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Tension between Traditional and Modern Teaching-Learning Approaches in Ethiopian Primary Schools

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Abstract

Whether a particular education system is of high or low quality can be judged in terms of input, output and process. Until recently, however, much discussion of educational quality is centered on only system inputs in terms of the provision of teachers, teaching materials and other facilities, and on output in terms of students' achievement. However, due to financial constraints, the government has realized that improving the quality of education through improved input is more difficult. Thus, the government chose to improve quality of education by improving the teaching-learning process, which it assumed as cost-effective. This study thus, was aimed at finding out the extent to which the innovative approaches of teaching and learning are employed under the Ethiopian tradition of teaching at primary schools, to identify the factors that affect its implementation, and finally recommend better ways and means for further improvement. By employing a descriptive survey research method, the study found out that although the employment of innovative teaching and learning is emphasized in the policy, currently traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen, dominate most classrooms. The common obstacles found are: the Ethiopian tradition of teaching and child upbringing, lack of institutional and learning resources, teachers' lack of expertise, inappropriate curricular materials for active learning and students' lack of prior experience to actively participate in the teaching and learning process.

Background

Introduction

Throughout the world, people are looking to education to pave the way for a more just social order on the grounds that education instills in the young crucial humanitarian values such as equity, tolerance and peace. Progress in education is taken to be essential for sustainable development, environmental protection, improvement in maternal and child health and participation in democratic social and political processes. Education is also currently becoming the most important contributor to national economic growth. Empirical evidence suggests that educational investment has been one of the most important factors contributing to economic growth in both developed and developing countries. Haddad et al. (1990), for

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example, suggest that expenditure on education contributes positively to labor productivity and the economic payoff to spending on education- from both the private and public standpoint- is high. They argue that improving access to and the quality of basic education is a priority in almost every low-income and middle-income country. Similarly, Raudenbush and Willms (1991) and Lockheed and Verspoor (1991) argue that to increase the pace of economic and social development in developing countries, schools must teach most school-age children the essential skills targeted by the primary school curriculum, which include literacy, numeracy, communication skills and problem solving skills. Access to good-quality schooling is thus, of central importance to national development.

What does quality mean in the context of education? Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously (Adams 1993). However, considerable consensus exists around the basic dimensions of quality education today. Quality education includes:

- Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities;
- Environments that are healthy, safe, protective and gender-sensitive, and provide adequate resources and facilities;
- Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life, and knowledge in such areas as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;
- Processes through which trained teachers use child-centered teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities;
- Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

For education to play these roles according to Lockheed and Verspoor (1991), it needs to meet minimum quality standard in terms of minimum inputs (facilities, teaching materials, qualified teachers, parent and community support), processes (effective leadership, monitoring and Evaluation, accountability, community participation, effective teaching and learning and Student assessment) and outputs (high student learning, societal and individual returns). Achieving universal participation also depends fundamentally upon the quality of education available. Parents make judgments about school quality when investing in their children's education. They expect schooling to help their children develop creative thinking and acquire the skills, values and attitudes necessary for them to lead productive lives and become responsible citizens.

This being the case, although the right to education has been reaffirmed on many occasions since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948, much has not been done on the qualitative dimension of learning until recently. It was on the

World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) that quality of education was recognized as a prime condition for achieving Education for All. The Dakar Framework affirms that quality is 'at the heart of education'. Goal 2 commits nations to providing primary education 'of good quality'. Goal 6 includes commitments to improving 'all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills' (UNESCO 1990).

Although countries are therefore committed to provide quality education to their citizens, the monitoring result of EFA (UNESCO 2005) indicates that, in many countries, children are not mastering basic skills, and low achievement is widespread. According to the report, national assessments in four Latin American countries show low achievement levels for large proportions of students at the end of primary school. In Nicaragua (2002), 70% of students reached only the 'basic' level in language and more than 80% did the same in mathematics. In Uruguay (1999), the performance of 40% of sixth graders in language was considered 'unsatisfactory' or 'highly unsatisfactory'. In El Salvador (1999) 40% of sixth-graders reached only the 'basic' level in language, mathematics, science and social studies. In Honduras (2002), the performance in language and mathematics was 'low' for 90% of sixth graders.

