, an ability based on experience and special training, is disregarded; and, what is even more galling, their suggestions regarding curriculum improvement, suggestions based on an intimate knowledge of the classroom situation, are utterly ignored. The splendid-sounding suggestion in the current curriculum that, at any cost, the teacher's flexibility must be encouraged, has not succeeded in persuading those most directly concerned, the teachers and directors, to implement some of the most obvious and important recommendations that the supervisors have made. Recommendations, it is felt, must come from the Ministry. But will any ever come from there?

Are our supervisors, as educational leaders who are aware of what is happening in the schools, really not fit to be trusted with the task of identifying problems, suggesting solutions and seeing to the implementation of these suggestions? Or should basic education in Ethiopia continue to suffer simply because there has been a failure to delegate responsibility to the right people?

It has been stressed by a member of educationists that if education is to be improved as time, place and circumstance demand, the urgent need of the school system is for an adequate number of professionally trained supervisors whose responsibility – real, not nominal responsibility – it is to take the lead in a continuing process of curriculum revision. This is a priority task in the view of many educationists. Ben M. Harris, for example lists ten major tasks for the supervisor, of which Task No. 1 in order of importance is:-

> Developing curriculum: designing or redesigning that which is to be taught, by whom, when, where and in what pattern. Developing curriculum guides, establishing standards, and developing instructional units or courses are examples of programs related to this task. [1]

Ethiopia has trained a considerable number of elementary school supervisors. But training is not enough; it is essential that, once in the field, they should be given the opportunity and responsibility of using their talents, training and experience for the betterment of the education system. Alas, too often they have

been deployed merely to fill administrative gaps as secretaries or assistants in Provincial or Awraja education offices, though obviously the place of the supervisor is not in the administrator's office but in the schools, helping the teacher to solve the problems of the schools and make the child's life more meaningful.

Ato Yohannes Asrat, speaking on the basis of recent personal experience, has this to say:

"..... a more general problem is that the number of schools within the Awraja are usually larger than one supervisor alone could handle..... some schools remain unsupervised; their problems remain unsolved and their conditions unrealised..." [2]

What has been accomplished during the last eight years in the production of elementary school supervisors is remarkable. However, the utmost effort should now be exerted to make it possible for these trained people, with the basic skills they have acquired, to carry out their responsibilities in enriching the elementary school curriculum and making it practical. Some of them are now loaded down with responsibilities of a kind that do not require the specialised training they have received. Isn't it wasteful and unrealistic to appoint a man, after five years of successful and practical training in the supervision of elementary schools, as director of a junior secondary school? Yet this is the kind of thing that is happening. Ato Tesfaye Redda, who has investigated the question, says,

"When it comes to assignment, service and supervisory activities in practice, one cannot fail to notice the neglect and wastage of the capable and trained personnel. The strong desire and effort exerted by the Ministry of Education while training such officers die after graduation when in fact, it is time to reap." [3] Other supervisors suffer from lack of support. Their suggestions are not put into effect, but are left to moulder in the files along with decades-old correspondence. As Ato Tesfaye puts it, "...not being able to get immediate actions at provincial level on reports submitted by the supervisors has impeded the work of supervision tremendously." [4]

This state of affairs prompts a number of questions. Should a nation's education be determined by officials who see only the ideal and are blind to the realities? Should it be determined by those whose convictions incline them towards making education serve the relatively small number of these who are privileged (in terms of geography, social position, income and influence) without regard to the disadvantaged? Should it be determined and administered by those who give importance mainly to higher education and lavish their money accordingly, regardless of the fallacy of squandering money on the roof of the structure before the foundations have been well and truly laid?

Even though many educational problems, administrative and other, need sharp and constructive assessment, some areas in particular call for immediate action by educational leaders – supervisors, of course, among them.

To start with, let us ask ourselves the question: to what end is education

in our country directed? Do we have an education based on a specific philosophy that considers the values, the life and thinking and the future of our people? Recently a handful of Ethiopian educational leaders have endeavoured to identify the philosophy our educational system is based on. Have they succeeded? It is clear to us what we are after? Our youngsters are exposed to conflicting ideals and values. Are they prepared to face these and react to them critically and intelligently, or are their young and easily influenced minds left to the mercy of chance? What does the school do outside its four walls to collaborate with concerned community agents in working out answers to the question, "Education to what end?"

Where do we stand at present? The aim of education in our elementary schools, at least the most apparent one, has been to prepare children for the grade six national examination designed by subject-matter specialists. Accordingly, the emphasis has been on content, which children have been made to memorize – fragments of facts taken out of books which, though written in Amharic, are of foreign origin and designed to be used successfully by technologically developed urban dwellers. This one-sided experience that our children get has little in common with the actual life of the society of which they are part. Is this what we want for our children? True, the curriculum mentions a list of specific and general aims of education in Ethiopia, but the astonishing fact is that the list serves only as the first page of the document. Some teachers may manage to memorise the list, but how many of these gear the experiences they provide children with to the attainment of these objectives is a topic for worthwhile research.

As many parents regret, some of the good traditional values have been neglected; instead, some unhealthy foreign habits and customs have, with no discrimination, been introduced to and picked up by young Ethiopians. It is not uncommon to see even elementary school children abandoning some of our centuries-old traditions of courtesy in the mistaken belief that good manners have no place in the modern world. If education in our country does not achieve the important but easily attained aim of inculcating good manners, what is its worth?

Is it less important to see that the future adults of our nation benefit from both sides of education, the traditional and the developmental? Obviously, the primary purpose of the school, as a formal educational agent, it to be "a transmitter of the cultural heritage and to be an agent of change." Education to be complete must be based on the valuable aspects of the national heritage and at the same time must aim at developing those values and attitudes necessary for the restless struggle towards a better life, notably a readiness to work and a readiness to surmount the social and ethnic barriers which stand in the way of cooperative effort.

