

What and How Much to Learn: Some Reflections of on the Call for Curriculum ‘Panacea’ in Our School System

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Abstract:

Education is considered an essential agent and vehicle of development. Educated societies and citizens are expected to lead quality life that they deserve to live. Today, qualified human capital has become the sole instrument of winning competitions in the global market. The knowledge, skills, and values gained through schooling days and years (though remains an initial entry point), play a considerable role to create a divide among the nations of the world and as means of development indicator. But no education system is complete in its own at any point in time, since education systems also produced both heroes and villains in human history. The truth, however, is that there is nothing that can be considered development without it. This being said, questions are in order: what and how much to learn to become what the society and the nation want their children would be. The principal purport of this discursive work is not to provide pure scholarly accounts, nor give answers to the current widely felt education system and curriculum questions in Ethiopia. In an attempt to explain why the public often insists on a curriculum to be an ‘answer for all educational problems’, the paper employs limited literary accounts and own observations to explain the limitations of curriculum insistence in Ethiopia. In doing so, I use some secondary sources to provide some ideas as to why such curriculum suppositions cannot always work and rather argue for the role of the society to supplement or complement school efforts. This limited work, therefore, is aimed at providing initial reflective ideas that could inspire a re-thinking of the ‘curriculum crusade’ held for some of the complex social ills in the country since recently.

Key terms: education, curriculum, teachers, students, society, social ills and heals

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1. Introduction

Education has been considered an important means to development. One of the general objectives of Ethiopia’s education and training policy (1994) is ‘to develop the physical and mental potential and the problem-solving capacity of citizens by expanding education...bring up citizens who respect human rights, stand for the wellbeing of people, as well as for equality, justice and peace, endowed with democratic culture and discipline...cultivate the cognitive, creative, productive and appreciative potential of citizens by appropriate relating education to the environment’¹ The recent education development roadmap (2018-2030) by the Ministry of Education (2016) also defines *education objectives to the creation of holistic development in all citizens, confident and competent citizens, critical thinkers, competent professionals who satisfy the requirements of the global market; entrepreneurs and innovative, strong ethical and moral values, stand for justice; peace, and unity in diversity*².

Modern education in our country has taken more than a century turn now. The need for education, however, came to its peak during 1950s and 1960s when the United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)³ and the work of Theodore Schultz⁴ made clear the link between education and development. Since then, the education issue has always been high on the agenda of most nations, the developed world in particular. The link between education and development made the education industry to focus on access to and quality, the latter being taken for producing a competitive labor power and edge-over human capital of the global market. Despite such a relatively long range of time, the quest for quality education and curriculum knowledge has remained consistent and enduring to-date.

Such quests for expansion and excellence have been part of all nations’ education system. Consequently, issues related to curriculum selection and its content, teachers, school leadership and education materials and media, have been the concern of the same. For instance, according to one of the seasoned curriculum experts, ‘despite the historical record of conflicting values, interests, and traditions in the curriculum policymaking, the “most worth” claim holds continuing appeal’⁵.

2. The insistence for more curriculums to be in schools

In Ethiopia, the call for more curriculums or curricula, by design or default, has for long been and still is a point

¹ ETP 1994

² Education Roadmap 2016

³ UNESCO, 1961,

⁴ Theodore Schultz 1961, Investment in human capital

⁵ Catherine Combleth 2000.

of debate whenever the general public perceives there is some ‘wrong’, not conforming to the on-going social demands in the country. Thus there is no wonder that whenever things fail to go on the right direction, many institutions and people alike make education and curriculum the number one ‘culprit’ or agency to be on fire and to be re-examined, or investigated. The underlying assumption for many is that for all social, economic, political and moral ills, the ‘answers’ are believed solely to be found within the classroom or school compounds. Consequently, heads of institutions ranging from religious to secular, including some members of the public call for answers for each and every emerging malpractices to be sought through their incorporation into the school curriculum with the hope that education is a ‘panacea’ from which a ‘ready-made’ answer could be drawn for the social, cultural, economic and political ills being felt.

