A Reflection on Amare's 'From Knowledge Acquisition to Knowledge Application: The Case of Curriculum Inquiry in Ethiopia'

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Abstract: This paper is a critical reflection on Amare's observation that the Ethiopian school system focuses only on the knowledge acquisition aspect of education with "narrowly defined" educational goals and his assessment of curricular and pedagogical accomplishments. Amare's critique is reflected upon from philosophical perspectives and in relation to UNESCO's four pillars of education. The paper concludes stressing the need for philosophical foundations to understand and improve the Ethiopian education system.

Introduction

Amare Asgedom (2009) contends, based on a case study he conducted in Tigray, that education in Ethiopia is highly tainted by the course-coverage syndrome and that the whole teaching and learning process focuses on only one dimension of educational goals – knowledge acquisition. Amare tried to show through his thorough investigation that the country finds itself in this quagmire in consequence of a curriculum "characterized by bulky content" and "narrowly defined" educational goals. He assessed the degree of curricular and pedagogical accomplishments at all levels of schooling in terms of UNESCO's pillars of education. He also accused the school system of being uncommitted to "the goals of skill development" and suggested a "radical transformation of the curriculum and the school system."

In this term article, I discuss Amare's perspective in relation to educational philosophies and the four pillars of education identified by UNESCO's International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (led by

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Jacques Delors) in its report *Learning: the Treasure Within* (UNESCO, 1996).

Philosophy

In one of our class meetings with Dr. Amare, we have been discussing whether the school is serving the society or being served by the society. I was arguing that we "the educated" need to have vivid philosophical perspectives (or paradigms) which we should consciously internalize as our beliefs and values and to which we are committed before anything else, including serving or being served by the society. It is my contention that, in the Ethiopian context, philosophical thinking in education lacks clarity and rigor.

Philosophy shapes the way we perceive both the social and the natural worlds. The worldviews we hold delineate our paradigms in relation to the ontological, epistemological and axiological features of education, and hence, our philosophy of education which has two-fold advantages: first, it contributes to a deeper understanding of educational theory and practice and concepts like *education*, *teaching*, *learning, knowledge* and *curriculum*; second, it provides the conceptual framework for intellectual dialogue and debate. Then, genuine change in our education system becomes inevitable.

Amare says:

> The absence of a proposal for a joint action and responsibilities in teaching and learning suggests the hidden bias of the curriculum to mere *acquisition* grounded in Western philosophy and context (culture) and hence lack meaning in the African context where traditional values underpin our understanding and moral behavior (p. 428).

When it comes to education, the profession we pursue, “the absence of a proposal” has to do with, in my opinion, unclear ontological, epistemological and axiological stances or, even worse, a lack of the philosophical rigor needed to take a defendable position on the part of the existing generation of “scholars” as regards the nature of education itself. And, as a result, we resort to adopting others’ beliefs, values and attitudes.

I have never observed a single or a group of individuals from this University debating in an open forum about the type of educational philosophy that is appropriate for our school system with a deeper sense of “a nation at risk” except, of course, a few who tried to vent their concerns out in meetings and thru articles they write. I am not pointing fingers here. What I am saying is, without a clear philosophical perspectives and researches based on them, especially educational philosophies commixed with endogenous values and beliefs that give more local control to educational processes, it would be difficult or even impossible to realize the radical transformation suggested by Amare.

To create a significant and meaningful change at all levels of our system of education, it requires reconsidering our view of *education* and *knowledge*. What *really is* education? What *is* knowledge? What is the *purpose* and *function* (to society) of education? The answers we have to these questions are indicative of our philosophical positions (if any) with regard to Ethiopian education.