The truly educated Ethiopian is the one who can combine the essence of our historical heritage with the value of modern civilization and can distil from both an original and harmonious philosophy of living. Education then should

aim at the development of the human qualities, should prepare the person in some useful profession and at the same time should lead him to some academic challenge. These ideas seem to give us some clues as to how our educational problems should be tackled. [5]

If education is to serve Ethiopians according to their needs, the determination of the content of the elementary school curriculum is of the first importance. The content of the curriculum is supposed to be based on the needs of the learners – and hence of the society with which the learners identify themselves. The needs of the learners are not limited to the acquisition of facts. Life includes the development of valuable attitudes, the formation of good habits, the development of wide and honest appreciations and worthwhile skills that contribute to the growth of a whole man, fit physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually. The current curriculum is too subject-matter-oriented to serve this purpose. It is not adapted to our children's needs, environment and practical situation.

> The hastily devised curriculum was a mere aggregate of topics from textbooks of differing national origins. In many cases it lacked sufficient continuity; it was highly theoretical and far removed from the everyday life of the pupils; in some subject areas such as science, it could not be taught adequately with the existing physical limitation of the schools; it sometimes made unrealistic demands upon the teachers; in general it provided very poorly for the needs of pupils in a developing society. [6]

Incidentally, after Dr. Ayalew Gabre Sellassie's comment (made in 1964) on the 1959 "experimental" Elementary School Curriculum, there were supposedly some "revisions" made by the Curriculum and Teaching Materials Division of the Ministry of Education. The more recent versions the writer is acquainted with are those of 1969 and 1971. The former does not reveal any marked alterations. If there is any slight observable change, it is in the arrangement and sequence of course lists in English and Home Economics. The 1971 issue, too, contains a change in mathematics. But, generally speaking, the Elementary School Curriculum of to-day is still the "Experimental" Curriculum of 1959.

The content and the nature of the curriculum have tremendously influenced the presentation of lessons in our elementary schools. Our children are made passive learners, and the classroom and the teachers' notes are made the main sources of learning experiences. These learning experiences seldom appeal to children's senses, while the community and its resources are treated just as foreign entities.

> The curriculum should consist of the competencies of living needed in Ethiopia rather than the usual body of vertical information to be committed to memory, or the college preparatory pattern in the usual limited sense. [7]

Vague concepts and inappropriate methods of teaching lead to wrong learning habits. Children are not helped and encouraged to think critically but

memorise blindly. "Critical thinkers are the ones that are needed in the world of today." Doesn't Ethiopia need them too?

> ... We need to introduce a major reform in our school system especially at the primary school level, considering both the purpose of schools and the appropriateness of the education we are providing our children. [8]

Along with the content of the elementary school curriculum the textbooks that go with it need the careful scrutiny and assessment of educational leaders in the country. There must be many of us who agree with Horace Mann, who said, "Books should liberate man from the limits of his environment." However, we should also agree that textbooks supplement classroom experiences that reflect actual life situations. True, the child's reading and understanding horizon must be widened if we want him to be well-informed and broad-minded. This serves a different purpose. Anyway, Heaven alone knows whether the text-books used in our elementary schools at present were prepared with Mann's philosophy in mind.

As pointed out by a number of educational leaders and book reviewers, the problem of books rests on the lack of appropriate Amharic words to express non-traditional ideas and concepts accurately, on the lack of publishing houses in the country and the lack of Ethiopians well trained in selecting and editing reading matter for children on the basis of their environment, level and maturity. The books in current use are deplorable. They are inadequate both in subject matter and in their relevance to local needs.

> ... The textbooks in science and social studies and mathematics which have been produced for the new program are almost entirely direct translations of foreign textbooks, and the cultural and practical situations described therein are in many cases alien to the Ethiopian environment. [9]

The terms used, though written in Amharic letters, don't sound like Amharic. The teachers, let alone the children, are confronted with problems. There are neither dictionaries nor encyclopedias to which they can refer for meanings, and the terms used rarely symbolize the concepts they stand for. Facts are scattered at random throughout these books with no or little attention given to structural and/or systematic organization.

> Attempts to keep language simple have sometimes resulted in insufficient explanation. Understanding of the subject matter has suffered through lack of appropriate organization of books into units, chapters, and sub-chapters. In general, our attempts to provide textbooks have been characterized by insufficient groundwork in knowledge of the educational process. [10]

Even these books which a resourceful and conscientious teacher could make use of with a critical approach, are inadequately and unevenly distributed. There are elementary schools in the nation which have never heard of such books.[11] For all most of us know, they might be locked up in stores out in the provinces, wonderful provisions for lucky termites, or they might never even have left the central store. But, couldn't the supervisors do something about

this waste, if given the necessary means and the freedom to act?

Before coming to the culmination of the discussion, the writer once again would like to point out strongly the fact that the responsibilities of the supervisor in improving basic education in Ethiopia are very great. The recognition and solution of elementary school problems, the needs of the children and the difficulties of the teachers need their vigorous action and selfless devotion. They could do great things if they were in a position to make an organized effort. Isn't it high time for them to work as a body and add weight and importance to their cause and efforts?

This paper is not, by any means, an exhaustive discussion of the supervisory role in the improvement of the elementary school curriculum nor is it a discussion of solutions to our educational problems. Moreover, the problems discussed here have been pointed out by both Ethiopian and foreign educators. Unfortunately, their recommendations are still recommendations. There appears to have been no effort made towards implementing them. Let us hope that these attacks from all sides will bring out action that will make possible the putting into effect of at least some of the valuable suggestions for solving some of the very crucial problems of education in Ethiopia.

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