

The Practice of Curriculum Contextualization in Selected Primary Schools in Rural Ethiopia

Ambissa Kenea (PhD)

Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Abstract

Relevance of the curriculum is one of the most important concerns in provision of primary education. The means to maintain the relevance of the curriculum is through contextualization. Contextualization of the curriculum, as used here, embraces relating the content, the teaching learning process and the materials to meaningful situations that are relevant to students' lives. The present study examined the status of curriculum contextualization in primary schools in rural Ethiopia. Data was collected from 640 students, 84 teachers, 16 school principals, 16 deputy principals, 10 Supervisors and 5 Heads of District Education Offices. The result indicated that effort at contextualizing the curriculum is terribly lacking. Though there is institutional concern over curriculum relevance, in practice, the attempt made to model the process through inclusion of elements of curriculum contextualization into teachers' performance assessment criteria and textbook evaluation guides is extremely lacking. Teachers' lack of know-how, poor administrative support, focus on regional examinations and shortage of resources are among the challenges identified to have curbed curriculum contextualization. The implication of this situation on the quality of primary education has been discussed; suggestions for improvement forwarded.

Key terms: Curriculum relevance, curriculum contextualization, experiential learning, humanizing education.

1. Introduction

Whether curriculum planning and development takes place at centre or at regional/state level, the question of curriculum relevance is an important issue. It is important because it determines the place formal education has in the normal growth (and development) of children as well as the roles formal education plays in local and national development. One aspect of maintaining the relevance of the curriculum is through contextualizing it to the learners' experiences (and to the situation where it is being implemented). As used in everyday language, contextualization is taken as linking or relating or adapting the curriculum. Contextualization, from philosophical strand, is understood as the process of embedding knowledge in history, culture, philosophical questions, and personal experiences. Another appropriate name for this strategy, according to Nikitina (2002), might be "humanization of knowledge." Humanization of knowledge here refers to the linking of theoretical knowledge to the situation or the context of those who pursue it. Hence, contextualization of the curriculum embraces relating the content, the teaching learning process and the materials to meaningful situations that are relevant to students' lives. It assumes that instead of first teaching skills and knowledge separated from the context of the learner and hoping that they will end up knowing how to transfer what they have learned to life outside the classroom, teachers start with real-life contexts and weave these contexts into every stage of the teaching and learning process. When curriculum is contextualized, the child's experience is a fundamental starting point in the teaching learning process and every effort is made to help him/her relate whatever learned into his/her everyday life.

The theoretical underpinning for curriculum contextualization include John Dewey's concept of 'education as life itself' (Gillespie, 2002); David Kolb's 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 1984); and Paulo Freire's 'humanizing education' (Freire, 1970). Earlier during the last century, John Dewey taught that the process of education is not only preparation for adult life. For him, education is life itself – stressing the need to promote the meaningfulness of what is learned to the learner here and now. For Dewey, such education motivates the learner and is a bridge between school and society. Dewey's argument lies behind the present concern for contextualizing the curriculum. Such curriculum helps the child learn to relate what he/she learns to his/her experiences, use what he/she learns to question about his/her environment. In such a process the child comes to develop (see) purpose in attending schools - a purpose which may link him/her to school.

The other theoretical backdrop for curriculum contextualization is the experiential learning cycle which was conceptualized by David Kolb. According to Kolb, there are four elements (stages) of thinking and learning: the concrete experience, observation, reflection and abstract conceptualization. The first stage of Kolb's cycle flourishes in the immediate context of the child - after which, if properly nurtured through a carefully crafted teaching-learning process, the other three stages may come (or set in). Kolb's conception has much to do in arguing about the role of curriculum contextualization for stronger academic achievement (performance on Regional/national examinations) of the child. This is the case because, if Kolb's assumption goes, the abstraction process which comes through reflection on our observations/experiences is a higher stage of thinking which can be rarely achieved in classrooms following the traditional subject-based curriculum implementation. Such abstraction may be taken as a fundamental tool for higher level academic performance. Taylor (2003)