While it may not be appropriate to go into the detail definition and discussion of the whole lots of curriculum technicalities here, it’s important to make clear that what we may characterize as ‘curriculum’ is not a single subject matter conceptualization (though it can be one of the aspects). The concept ‘curriculum’ is a broader conceptualization: as the total school program undertaking which consists of the subject matters offered to students, the teacher who has an irreplaceable role in the school program, the students, the school leadership and the society behind all this learning package to bring up citizens who can play an active role in a country’s future socio-economic, political and cultural development. Curriculum, therefore, is “what happens to children in school as a result of what teachers do. It includes all of the experiences of children for which the school should accept responsibility”.¹ It is also “all of the planned experiences provided by the school to assist the pupils in attaining the designated learning outcomes to the best of their abilities.”² Nevertheless, Lawrence Stenhouse clearly shows that the school depends on the environment outside of it when it comes what to teach children as follows:

Where do the school subjects come from? They originate outside the school and have an existence independent of it. The school is a distributor of knowledge rather than a manufacturer, and this implies reference points outside the school for the subjects it teaches. These reference points lie in cultures outside the schools on which the school subjects depend and to which they refer.³

Note must, however, be made that the ‘responsibility’ that the school takes does not imply to broader social ills which transcend the human, material and intellectual capacity of schools. The school is fairly responsible to the nurturing and upbringing of children under its educative mandate with the curriculum and other educational facilities provided to help its students achieve the learning goals set at each stage and desirable behavior that the society and the nation want to see. These all are mediated under the auspices of the school.⁴ Having taken conceptual breath of the subject under discussion, it’s now important to look at what we want our citizens can learn, how to learn and when to learn and to what end. These have been popular classical questions embedded with most education programs in many of the developed world but gradually permeated to the developing countries. Ever since the publication of *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*, by Ralph W. Tyler (1949)⁵, who not only had prominent position but also considered to have an indelible mark on the field of curriculum theorizing, these questions remained integral parts of most education systems around the globe. Despite critics, Tyler’s objective model has survived to-date in the preamble and content of all educational policies and programs of almost all nations. One of the four basic tenets of Tyler’s curriculum questions is the learning experiences⁶ to be organized for effective learning to take place and to achieve set educational goals and objectives.

As hinted elsewhere in this work, the above salient questions seem to have been dominating most Ethiopian public quest particularly since four years now. In fact, it’s the intensity of the insistence toward curriculum discourse nowadays though similar quests and concerns have been on the education agendas particularly since mid-1970s. Now, recent government reforms might have placed special pressures on the country’s education and training programs to come to the center stage. I deliberately use both concepts education and curriculum as the distinction between the two is not as such clear-cut among our general public.

Nevertheless, the two points have triggered the question of education and curriculum in Ethiopia. The first is the *Education Development Roadmap* which is now in its earlier stage (only 2-3 years) now. The second is the continuous socioeconomic and political ruptures that grossly call for a curriculum ‘crusade’, to become a medicinal option in the eyes of many people and some heads of institutions. In response to such educational woes, a continuous curriculum ‘cure’ for corruption, civil conflicts, uncertainty in political and governance legitimacies at some points, ineffective service deliveries and recklessness to accountability, etc., where lists continue to the infinitum, have all become popular fads to push on the education domain.

¹ Kansas (1958) as cited in Lawrence Stenhouse (1975)

² Neagley and Evans, 1967,2

³ Lawrence Stenhouse (1975, 10)

⁴ Miller & Seller (1985, 3)

⁵ W.R. Tyler (1949): *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

While vices of the above types are to be learned through the school curricula to bring about desirable changes in citizens' behavior, there are practical limitations in school time-table to address all these desires fully or partially. Meantime, there is also a sensible question to ask: Then what is the role of school if it does not make such essential social and national concerns a priority and part of the learning process? In principle, schools have to, but these are not the only curriculum affairs that children have to learn and know. There are other critical knowledge, skills and values (including those just mentioned) that students need to learn. If all such doses are let for learning 'prescriptions' in school compounds alone, the time-table is be torn into pieces either the common attributes known as the "essentials" or the supporting learning goals may not be achieved. Hence, keep insisting hard, the outcome will only create a gap between the intended and learned curriculum, where the former remains at the ideal stage and does not get transformed into action due mainly to the aforementioned critical constraints: time as well as the human factor.