John Dewey, a pragmatist and progressive educator, is quoted to have said: “The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think -- rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men.” In this perspective, the whole process of educating is to draw out, as Socrates said, and build upon the learner’s internal abilities. It, however, seems that we are standing contrary to this philosophy. My experience and observations have already made me believe that most Ethiopian educators still see education as a process of pouring (injecting) information external to the learner. In this view,

which I call the "tabula-rasa paradigm", we see ourselves as the knowledgeable and the authorities of classroom instructions; we complacently transfer our knowledge to "empty minds" and expect the "filled minds" to regurgitate that knowledge when asked. Amare's article justifies this: "The teaching and learning process in class is aimed at making students acquire massive amount of information and thereby reflect it in the form of recall." (p. 421). On the same page, Amare tells us about his concern regarding our view of the purpose of education: "The most serious problem of our educational system is that *acquisition* (knowledge) becomes an *end* in itself …" As long as this devastatingly overwhelming view lingers on in the mind of the educated, it would be naïve of us to expect a change despite policies designed in that direction. As Amare argues education should serve far-reaching purposes than just bringing about acquisition of knowledge.

Amare blames the "wrong curriculum" for not achieving the 1994 policy statements. According to his analysis, the effect of teaching the wrong curriculum was to "urbanize the rural youth through inculcation of Western values …" (p. 425). The curriculum is simply a reflection of our conceptions of knowledge, teaching and learning. It seems that the "wrong" curriculum designers, whoever they might be, ontologically view knowledge as existing "out there" independent of the human thought processes; and, perhaps, tacitly assuming that the West discovered the knowledge out there. Consequently (no surprise here!), "our" curriculum emerged laden with Western epistemic and cultural values threatening indigenous knowledge and culture. This is not to mean, in any way, that we do not need to share Western experience, however.

Let's collectively begin to look inward and try to develop profound philosophical thoughts of the nature, purpose, process and function of education. Let's view knowledge (curriculum content) from multiple perspectives, both in theory and practice, and broaden the curriculum to include pedagogies that reveal learners' hidden potential, endogenous values and actual local needs, verities of traditionally preserved knowledge, etc. We nee to design a curriculum with a holistic purpose of attaining social

relevance and pedagogic quality thereby producing citizens capable of using and generating knowledge to solve theoretical and real-life problems; definitely, not a curriculum that produces a generation with a white-collar-job attitude. Schools must also be willing to make a paradigm shift from immutable "knowledge transmission" view to the dynamic "knowledge construction" view where they can serve the community by serving their students and hence fulfilling the purpose and function of education.

UNESCO's Four Pillars and Ethiopian Education

In his inquiry of the (Ethiopian) curriculum, Amare used as a guiding framework the four pillars of education drawn from Jacques Delors' report – *Learning: The Treasure Within* (UNESCO, 1996): *Learning to Know*, *Learning to Do*, *Learning to Live Together* and *Learning to Be*. One might question, however, the relevance of using this four-pillar framework for scrutinizing a curriculum congested with content *before* making attempts to give all three domains (cognitive, affective and psychomotor) equal status in the curriculum or, more radically, before we, teachers and students alike, liberate ourselves from what Paulo Freire calls the banking concept of education – the depositor-depository concept. I am not sure which should come first; in any case, let's turn to the four pillars:

Learning to Know

Amare's interpretation of "learning to Know" as "knowledge acquisition" (p. 415) seems quite different from what has been stated in Delors' report. In fact the first statement under *Learning to know* reads: "This type of learning is concerned less with the acquisition of structured knowledge than with the mastery of learning tools." A few paragraphs after, the report expounds that "Learning to know implies learning how to learn by developing one's concentration, memory skills and ***ability to think*** (emphasis added)." This is certainly a much deeper elucidation.

I agree with Amare's keen observation that a "curriculum that uses knowledge in the context of recall as an *end* in itself instead of a *means* for understanding, synthesis, … ultimately produces people who have inflated self-images but … incapable of adapting to or changing their environment." A curriculum designed with the conceptual framework of *Learning to Know* helps the learner develop lifelong knowledge, skills, reasoning power and critical thinking needed in the world beyond the classroom walls. The question is how to explore the philosophy of *Learning to Know* and implement it here in Ethiopia towards meaningful change. Amare mentioned that students in Tigray should learn "disciplines and not subject matter" because "a discipline constitutes a distinctive way of thinking about the world." (p. 431). A multitude of Tigray-type cases exist county-wide which need research-based remedies.