The report indicates a similar situation in Africa as well. A study by the Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (1995-98) measured primary school students' reading literacy against standards established by national reading experts and sixth-grade teachers. In four out of seven countries, fewer than half of sixth-graders achieved minimum competence in reading. Low achievement is also evident in a study conducted in six French-speaking African countries from 1996 to 2001. 14% to 43% of grade 5 pupils had 'low' achievement in either French or mathematics. In Senegal, for example, over 40% of students had difficulty putting in order several numbers with two decimal points.

Despite the concern of the government for quality of education, current conditions in most schools throughout Ethiopia is both compelling and disturbing. In the 2000 assessment of learning achievement of Grade 4 and Grade 8 students, about 10,500 fourth grade students were tested in reading the language of instruction, English, mathematics and environmental sciences; and some 5,500 eight graders were tested in English, mathematics, chemistry and biology. The average percentage of correct answers for all the subjects combined was 48% in the grade 4 sample; and 41% in the Grade 8 sample. Given that the test items were chosen from a range of key topics in the curriculum for the grades tested as well as that of the previous grades, these scores indicate that a large number of students were not achieving the curriculum objectives. In many parts of the country, an enormous gap persists between the numbers of students graduating from school and those among them who master a minimum set of cognitive skills. Furthermore, many of the quality indicators in the form of input (student-teacher ratio and student textbook ratio and facilities) and process (effective management and instructional processes) are reflective of the low quality education in primary schools.

The Ethiopian government with severe resource constraints is faced with difficult choices whether to continue with the expansion or give emphasis on improving quality. Given the financial constraints and the internal and external pressure for achieving universal primary education in 2015, trying to improve quality by improving input demands many resources and therefore is difficult to attain. Thus, parallel with rapid expansion of the education system, the government called for improving quality of education by employing interactive teaching and learning process with the limited resources at hand, which is also confirmed by scholars as one of the cost-effective ways of improving quality of education. For these scholars (Cook & Cook 1998; Farrell 1989; Fuller 1986 and Grisay & Mahlck 1991) the quality of education depends largely on the teaching-learning process. It is cognizant of this situation that the employment of learner-centered pedagogy is emphasized in the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy of 1994. The policy statement refers frequently to the employment of a learner-centered approach, active learning, and problem solving approaches in different contexts. Recently, the buzzword for educational reform in Ethiopia is learner-centered learning. National and regional education personnel are advocating for students to be actively engaged in learning, constructing understanding and meaning, not receiving it. Even though a learner-centered approach may not be the cure for all the education quality problems in Ethiopia, it is a step in the right direction, although it is a widely phrased, but poorly understood concept in practice.

Research problem and questions

In Ethiopia, the current curriculum calls for emphasis on an active learning and teaching approach, and therefore demands teachers to employ this teaching-learning style. However, little attempt is made by the policy document and other subsequent education strategy documents to give elaborations and to indicate how it can be translated into the teaching-learning process at the classroom level. Thus, learner-centered pedagogy is most commonly understood for what it is not. Even education personnel at different levels are only speaking about the term without mastering it and thereby providing a support system for teachers, which is just only half the battle. Under such circumstances, curriculum designers, textbook writers, teacher training institutions, education experts, and teachers all followed their own way in implementing this approach. Moreover, few studies have been conducted to examine to what extent this approach is being employed. Thus in this study an attempt has been made to find out to what extent the learner-centered approach is being employed in the Ethiopian primary schools and what challenges teachers encounter while using active-learning by raising the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the Ethiopian traditional teaching approach affected the implementation of a learner-centered approach?
2. To what extent has the Ethiopian tradition of child upbringing affected the implementation of a learner-centered approach?
3. Are institutions set up with available resources in support of its implementation?

4. Were the curricular materials prepared in a way to facilitate a learner-centered approach?
5. Are teachers taught using a learner-centered approach during their training?
6. What is the students' view of being taught by an active learning approach?

Purpose of the study

There is a scarcity of research on how the teaching process affects quality of education in Ethiopia. The studies which do exist mostly describe the quality of an educational system in terms of 'input' into the teaching process or look at student achievement in relation to these inputs. However, assuming that the employment of active learning can improve education quality, the Ethiopian government has called for using active learning in all schools.Thus, this study was aimed at analysing the extent to which a student-centred learning approach is understood among teachers and students, and is being implemented in Ethiopian primary schools. In addition, the study aimed at exploring, through field investigation, the manner in which teacher and school related variables militate against the implementation of learner-centered approach. Ultimately, its findings are meant to help teachers, researchers, key educational policy-makers and other education experts, to explore possibilities of developing more effective ways of utilizing an active learning approach at the school level.