emphasized this when he states "... the aim of strategies such as contextualization is in fact to increase the chance of success, since by understanding abstract concepts better, pupils should perform better in examinations." The third conception which served as a theoretical setting for the present study is Paulo Freire's 'humanizing education' (Freire 1970). For Freire, education is humanizing when it helps the liberation of the consciousness. When, as a result of the experiences they got from the curriculum process, the learners start to question (dialogue about) their situation then the process of liberation starts. Contextualizing education is one best medium for that. Education which is devoid of any meaningful experience for the learner (he termed such an education as a banking concept of education) is oppressive (and is de-humanizing). As humans, children need to see the meaning of what they learn, how what they are exposed to is related to their experience and how the 'worthwhile knowledge' selected for them (and the process of education) serve them as framework to examine their condition (situation).

Curriculum contextualization, as an aspect of the continued process of curriculum development, is guided by the values of learner- and community-centeredness. Based on research findings on curriculum adaptation, Gillespie (2002) identified the following important assumptions for a contextualized approach to curriculum:

- ✓ Effective learning requires not only the acquisition but also the active application of knowledge, skills, and processes.
- ✓ To encourage transfer to other contexts, effective learning requires the acquisition of a complex knowledge base including content knowledge, skills, and cognitive and metacognitive strategies.
- ✓ Learning is a function not only of the activity itself but also of the context and culture in which it takes place.

Teachers, as links between the learners, the curriculum resources and the instructional environment; play central role in contextualizing the curriculum. It is the teacher who has to recognize if there is any gap between the espoused curriculum element/material and the situation of the child. For this, teachers' knowledge of the learner and their situation is very important.

Educational leadership at the various level along the ladder (including school principals) have also immense role to play in making sure that the curriculum is adapted to the situation of the child. For instance, Lunenburg (2010) writes that the school principal's primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of all students. Important among the roles educational leaderships at various levels play in curriculum contextualization is providing policy back-up and professional support for teachers. In fact, it can be argued that teachers' role in effectively contextualizing the curriculum is largely a function of effective leadership support.

2. The problem

An episode:

Once up on a time, this researcher was doing a baseline study for a quality education project which was to be implemented in a rural area of North & Central parts of Ethiopia. As part of the data collection process for the study, he had to interview some farmers. It was during this exercise that a response which shocked the researcher came from a farmer. The farmer worried about his elder son who completed grade ten and yet could not manage to go for further training/education and was 'unemployed'. The farmer's worry was not because his son could not get employment in government organization. He was rather concerned about the fact that the son became unproductive because "he attended school." In a broken spirit, the farmer said, 'Had I not taken my son to school, he would have come to be good farmer. Now he despises farming and became dependent on the family. This is what I got for spending my resource on his education.'

In connection to this episode we can talk of three categories of context following Taylor (2003): i) contexts to which the students relate but are not familiar with; ii) contexts in which they have strong experience and iii) contexts which are contentious or provocative, such as the difference between traditional culture and science. The episode talks about a situation where the farmer's son is aspiring for a context which he is not familiar with and where he (the son) loathes the context which he is familiar with – the farming. On the other hand the education could not prepare for either of the context. The other possible way to explain the situation reported in the episode could be by relating to the third category of context: the contentious – where the son failed to reconcile the contradiction between what he had from his tradition and what the schools provided. Then the schools failed to mediate and the son developed a faulty personality (could not accept working under the forces of tradition).

This episode made the researcher to ponder about what is actually wrong with Ethiopian education? Is really the system of education contributing to such state of affairs? What can be done to curve the situation? The present title has come out of this apprehension with the overall intent to look into whether schools, school leaderships and teachers are aware of the danger and what they are doing to it.