I have this inner feeling that we are losing both the *teaching and learning culture*. The behaviors of teachers and students in Case A type schools in Amare's research may reflect my concern. We need to rethink and lay particular stress on the values of *Learning to Know* for the individual learner not only in the school years but also thereafter when functioning in the wider world. We need to restate our educative purposes (I do not mean Tylerian objectives here) based on promising learning theories and develop a curriculum that clearly outlines *how* to know and *what* to know in the process of learning. Here, "What to know" means much more than enabling students to answer text-book "What … ?" questions; it is a meta level educational perspective which takes us beyond mere teaching and learning; it is about endlessly exploring what can be known to the human mind; it is about using learning opportunities to learn.

Immense curricular content does not guarantee that students are *learning to know*. Indeed, we need to shift the focus from quantity to quality. Again, we must take care not to narrowly see quality only in terms of having quality teachers and quality teaching materials in schools. Since we are talking about learning here, quality education should also address the *quality of learners* – are they ready to learn?

Learning to Do

Delors' report associates *Learning to Do* with "the issue of occupational training" in the sense of creating "personal competence" that fits the requirements of the ICT age. Stressing the shift from certified skills to personal competence, the report further states that 'Learning to do' can no longer mean what it did when people were trained to perform a very specific physical task in a manufacturing process. … *Purely physical tasks are being replaced by tasks with a greater intellectual or cerebral content* such as the operation, maintenance and monitoring of machines and design and organizational tasks, *as the machines themselves become more intelligent* (italics mine)."

I subscribe to Amare's opinion that the Ethiopian curriculum is not clear about the type of skills students should learn and how those skills are achieved. But, he also confuses me when he states that phrases like "development of skills" express learning to do [!] (p. 431). How can we be sure that skill-related objective statements in our curriculum *really* mean *Learning to Do* in the sense described in Delors' report? Are the acquisition of skills ("development of skills") meant to be expressed in relation to occupational success, especially during curriculum implementation? I have doubts here.

The 70/30 curriculum failed to instill the much needed personal competence into the young generation that would have enabled them to deal with many situations that still persist as problems. It is dismaying to see young teachers in schools still armed with whips but not with the principles of *Learning to Do*. Outside schools, in everyday life, it is not uncommon to witness service failures such as frequent power interruptions and communication network problems despite technological improvements. We see more and more expatriates doing the (consultancy) job in these sectors, including the education sector. I heard that the news that France Telecom has taken over the management and operations of ETC. I wonder what percent of young Ethiopian electrical engineers are participating in the design and

construction of hydro-electric power plants. All the incapacity on our side is indicative of the fatal flaws in our vocational education and training programs – that they are unable to produce the workforce equipped with occupational/work-specific skills, functional/transferable skills, leadership and management skills, social/interpersonal skills which are required of a competent person not only in the confines of the workplace but also in achieving the wider aim of education in building a country.

Amare asserts that the different types of skills are overshadowed by "the culture of knowledge acquisition" in the Ethiopian curriculum which "superficially treats the idea of '*learning to do*' This is acceptably true, for we did not do our job as educators. Amare, however, goes to the extent of saying plainly that "our society … seems to avoid the *pain and labor of thought…*" (p. 432.) He even wonders how much we Ethiopians are a learning society. It is understandable that a man as educated as Amare gets frustrated when his hope for a better society appears to disappear into the thin air. The American writer and philosopher Eric Hoffer said that *the truly human society is a learning society*. I believe we are *truly* human capable of learning to do. Amare himself attested that in Tigray "Case B and Case C type of schools are good examples of *learning to do*." We are (aren't we?) descendants of those who erected the Obelisques of Aksum and the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. We can use the rich legacy of our history in the school system to realize the unrealized human talents, skills and competence hidden in the young generation. I do not think we are "in the process of degenerating" (p. 434), we are in a long period of hibernation. We need to wake up now and do much more than writing mission-vision statements.

Learning to Live Together

The Learning-to-Live-Together section of Delores' report begins by stating that education is failing to mitigate the violence and endless conflicts of the contemporary world. The report also suggests what the education sector can do in order to avoid and resolve conflict: *discovering other people* in the

fist stage of education and *involvement in common projects* in the second stage.