Methodology

A descriptive survey method was used in the study. The sources of data were primary school students, and teachers. Moreover, curriculum materials were used as data sources. Questionnaires and Observation were used as instruments for collecting data. By using a Simple Random Sampling Technique, Oromia, Somalia, and Hararri were selected from the Core and Peripheral Regions, and Cities, respectively. A total of 12 schools were purposefully selected in which 6 schools from urban and 6 schools from rural areas were included.

A purposive Sampling Technique was used to determine the grades of students which would fill out questionnaires and be observed. Accordingly, students from grade 4 and 8, (which are both the terminal grades for their respective cycles: that is first cycle grades 1-4 and second cycle grades 5-8) were selected for the very purpose that they have better experience of their respective cycles than students of other grades. Ten teachers and 50 students from each school were selected by using a simple random sampling technique. Finally, a total of 120 teachers and 600 students were selected to fill in the questionnaires, and classroom observation was made in each school. Different questionnaires consisting of 20 questions (see tables1-5) in which the respondents show their agreement or disagreement, were distributed to teachers and students and all the distributed questionnaires were returned. Furthermore, classroom observations were made in two classes (grades 4 & 8) of each school utilizing observation checklists consisting of similar issues as on the questionnaires which were used by the researcher himself/herself to triangulate the result of the questionnaires.

Conceptual Framework

Understanding education quality

Despite a growing consensus about the importance of quality, there is much less agreement on what the concept means in practice. Quality in education is relative and not easy to define and measure. Many educators agree that an adequate definition of quality of education must be related to students' achievement (output) as its basis. They also include in the definition, the nature of the educational experiences that assist the students to produce those outcomes. In the context of schooling, the concept of quality is linked to how efficiently learning takes place. This is believed to be strongly determined by the teaching and learning style taking place at the classroom level, teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical skills, the availability of textbooks and other learning materials including the time spent by pupils actually learning their lessons (UNESCO 1993).

Most public debates on the quality of education include concerns about a student's level of achievement, the relevance of learning to the world of employment or the social, cultural and political worlds occupied by the student. Frequently they often also include concerns about the conditions of learning, such as supply of teachers or facilities. In light of this, researchers have suggested that the concept of educational quality is complex and multidimensional (Grisay & Mahlck 1991; Hawes & Stephens 1990). Grisay and Mahlck (1991) argue that the notion of quality should not be limited to student results alone but should also take into account the determinant factors which influence these, such as the provision of teachers, buildings, equipment, and curriculum. According to them, the general concept of quality of education is made up of three interrelated dimensions. These are: the quality of human and material resources available for teaching (inputs), the quality of teaching practices (process) and the quality of results (outputs and outcomes). Thus, studies which set out to assess the quality of education need to treat these factors carefully. Some studies support assessing the quality of education by using simple measures of input to education (teachers, equipment, materials, etc.). Many of these studies are problematic because they focus on formal rather than actual quality characteristics. For example, one school might have a larger number of highly qualified teachers than another, but they may be less motivated. Similarly, one school might have fewer facilities than another, but use them more efficiently (Carron & Ta Ngoc 1981).

Another set of studies are those which use indicators such as repetition rates and dropout rates as proxy measures of educational quality. The attractiveness of such studies is the availability of data, often contained in educational statistics collected through Educational Management Information Systems in most developing countries. According to Lockheed and Hanushek (1987); these data are useful for making aggregate comparisons between regions of a country, and between countries, but are less relevant for analyzing differences in performance between schools and between children in the same grade. They are even less useful for explaining such differences.

Many studies do collect data on student achievement. However, most such data are based on standard achievement tests and tend to focus on the acquisition of traditional knowledge and skills. Ross and Mahlck (1990) state that the attainment of more complex educational objectives, such as 'individuals capable of working in cooperation with others' or 'demonstrating ability to solve problems' are rarely evaluated. Indeed, looking at student outcomes alone does not tell us how schools operate. In this regard, Grisay and Mahlck (1991) argue that a school whose students achieve a higher score than those of another is not necessarily a better school. Higher scores may be explained by 'out of school' factors such as the fact that students enter school with higher academic abilities. In other words, a school's 'effectiveness' should be judged by its contribution to a students achievement independent of the student's home background. In this sense, it is the 'value added' by the school to the student's literacy, academic and social skills, which should determine its standing.