3. How much can schools sufficiently discharge their learning missions?

We have to acknowledge that as any other institutions, schools have their own limitations while organizing their learning experiences. One of them is the human power, in short, the teachers and school managers in main. For instance, teachers may teach the damaging role of corruption to the individual, society and the nation at large. But they don't have the legal avenue to file a legal charge against the perpetrators. Teachers can teach about peace. But they cannot go to the end of peace building process and resolve conflicts in their aftermath. Similarly, teachers can teach the consequences of traffic accidents on human and national properties. But they cannot sue people who violate traffic laws. The same explanations can be given to the rest of our socioeconomic, political and related challenges.

The immediate question is, who then acts on behalf of the public. Owing to such school curriculum (curricula) limitations, a parallel community education programs have to be organized and imparted to citizens. This helps to bridge school learning gaps due to the aforementioned limitations. Such programs could take a form of organized learning clubs, associations, volunteer groups, etc. to be run by competent government and non-governmental institutions. The public (community) can fully share their time-tested knowledge and practical life treasures to the growing adolescents (citizens). It's believed that practices are abundant from veterans of all disciplines and it only needs somewhat a 'go-ahead' start whistle from relevant government institutions. The Ministry of education can play a pioneering role in readily emulating such parallel teaching and learning program initiatives in reducing the burden of school time-tables until such a time that our school calendars get extended to more than what we have now, or aided by alternative technologies that may be accessible to majority of students. Currently, physical calendar extension may not seem feasible for school calendar extensions for some years to come due to the rainy weather and hot temperatures in some parts of our country.

The World Bank acknowledges through its recent Global Education Policy Dashboard (GEPD) ¹and new Education Sector Strategy (ESS) ² hold that it's only through strengthening the role of non-governmental players and incentives that today's education programs can achieve their goals. In consequence, all education reforms need to take into account this systematic approach through which three main points or goals (focusing on learning outcomes, dissemination of innovation and demand-side interventions) can be realized. The global education policy dash board which was initiated by the WB and some philanthropic organizations is considered to have undergone piloting stage and may have come under implementation globally according to the plan, which may come to be part and parcel of the country's education system.

4. The quintessential role of teachers in the school curriculum

Another point which is quite relevant to the 'how' of curriculum is the academic as well as pedagogical knowledge and skills whose domain largely belongs to teachers. In most of what we like our citizens learn and know, many people tend to forget the role of teachers in the learning equations. In contrast, many countries whose educational performance stands tall pay greater tribute to the role and focus to their teachers. It has become quite obvious that all school affairs, including the curriculum, that we often talk of, cannot achieve desired objectives in the absence of well-trained and committed teachers. This can be made vivid with the note by the late Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, who had implicated it in one of his key addresses:

If we are to achieve our full human potential translated into sophisticated industrial goods we manufacture or the services we provide, we must raise the standard of education of our students, which can only be done by raising the quality of our teaching at every level. Better teaching makes for more students with good general grounding and greater trainability for specific jobs... ³

The above emphatic note will inform us that the teaching variable is one of the determinants of school

¹ WB, GEDB, 2019

² WB, ESS, 2020

³ Lee Kuan (1979), as cited in Tan, Low and Hung 2017 (p.34).