Learning to Live Together is all about using education to instill in the minds of children the spirit of respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and living together in peace while acknowledging differences in culture, religion, ethnicity, etc. It involves the development of social and interpersonal skills, verstehen (empathic understanding) and concern for others starting from KGs and primary schools. Smith (2002, 2008) quoted Gardner:

> I want my children to understand the world, but not just because the world is fascinating and the human mind is curious. I want them to understand it so that they will be positioned to make it a better place. Knowledge is not the same as morality, but we need to understand if we are to avoid past mistakes and move in productive directions. An important part of that understanding knows who we are and what we can do... Ultimately, we must synthesize our understandings for ourselves. The performance of understanding that try matters are the ones we carry out as human beings in an imperfect world which we can affect for good or for ill.

Amare narrates his experience (our experience too) about the behavior of AAU students – that they put the blame for their academic failure on the teachers. Let me add more: I (we) observe the tendency of students to cluster themselves in ethnic groups in almost all scenarios – when attending classes or studying in the libraries, in their choice of roommates, while eating and relaxing in the lounges and cafés, and so on. They are physically together but not living together, seeing each other but not discovering each other. I also witness the same tendency among teachers (what a shame upon us!) There are, fortunately, some exemplary students and teachers who are intrapersonally and interpersonally oriented, empathic, fully

cognizant of each other's ability and extremely positive towards the teaching and learning process. Such is the behavior that the Ethiopian curriculum should focus on to implant the concept of *Learning to Live Together* in our school system.

"[The] humanization of education is most critically needed. [We] should create a school community … working for a common goal with a school climate characterized by trust, seriousness, commitment, love, and mutual cooperation." (Amare, p. 443). Only then can we clear ourselves from dogmatic predisposition to attribute success to self and failure to others and start evaluating *our* success and failure in relation to *our* competence and skills. In addition to the need for curriculum content that advances intra- and interpersonal talents, all extracurricular activities in schools should be seen as opportunities for *Learning to Live Together*.

Learning to Be

The UNESCO Commission led by Jacques Delors stressed in its report that "education should contribute to every person's complete development - mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality." That is, *Learning to Be* is an educational process of self-discovery, creating oneself and finding inherent values and using them for all rounded personal development – body, mind and spirit – throughout one's private, family and social life.

In marked contrast to the idea of *Learning to Be*, Amare's research in Tigray shows that "the schooled are characterized by a high level of corruption, poor commitment, disengagement, poor self-confidence and a negative way of looking at others. … They do not believe they can change their own situation by themselves through hard work." Wasting school time by chewing chat, drinking alcohol and wandering the streets aimlessly is not unique to Tigray students; it has become a characteristic of urban students across the country. These findings, or rather facts, are clear indications of axiological (ethics, aesthetics) emptiness in our educational philosophy – a paucity of

"value" content in our curriculum. Amare argues that it may be difficult to judge the impact of the recently implemented civics and ethics education courses on student behaviors. That may be true, but is it likely that these courses are offered in a way fundamentally different from the offering of other courses? Are the teachers giving these courses specially trained? How can we be sure that students taking these courses are *really* learning them to change their mistaken perception (for self and others)? In fact, Tigray teachers told the researcher (Amare) that students are still aiming at passing examinations like they do for other courses which Amare is also cognizant of.

The implications to curriculum, and hence school education, are clear. We must integrate the science of human values with other subjects when designing a curriculum so that students have every opportunity to shape their perceptions of self and others, to be able to make decisions and actions in life, and to clearly understand *why* they learn what they learn. Teacher development/training programs must equally focus on ethical and aesthetic values – values of trueness, goodness, and beauty. We must establish axiological foundations in our school system not only by offering a single subject, say, moral education, but by integrating the theory of values across the entire curriculum both horizontally and vertically. Philosophical conceptions drawn from axiology provide a general framework for understanding students' perceptions and fostering their innate talents, enabling them to create original ideas and innovative ways to solve problems, to develop positive attitudes, and most of all, to make the right decisions in their academic life and future careers.