There are a number of reasons (trends) to wonder about curriculum contextualization (adaptation for that matter) in Ethiopian context: increase in street-ism and orphan-hood, school dropout, and increase in literate unemployment and many more. Readings in the area of curriculum revealed that when education is linked to the

immediate experience of the child (i.e., when it is contextualized), it serves both the purpose of preparing possible dropouts for the economy in their host environment and helps those who would continue to higher level to creatively perform on examinations (Taylor, 2003). As Taylor unequivocally put it, the overall purpose of a contextualized approach is to encourage learning *for* life, by relating learning *to* life. The present study took this as given and tried to look into the practice of contextualization of the curriculum. The study addresses the following objectives at its core:

- a) To examine whether the schools have policies on contextualization of the curriculum.
- b) To check whether there is any attempt to contextualize the curriculum at the schools
- c) To appraise aspects of the curriculum (content, method and/or materials) teachers attempt to contextualize, if any.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there is no local study that attempted to examine curriculum contextualization proper in primary schools in rural Ethiopia in the way presented here. In addressing curriculum contextualization I never intend to promote traditionalism which rests on the idea that schools should solely reflect the environment they are found in. I rather argue that schools have to mediate the tension between tradition and modernity and prepare children for active citizenship in both their environment and beyond the horizon.

3. Scope of the study

Geographically, the study is conducted on 16 schools drawn from Northern, Central and Southern Ethiopia. Conceptually; contextualization may be seen in terms of the likely gap between situations assumed during curriculum changes going around on the other. In this study the former is emphasized, though cursory references are made to the later.

4. Methods of the study

The study examined the current status of curriculum contextualization in rural primary schools in Ethiopia using a mix of qualitative and quantitative approach. In this section the sources of data, the tools used for data collection and the methods of data analysis are briefly outlined.

Sources of data and sampling: The sources of data for the study were teachers, school principals, students, Heads of District Education Offices and School Cluster Supervisors drawn from five Districts (two from Northern Region, two from central region and one from Southern Regions of Ethiopia). Purposive sampling was used to select sixteen schools from the five Districts. Accordingly, six schools from the Northern Districts, six from the Central Districts and four from Southern Districts were accessed. The schools were operated by the government (i.e., the respective District Education Office) and located in rural areas. The researcher had visited all the schools for the data collection.

From each school, 50% of the teachers were taken as sources of data. With the suggestion of the teachers selected as sources of data, ten students who were thought to give adequate information were taken from each of the Second-cycle primary Grades (5-8) at each of the schools. Principals and vice-principals of the schools, heads (or vice-heads) of the District Education Offices, and two cluster supervisors were also taken as sources of data for the study. Accordingly, a total of 84 teachers, 640 students, 16 school principals, 16 vice-principals, 10 school cluster supervisors and 5 District Education Heads were taken as human sources of data. Besides, curriculum review guide; curriculum review reports, teaching materials produced by teachers and documents written by teachers in the name of curriculum adaptation were reviewed (when available). From each school two classroom teaching-learning processes (i.e. sessions) were observed.

Tools of data collection: the tools used for data collection included questionnaire, interview, document review guides and classroom observation guides.

Questionnaire: Two sets of questionnaire were prepared. The first set was prepared for teachers. This set composed of 19 items clustered under four major categories: policies/guidelines on curriculum contextualization, practice of curriculum contextualization, aspects of curriculum contextualized and roles of teachers and educational leadership in contextualizing curriculum. The second set was prepared to be used with students. It is composed of eight items, all of which focused on efforts teachers make to contextualize the curriculum. Both the questionnaires were reviewed by professional educators and tried out on a school not taken for the final study to check whether they are clear enough and usable. The finalized questionnaires (which appeared in the form of checklist i.e. "yes/no" response) were distributed to 84 teachers and 640 students respectively. The questionnaires were administered in a hall (separately for teachers and students) and all of them were filled-in and returned. There was one open-ended question on each questionnaire to give the respondents further chance for additional opinions.

Interview guide: a structured interview guide which composed of twelve items clustered under five categories (policy, practices, aspects of curriculum contextualized, roles of the leadership and awareness of the need for curriculum contextualization) was prepared to facilitate the discussion with the educational leadership (District

Education Heads, Cluster Supervisors and School Principals). The interview guide was commented by professional educators prior to putting into final use.

Document review guide: the documents considered for the study were additional teaching materials produced with the purpose to relate the official curriculum to the child; teacher-made materials which may include ‘partial’ modification of the official curriculum; reports on curriculum contextualization and gaps between student textbooks and their exercise books. Accordingly, the document review guide contained four items which mainly focused on documents produced at school level. Since the document review was intended to generate supportive data, the guide was very closely related to the questionnaire and interview items.