performance which can be explained both in the form of learning achievement and positive change of behavior of our students. That is why the consensus “The Teachers Matter”, was emphasized by the former British Secretary of State for Education and Skills, Charles Clarke, is nowadays resonating louder in many countries whose education performance is on top the achievement leagues. Clarke also added that any educationally transformative government needs to place excellent teaching at the center of its policies, for “brilliant, challenging and forward-looking teachers are greatest asset any government can have in promoting educational reforms and improvement in their country.”¹ The cardinal role of a teacher is also emphasized in what Andreas Schleicher has clearly stated in the OECD publication of “World Class: how to build a 21st-century school system”. He reiterated: “nowhere does the quality of a school system exceed the quality of its teachers”. This unequivocally attests the grand call resonating high as, “the teachers matter”² to be our central attention as government, educators, and the public at large. It is only then that our curriculum gets effectively implemented and our students learn and become knowledgeable and active builders of their nation. The way to achieve this grand educational and learning ideal only comes through a thoughtful and planned recruitment, selection, and preparation of teachers and the continuous development of their professional career (CPD). To this end, teachers’ empowerment has proved the achievement of better school performance. Through their active day-to-day professional tasks, teachers gain professional confidence and liberty to discharge their professional potentials. A study made from the above source also proved that teachers in most achieving schools in many countries clearly made clear that they don’t want to see someone on their shoulders as the practice of control has transformed itself into quality assurance in most parts of the world.

5. The way forward

5.1 It’s important to underline that in the face of limited school time, the task of our children’s learning cannot be full and complete. The very concepts of pre-schooling with its variants, primary and secondary schools, college and university, are vivid manifestations of learning periods with defined profiles. These timings are also further broken down into days, weeks, months and years. The wisdom behind such time-bound learning is both to assess leaning pace and determine transitions into the next learning level. But it’s important to think that our schools can metaphorically be likened to a small boat on a sea. If overloaded, its likelihood to capsize is eminent resulting in loss of life and properties. Same may apply to school curriculum. All what we wish to be learned may not be learned and we need to focus on the learned curriculum (the essentials or the core) and emphasize on what is technically known as the “hidden curriculum” to flourish. Had it not been for the limitless knowledge boundaries, Plato could not venture for categorizing school curricula into the ‘arbitrary’ and the ‘necessary’. For him, school curriculum had to achieve two main goals: for the body and spirit, these being taken as core curriculum. Again, controversies on this categorization are in accordance. Some go contrary in a bid to satisfy diverse students in light of the current call that “All children can learn” regardless of their socioeconomic, physical or mental attributes. More than ever, it’s a right issue to which all nations and governments are required to adhere to.

But from Plato’s categorization, it is not difficult to imagine that the rest of the learning skills (knowledge, skills and attitudes) have to be acquired mainly out of the four-walled classroom and in the larger public’s environment. Plato further believes that, “a just society always tries to give the best education to all of its members in accordance with their ability”.³ To this end, it can be argued that our public institutions and the larger public sphere at large are omniscient for such potential parallel learning opportunities. Our students have to be oriented and led by such competent institutions (MoA, MoP, MoM, MoJ, etc.) to be integrated both into the world of knowledge and work simultaneously. Moreover, our towns and urban centers have to become ideal learning venues by organizing sporting events, such as hiking clubs, volunteers’ services and several group occasions. Unlike in the past, city beautification today has to have meaningful ends-learning ends. Through these and others, some of our social ills can be gradually healed. Social ills are cured through concerted social healing events that remain underutilized nowadays, simply because we tend to overstretch what schools in reality cannot shoulder.

5.2 We have to support our teachers as they matter considerably. It must be understood that as any other professionals, their knowledge and professional experience has limitations. The very concept of training teachers does not imply that they are “all-knowers”. It rather implies the limit to a specific subject which is also subject to retraining and development of the profession. Their continuous professional development (CPD), still in certain or limited study area is in accordance. We have to also guard ourselves from spontaneity of pushing curriculum decisions. Sweep and euphoric decisions on education programs, sooner or later, will have a severe backlash on citizens and nation at large. Our school curriculum is not yet free from its historical scars of volatile transitions

¹ Charles Clarke, British former Secretary of State for Education and Skills (N.D)

² Andreas Schleicher, 2018 (OECD Publications of “World Class: how to build a 21st Century School System).