Except a few emblematic schools (like Dugum and SOS in Amare's study), who attempted and succeeded in predicating the whole process of education on morality and in creating aesthetic school compounds, Ethiopian education (primary, secondary and tertiary) seems to neglect the much needed dimensions of human development – affective, social and motor. Schooling focuses on intellectual development (cognitive domain) with detrimental effects on *character education* (also called value education, citizen

education, moral education or Moralogy by different people in different countries). That is why Amare insists the reconstruction of the Ethiopian curriculum "into a type that focuses on nurturing *critical* persons, which aims at *decency*, *freedom*, *caring* and *courage* (emphasis added)." In one of his speeches, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is known to have said:

> The function of education … is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.

The teacher by virtue of his/her profession and as a person has the responsibility and obligation to set a good example to students as the latter learn also thru observations. Observational learning, also called social learning or modeling, may produce immoral and unethical behavior if the model displays similar behaviors. In the school system of Ethiopia, we witness the practice of absenteeism from class, name-calling, partiality or favoritism, indecent sexual relations and other malpractices on the part of teachers. Such unprofessional practices of teachers engender not only ethically and morally unacceptable student behaviors (as we are already witnessing) but also a bad school leadership as it is likely that the leadership is comprised of such individuals. Obviously, if students do not have the chance to learn to BE, how can they learn to KNOW, to DO and to LIVE TOGETHER?! James A. Ogunji, a Nigerian scholar, wrote (Ogunji, 2009), "When any leadership cannot tow the path of moral rectitude it is surreptitiously dragging its followers and the generality of society by extension into moral problems."

Fortunately, the education status quo in Ethiopia does not indicate the Nigerian-type social and moral crisis as I know it from Ogunji's paper. (op. cit., p. 44) However, we need to be vigilant to the possible danger. Amare's observation strengthens my concern: "At present, the civics and ethics course is offered in parallel with a school culture that contradicts the intent

and content of the course. It is meaningless to tell people to do something while you are doing the opposite (p. 439)."

The family is the first school for children where they start imbibing ethical principles. In this regard, parent-school relations must go beyond mere exchange of information about students' behavior; a proactive and concerted action is required in creating moral beings. It is imperative that schools, families, the community, the government and other bodies who can influence education work towards the common goal of stopping the moral drift and nurture students' moral intelligence.

Conclusion

UNESCO's ideas of lifelong learning based on the four pillars of education – *Learning to Know*, *Learning to Do*, *Learning to Live Together* and *Learning to Be* – need clear philosophical perspectives to apply them in any school system. Philosophy is a compass in educational navigation. It points the right direction in policy making, in deciding on curriculum content and organization, in developing educational theory and practice and in relating these to indigenous knowledge and culture, to what and how students should (or need to) learn, to the extent and kind of academic freedom, to community-school relations, etc. My point is, the questions we should raise in policy and curriculum making must be much deeper than the consideration of Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains and mere mission-vision statements.

If one reads the history of American education, one finds philosophies of education such as Essentialism, Perennialism, and Experimentalism with profound influence on the direction of American education. What philosophy is our education based on? I am not talking about Zera Yacob philosophy. I am questioning whether contemporary Ethiopian scholars have schools of thought to follow or whether they have established one with visible influence in Ethiopian schools. I say that our education policy lacks a clear philosophical (ontological, epistemological and axiological) foundation and,

therefore, the educational philosophies which stem from it. As I have pointed out earlier in this paper I never come across a public philosophical debate between schools of thought on issues of education. Who can tell me who is what? Metaphysically idealist or realist? Epistemologically subjectivist or objectivist? Axiologically relativist or cognitivist?

My conclusion is that before anything else, we need to build the philosophical foundations to better understand and improve education itself in the Ethiopian context. In this regard I subscribe to Amare's opinion about the demand for "a clear philosophy of education to underlay policies and practices (p. 437)", and to his argument that "philosophies inform both educational policies and educational practices and become premises of one's curriculum and pedagogy." (Amare, n.d., *Conceptualizing Education*, p. 2)

Finally, I would like to finish my reflection with the following statement:

> "In the absence of philosophy, the teacher is vulnerable to externally imposed prescriptions, often mechanically treated, and to whatever schemes are dominant and fashionable at any given time. … Schools should have a philosophy for educational direction, choice and the testing of innovations." (http://socyberty.com/education/the-importance-of-philosophy-to-curriculum-makers/)

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