Observation guide: this was planned with the aim to provide supporting evidence regarding the status of curriculum contextualization and the aspects of curriculum that has been contextualized, if any. The observation conducted included classroom, student exercise books and pedagogical resource centres – materials produced by teachers. Similar to document review guide, observation guides were prepared by relating to the questionnaire and interview items. The observation was conducted by the researcher and an assistant. An initial inter-rater agreement of 80% was taken as normal and deviations on specific issues were discussed and decided through consensus.

Once the data collection was over, both numeric (quantitative) and verbal-narrative techniques were used to present the data resulting from the exercise. Percentages were used for analysis of the quantitative data. All qualitative data were used to augment the results of numeric data.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. The place of curriculum contextualization in the “policies” and guidelines

Even if policies can mean many things, the term is used here to refer to any principle, expectation and accustomed norms of practices which the schools promote across the board. Therefore, the point here is whether schools, as systems, officially promote curriculum contextualization through the values they uphold, the principles of practices, the guidelines they follow and the common practices they expect from the teachers and students. Assessment of whether the schools have policies on curriculum contextualization was made in terms of whether:

- *There is guideline on contextualization of curriculum (or its part)*
- *The teacher’s guides ask teachers to link the subjects to the environment*
- *Usability of what the children learn in their lives is an important concern for the school*
- *Relating the subject content to the child was a point of discussion on staff meeting*
- *Curriculum adaptation is part of the criteria in teachers’ performance assessment*
- *Individual teachers have the autonomy to adapt the curriculum (or its part) to their classrooms*
- *The schools, as a policy, expect teachers produce localized materials so as to adapt what is in textbook to the situation of the children/and their locality*

Teachers and school leadership (District Education Heads, Cluster Supervisors and School Principals) were asked to give their opinion on these. The result has been organized as in Table 1.

Table 1: Whether the schools have policies and guidelines that encourage curriculum contextualization

| Respondents | They have | | They don’t have | | Total* |
|-------------|-----------|------|-----------------|------|--------|
| | No | % | No | % | |
| Teachers | 352 | 59.9 | 236 | 40.1 | 588 |
| Leadership | 201 | 82.4 | 43 | 17.6 | 244 |

*N’ is greater than actual number of respondents because of measure on multiple indicators.

A marginal majority of teachers (59.9%) and a great majority of the school leadership (82.4%) believe that the schools have policies (guidelines and expectations) that promote curriculum contextualization.

Looking at the guidelines which teachers are expected to use to evaluate textbooks may provide additional information on the place of curriculum contextualization in the guidelines and expectations of the schools. The textbook evaluation guide of one of the regions has been examined for the present purpose. The guide included six open-ended question items and teachers were to fill in their judgments. The items in the guide are listed below:

- a) **Contents of the textbook:**
 - *Difficulty of the content*
 - *Whether the contents arranged from simple to complex*
 - *Whether there are review questions taken from the contents*
 - *Whether there are any mistakes as far as the contents are concerned*
- b) **Sequence of the textbook**
 - *Whether chapters are interdependent – e.g. chapter II based in chapter I, etc and logically*

arranged.

c) **Relations the textbook has with other textbooks**

- Horizontal relationship
- Vertical relationship

d) **Volume of the textbook:** that the portions included are commensurate with the time allotted for the particular school subject.

e) **Strength and weakness of the textbook:** assess based on criteria 'a' – 'd' above.

f) **Suggestions from the teacher-evaluator on how to improve the textbooks.**

A look at the list reveals that the particular textbook evaluation guide lacks items on curriculum contextualization or adaptation. Its whole focus is on the contents of the subject: difficulty, sequence, relationships (horizontal-vertical) and coverage. It could have asked whether the textbook lends itself for local adaptation and/or what can be done to make sure that the contents of the textbook are contextualized to the specifics of the school environment. Teachers could have been asked to propose alternatives that would enable them teach the particular subject in their respective school settings.