³ Madonna Murphy, cited in Plato’s Philosophy of Education and the Common Core Debate (2015 ,p. 5)

³See Tekeste Negash (2006), and an article on “ Education Roadmap: Some Reflections”, in ECSU’s July-January 2020.

and overcrowded contents. During that last 40-50 years or more, our school curriculum has been criticized for its elitist approach and overcrowded school time tables and it's presumptuous to think that we have overcome the challenge in its entirety. Other than parents' back-breaking sacrifice and unguaranteed job opportunity on current labor market, clothing and feeding own children are not found to be an easy path. However, this is not to deny the underlying axiom that investment in today's child is for the morrow's individual and national return. The issue, however, is that our educational policy decisions have to be based on sound and cautious basis, taking into account the obvious and inevitable education economics of the nation and its people. This also holds true to our quest for more and more curricular contents to go into it without taking into account the time at their disposal.

5.3 We may start re-thinking about our urban school population that may influence the quality of implementation of our curriculum. As elsewhere around the globe and our sub region, rate of urbanization has doubled and tripled due to the pull and push factors between the urban centers and rural areas. The World Bank (2015) Report¹ shows that Ethiopia's urban population is increasing rapidly at an average rate of 5.4% per year and in the year 2028 the urban population of the country will reach 30% of the total population. Similar report by UN-Habitat (2014) projected a 3.6% growth of the urban population and in 2050 there would be additional 42 million urban residents in the country. A dramatic increase of the urban population can have two implications. The first implication is that the proactive management of the population will result in the structural transformation from rural agricultural livelihood into a diversified urban economy (Report, 2015). Such unprecedented development has posed untold burdens on urban service provisions on one hand, and the rural labor drains on undeveloped rural land which could have been the potential for ready employment area both for most university graduates and the rest. Among municipal services that are immensely facing challenges is the education sector. Student population both in each school and student-classroom ratio is raging to the brink. Today, most suburban and city environment students are rushing from as early as KG to post-graduate students, shuttling every day back-and-forth, thanks to the omnipresence of mid/mini-buses and public bus services almost within limited radius. Now, school and university graduate program students keep shuttling between 15-40 Kms radius from *Bishoofu, Saabata, Hoolota, Laaga Xaafuu-Laaga Dhaadhii*, and what have you.

Such educational opportunities are quite commendable on the part of all partners to have made educational access possible to all who have the thirst. Nevertheless, the uncomfortable curriculum imparting that compromises quality education provision, due to student population pressure, needs pragmatic solutions in the medium-and long-term in a bid to reduce city governments' resource pressures. To this end, there may be a rethinking of the re-institutionalization of public schools with carefully planned, guided and closely supervised approach. may be considered. Of course, this crazy suggestion is at the backdrop of their past institutional and pedagogical challenges they have been with. But the fact that most urban centers' education finance is nearly waning and may not continue coping with such ever-escalating education service demand, calls for the need of their re-institutionalization is only a matter of time. Equally, the partnership with private investors in the education sector must be enhanced with quality ingredients to be the central measuring stick for their license renewal.

5.4 Revitalizing parents and communities' role in the education process

Current practices in this regard implicate to some degree that parents and the society at large seem to abdicate their vital educating role of their children to schools and teachers. The true guardianship of the past where every member of the neighbor, community and a significant portion of the society is the guarantor of communal education and 'parent' of every growing child now seems to gradually fade and collective responsibility in citizen's character formation spared to tacit impersonality. More so, a considerable portion of parents also tend to be less concerned with public education of their children either due mainly to modern life styles or unintentional withdrawal from their natural and parental guardianship. These are, more or less, shared by Ethiopian parents today.

Such 'avoidance' manifestations are contrary to many education philosophy pioneers including Plato (427-347), Durkheim (1858-1917), Bourdieu (1930-2002), and Dewey (1857-1950). For instance, Plato believes that a "just society always tries to give the best education to all of its members in accordance with their ability".² Durkheim also believes that while education socializes citizens it's the society that determines the ideal education that helps achieve the latter. This can be achieved through the 'hidden' curriculum, a subtler, but nonetheless powerful to nourish values and norms that are essential to the society by society. Educational sociology, therefore, holds the premise that education is basically a social fact and a process having social foundation and in turn determined by society as it serves the key humanizing purpose that is critically necessary for all.