5.2. *Leadership's and teachers' awareness of their roles in curriculum contextualization*

Teachers' awareness of their roles in curriculum contextualization was examined in terms of two major points – whether the teachers:

- Believe that curriculum contextualization is part of their duties and responsibilities
- See that relating or adapting the curriculum to the child is one of their tasks in planning their lessons.

The school leaderships' awareness of their roles in curriculum contextualization has been judged after every discussion with the particular school leader (Head of District Education, School cluster Supervisor and School Principal).

Table 2: *Whether educators were aware of their roles in contextualizing curriculum*

| | They are | | They are not | | Total* |
|------------|----------|------|--------------|------|--------|
| | No | % | No | % | |
| Teachers | 73 | 43.5 | 95 | 56.5 | 168 |
| Leadership | 30 | 63.8 | 17 | 36.2 | 47 |

*'N' is greater than actual number of respondents because of measure on multiple indicators.

A marginal majority of the teachers (i.e. 56.5%) were not aware of the fact that curriculum contextualization is part of their duties. On the other hand, a good majority of the school leadership (63.5%) were judged to be well aware of their roles regarding curriculum contextualization. However, there was still a non-negligible proportion of school leadership (about 36%) who were perceived to be not well aware of the roles they have to play in contextualizing the curriculum.

5.3. *The practice of curriculum contextualization*

Teachers were asked to report how far they carry out some teaching activities which promote contextualization of the curriculum. Here are points from the questions they were asked:

- I use visits to neighboring farms/market/workshops to make my lesson more vivid.
- I invite local community elders/leaders to my classroom so that they talk to the class on some local issues.
- I invite experts in the locality (e.g. agriculture experts) to my classroom so that they train my students on practical matters.
- There can be some differences between what I teach and what is in the textbooks
- Community studies (in the form of projects and assignments on community structures, health, relationships, governance, etc.) form important part of the subject I teach.
- I was provided training on curriculum contextualization
- I was provided in-class supports on how to contextualize the curriculum (for e.g., discussions after classroom observations included contextualization as an issue)

In a related manner, the school leaderships were asked to check whether indicators of the practices of curriculum contextualization are in place in their respective schools. The indicators were:

- Mechanisms in place to follow up curriculum contextualization by schools & teachers
- Evidences for curriculum contextualization (e.g., materials developed, reports from schools, etc)
- Curriculum adaptation is an agenda for discussion on quarterly review of performance

The students were also asked whether or not their teachers do the following:

- Sometimes your teachers take local examples to make the lesson more understandable
- There are times teachers create materials (other than those suggested in the textbook) to use them to teach you
- There are times when teachers invite community elders/leaders to class to teach you about important

local issues connected to the lesson topic

- *There are times when teachers invite experts to class to teach or train you on important issues connected to the lesson topic*
- *Teachers give you projects/assignments which you can complete by going out to the community (e.g. by asking community members)*
- *Sometimes you visit a farm or other economic institutions with your teachers as part of the lesson*
- *Your teachers challenge you to relate what you learn in class to what you see (experience) in your community*
- *At school there are programs whereby you engage in actual labor activities (e.g. on school garden/farm; school fencing; clearing and shaping play grounds).*

Result from this exercise has been aggregated and presented using Table 3.

Table 3: Responses on whether curriculum is actually contextualized

| Respondents | Yes | | No | | Total* |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|--------|
| | No | % | No | % | |
| Teachers | 210 | 35.7 | 378 | 64.3 | 588 |
| Leadership | 41 | 29.1 | 100 | 70.9 | 141 |
| Students | 1610 | 31.4 | 3510 | 68.6 | 5120 |

***N* is greater than actual number of respondents because of measure on multiple indicators.**

As presented here, majority of all the respondent groups (64.3%, 70.9% and 68.6% for teachers, school leadership and students respectively) indicated that there is no visible effort to contextualize the curriculum. The classroom observation result presented in Table 4 is consistent with this finding:

Table 4: Classroom observation result

| S# | Criteria items | Yes | | No | | Total | |
|-------------|--|-----|------|-----|------|-------|-----|
| | | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| 1 | Attempt made to relate the material to the students during aim orientation | 11 | 34.4 | 21 | 65.6 | 32 | 100 |
| 2 | Instance of localizing the content | 7 | 21.9 | 25 | 78.1 | 32 | 100 |
| 3 | Instance of localizing the approaches (questions asked, examples and illustrations used) | 15 | 46.9 | 17 | 53.1 | 32 | 100 |
| 4 | Instance of localizing the teaching materials used | 10 | 31.3 | 22 | 68.7 | 32 | 100 |
| 5 | Instance of students asking or giving opinions based on their local settings | 9 | 28.1 | 23 | 71.9 | 32 | 100 |
| 6 | Tasks/assignments/projects given involve the utilization of local resources or local information | 12 | 37.5 | 20 | 62.5 | 32 | 100 |
| Grand total | | 64 | 33.3 | 128 | 66.7 | 192 | 100 |

On all the indicators of curriculum contextualization identified for classroom observation, the result is more to the negative (no enough effort has been noted on curriculum contextualization) – about 66.3% on the average indicating that there is no effort to contextualize the curriculum during the teaching-learning process. A note taken during classroom observation in a school in one of the District reflects this situation. *The teacher was teaching English to Grade Two children. She got the word ‘Camel’ in the textbook and asked children to call/say the word after her (i.e. sort of drill).* The word is abstract for the children because none of them saw the animal ‘Camel’. Asked why not she replaces with the more familiar words such as ‘Cow’, ‘Donkey’ or ‘Mule’ for which the children can get an immediate real object from their environment, the teacher replied, “I just teach what is in the textbook.”

A rather frustrating result has been noted when attempts made to assess or review documents (see Table 5).

Table 5: document review result (school level)

| Items | Yes | | No | | Total |
|--|-----|------|----|------|-------|
| | No | % | No | % | |
| 1. There are additional/ supportive curriculum materials which were intended to contextualize the curriculum | 0 | - | 16 | 100 | 16 |
| 2. There are reports on curriculum contextualization at the school level | 0 | - | 16 | 100 | 16 |
| 3. There are teaching materials produced by teachers which show clear modification of what has been suggested in the textbooks | 9 | 56.3 | 7 | 43.7 | 16 |
| 4. Student exercise books have items other than those contained in the textbooks (compared on any three sub-topics) | 5 | 31.3 | 11 | 68.7 | 16 |

Except teaching materials locally produced by teachers, also called teaching aid, there is no adequate documentary evidence that shows efforts towards contextualizing the curriculum.

In general, the evidences presented based on self-report by the respondents, classroom observation and document review indicated that intentional effort to practically contextualize the curriculum is lacking.

Contextualization of learning occurs when the content of the curriculum and the methods and materials associated with it are related directly to the experience and environment of the learner (Taylor and Mulhall, 2001). Hence, attempt has been made to look into what aspects of the curriculum (content, method and/or materials) contextualized, if any. Respondents who reported instances of curriculum contextualization were asked about this.

Table 6: Opinions on aspects of curriculum to be contextualized (multiple responses)

| Respondents | Content | | Methods | | Materials | | Total* | |
|-------------|---------|------|---------|------|-----------|------|--------|-----|
| | No | % | No | % | No | % | No | % |
| Teachers | 19 | 16.6 | 65 | 57.7 | 29 | 25.6 | 113 | 100 |
| Leadership | 18 | 30.4 | 21 | 34.2 | 22 | 35.4 | 61 | 100 |

***'N' is greater than actual number of respondents because of measure on multiple indicators.**

Of the three aspects of the curriculum identified (contents, methods and materials), contextualization of the content of the curriculum attracted the least rating from both the teachers and the school leadership followed by curriculum materials. This could indicate that the teachers and the school leadership do not believe in modifying what is stated in the textbooks – could be a lack of know-how on how to do it or, as Ambissa (2005) writes, a tendency to see that the textbook tells the truth. This situation may partly reflect what Pridmore (2007:4) writes; “In many education systems teachers are not expected to exercise a level of adaptive professional autonomy (and indeed are often discouraged from doing so).

5.4. Challenges to curriculum contextualization

Teachers and school leaderships were asked to identify the major factors that they think have limited contextualization of the curriculum at their respective schools. The following list has been extracted from the responses.