The digressions made so far is not without reason. Society has to consider schools as its own institutions that can help its children as future builders of a nation. Closer and meaningful partnership between the two

¹ The WB Report 2015

² As cited by Madonna Murphy (2015) from Plato's Philosophy of Education and the Common Core Debate

complements school efforts to that end. Since three decades now, our schools have been represented with a body known as “parent-teacher-student association” (the name keeps varying). It’s important to assess whether the associations are living up their expectations. This is important at this point in time to strengthen and revise their educational mandates so that they can play their entrusted roles and supplement school efforts in building young citizens for the nation. As it stands, their role is mainly limited to organizing and facilitating matching school finance for school/classroom expansion, taking part in the evaluation of teachers (currently, there seem mandate changes taking place). Such engagements need to be transformed to curricular and pedagogical roles so that this rethinking can make their constituencies understand how much schools are operating under austere situations. Being a bridge between schools and the society, these associations enjoy ample opportunities to entice individuals, groups and civil society organizations to support school programs through and begin to work for the quality of teaching-learning process.

5.5 To bring up active learners through active learning

Past popular Ethiopian opinion used to believe that a student’s academic success hinges on the quality of their teachers. Such views were equally shared by American publics where quality of instruction, teachers and textbooks were superior to students’ efforts¹. However, to W. R. Tyler (1949), the student is the number one responsible individual in all the learning equations. This very maxim has been emphasized by the classical philosopher and educator Plato when he had said: *the role of a teacher is both a ‘master’ and a ‘mentor’*. At its face value, the term may sound somewhat absurd today but it only implies the view that before becoming a teacher one has to be a learner and gain sufficient experience. The concept ‘mentor’, however, makes the message clear that the learner has also an immense role in their learning endeavors. The moral of the story is that students’ combined inspiration and perspiration primarily contribute a lot to school and student learning achievement. The amount and quality of efforts exerted by students explains the academic achievement. Consequently, the old practice where parents and policymakers blame schools and teachers, when achievement drops, does not bring about real solutions while not considering the study habits and amount of efforts exerted by students,.

While modern technology has greatly eased the modes of learning, ultra-dependence on it may reduce critical analysis and synthesis of information that is readily available. Such ultra-dependence syndrome is also being felt in some of our higher education programs. Active learning and engagement is, therefore, quite necessary in a bid students not only amass facts but also engage in solving at least their own and community problems. This is a reminding note as use of print media tends unintentionally fading away in libraries and research documentation sections in which the number of users are gradually dwindling. At primary and secondary levels, parents have major roles that students are aided to develop love for reading to tackle some of the grim educational assessment results that we are witnessing today: not able to read, write and compute after completing a certain level of learning. This similar problem has been made official in some African countries by the WB recently. Indeed, the results of some terminal examination can shed this light when critically examined. The whole intent of this point is clear: active learners are part and parcel of school and their own learning achievement where desired students’ behavior (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that societies and the nation want it to prevail. Good school and learning effectiveness are the sum-total of at least three ingredients: schools, teachers, and students, of course, their parents’ role is considerably sound.

Notes:

1. Education and Training Policy (ETP)- 1994, Transitional Government of Ethiopia, BS Printing Press
2. Education Roadmap, 2016
3. UNESCO, 1961, Addis Ababa Conference
4. Theodore Schultz, 1961, Investment in human capital
5. Catherine Cornbleth, 2000
6. Kansas Curriculum Guide for Elementary School quoted in Oliver 1965
7. Lawrence Stenhouse 1975, An Introduction to Curriculum Research & Development
8. Miller and Sellar (1985)
9. W.R Tyler, 1949, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction
10. Ibid. 1
11. World Bank Global Education Dashboard, 2019
12. World Bank Education Sector Strategy 2020
13. Lee, K. Y. (1979), *In The Papers of Lee Kuan*
14. Clark Charless, ND
15. Andreas Schleicher 2018
16. Tekeste Negash 2006
17. World Bank Report 2015

¹ Hard work and high expectations: Motivating Students to Learn (1992).

18. *Madonna Murphy in Lawrence Stenhouse 1975*
19. *Plato's philosophy of education and common core debate (Conference paper 251 (2015))*
20. Tommy Tomlinson 1992. Hard work and high expectations: Motivating Students to Learn..

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