- *Teachers' lack of know-how*
- *Lack of administrative support*
- *Focus on Regional examinations*
- *Lack of resources*
- *Time pressure due to unnecessary meetings; bulky curriculum portion, etc.*

These problems are consistent with what ANAFE (2010:2) writes regarding the failure of contextualization of the curriculum to African reality, which reads:

The major reasons for lack of development of contextualized learning materials were: lack of policy support, lack of funds, lack of incentives for the production of the materials, lack of experiences in the production of contextualized learning materials and limited partnership to support the process.

Similarly, Taylor, et al (2003) opined that among the difficulties blocking efforts of curriculum contextualization are the constraints placed upon teachers by workload, general conditions, and lack of experience as well as the driving force of examination-oriented learning which acts against the introduction of more flexible approaches to teaching and learning. A strong case of relevance to Ethiopian situation has been noted by Parkyn (n.d., in IIEP discussion series no 36) who writes;

Most administrators in the developing countries that are undergoing rapid quantitative growth in education find themselves faced with a situation in which they have poorly educated teachers and have found it necessary to prescribe universal and highly elaborated syllabuses, standard methods, and uniform materials. To prevent these from becoming rigid and increasingly irrelevant to the changing needs of society is the problem.

Irrespective of that, the challenges listed by teachers and school leadership should not wholly constrain attempts at contextualizing the curriculum in Ethiopian reality. For instance, lack of resources can be a problem. However, one of the major points in curriculum contextualization is about using locally available resources. It is not about high level equipments or chemicals. It is about replacing the proposed with something available (something local) and yet that can help the students achieve the same level of competence (or standard of learning) proposed in the syllabus. Similarly, even if localizing the curriculum needs time and effort to think creatively, it is possible to make it within the few time available for the everyday chores of teaching. Therefore, if the teachers and the school leadership are capable enough to contextualize the curriculum (know about it, willing to do it and able to do it), the other factors can be less detrimental. The key message from this article in connection to curriculum contextualization might be that ‘business as usual’ and ‘more of the same’ will not help solve the educational problems in rural Ethiopia.

6. Conclusions and Implications

From the results presented in the preceding sections it is possible to deduce that curriculum contextualization is not as such a major agenda for the schools. As a result, effort at contextualizing the curriculum is terribly lacking. There is a general tendency to ‘teach the textbooks rather than helping the children learn within their context using the textbooks.’ In such a situation the relevance of what schools teach to children would be in problem. Teaching for examination, i.e. preparing the children to pass the examination through more doses of theoretical knowledge would be the state-of-the-art. This is an elitist approach which provides the child with singular option. Anyone who fails to achieve this, as the episode presented towards the beginning of this paper indicated, would be unfit for other life options (the reality of their environment). Stressing the same, Johnson, Hill, and Ivan-Smith (1995) write:

...Where children need to work in order to survive, the education provided for them should be “made relevant to the lives, work and aspirations of girls and boys themselves”. Only then does it have a chance to contribute to the improvement of life for the children through alleviation of their poverty.

Ethiopia, with its dwindling employment opportunity in the public sector, cannot afford ignoring this state of affairs. Hence, there is a need to intervene to curve the situation by way of:

- a) Making contextualization of the curriculum an issue for system-wide discussion within the education sector.
- b) Capacity building for teachers and school leaderships in the form of formally organized orientation and school- and classroom-based professional support.
- c) Modeling contextualization of the curriculum (by the District Education Offices) through local production of materials intended to enrich the regional curriculum/textbook.
- d) Revisiting textbooks evaluation guides so that these documents encourage localization of the curriculum.

Relevance of the study to international audience

The dilemma associated with curriculum contextualization happens to be a universal educational problem (see for instance Parjanadze, 2009; Anderson-Levit, 2003). Such dilemma mainly involve local relevance versus international standard; focus on qualifying examinations versus emphasis on applicability of knowledge; etc. Works cited in this study (e.g. ANAFE, 2002; Parkyn, nd) hold that this is true in Africa and other developing countries. Therefore, while this study can serve as input for any education system, it may also instigate a need for further national studies on curriculum contextualization may be by replicating the same approach.

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