A study carried out by Johnson (1998) on the process of learning in South Africa sought to develop a framework in which education quality could be assessed through the use of 'insider perspectives'. Working with South African primary school teachers, the researcher developed a set of indicators of achievement for literacy and numeracy within five broad levels of progression: initial, developing, independent, complex and advanced. These levels are meant to be reflective of increasing competence and when they are related to children's age, the resultant matrix essentially constitutes a 'growth model' (Rowe & Hill 1996) which projects a child's developing levels of performance.

Dalin's (1994) study of 'How schools improve' is a qualitative study carried out in Bangladesh, Columbia and Ethiopia. The study sets out to account for educational change in a much broader sense than student outcomes in the quantitative research tradition. Also, the study gave credence to a wide range of perspectives of change. For example it contrasted the perspectives of key informants with those of local informants. The study is an important addition to a relatively limited number of qualitative studies of educational quality. The focus is on accounting for educational change and its strength is the importance given to different perspectives on the change process.

Although it is important to keep in mind that all these dimensions are important aspects of quality of education and interdependent, influencing each other in ways that are sometimes unforeseeable due to education's complex nature, because the purpose of this paper is to examine the process aspect of education quality, emphasis has been placed on the teaching strategies employed by teachers to help students learn.

Active learning as an appropriate teaching-learning strategy

Effective teaching and learning requires the use of appropriate methodologies and pedagogies to meet the demands of the current generation of students, new technologies, and the ever-changing educational environments. The challenge is to find new ways to stimulate and motivate the creative abilities of today's generation who have a different set of orientations toward learning than most of us did as students. The traditional "chalk and talk" lecture approach with the student as the passive recipient of knowledge may not be suitable

for today's generation. The traditional lecture approach has its own merits, but it is increasingly critical that educators employ a wide range of pedagogies and strategies to encourage students' participation.

Learning by "doing" is a theme that many educators have stressed since John Dewey's convincing argument that children must be engaged in an active quest for learning new ideas. Students should be presented with real life problems and then helped to discover information required to solve them (Dewey 1966). Piaget and Inhelder (1969) stressed the need for "concrete operations" in early childhood. Silcock and Brundert (2001) define learner-centered approaches as those where the tutor guides and facilitates the learner, rather than asserting control, towards targeted learning goals. Accordingly they further elaborate that learner-centered is a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources, select and implement learning strategies and evaluate learning outcomes.

Similarly, for Kolb (1984), 'learner-centered learning' is student participation in the learning and teaching process, where students themselves engage with and, to an extent, create their own learning experience. Learner-centered learning changes the focus from teaching to learning, and from students acquiring and processing knowledge to students actively, independently and critically creating meaning for themselves. The role of teachers in student-centered learning will become that of guides and mentors helping students access, interpret, organize and transfer knowledge to solve authentic problems, while students gain expertise not only in the content areas being studied, but also in learning. In fact teachers become more like a guide on the side of helping students to find answers to real life problems. Schools need to be organized around the work of students instead of the work of teachers.

Active teaching and learning involves the use of strategies which maximize opportunities for interaction. Indeed, some literature makes reference to 'interactive' rather than active approaches. Our main focus here is on the kinds of strategies that are frequently put in opposition to so-called transmission methods. By transmission methods, it is meant formal, didactic, expository and teacher-centered approaches, such as the fifty minute lecture that most of us are so familiar with. In contrast, active teaching and learning offers opportunities for interaction between teachers and students, amongst the students themselves, as well as between students and the materials, the topic itself or the academic discipline. Typically, the kinds of strategies we would employ in order to promote active learning are small group work, research based projects, case studies, discussions, role play, field trips and so on.

Use of active learning techniques in the classroom is vital because of their powerful impact upon students' learning. Student-centered learning is more aligned with the life long learning skills needed in the workforce of the information age. With the rapid changes in history and culture, textbook based and teacher-led learning has become obsolete. Instead technology resources are replacing these obsolete approaches to create an interactive learner-centered classroom. The most fundamental justification for taking an active learning approach to the delivery of lessons is the widely agreed-upon assertion that the degree to which students

understand a concept is in direct proportion to the amount of personal energy they have expended in trying to master it. A second, justification for students learning in this fashion is that it may closely model what students will need to do when they leave the schools and enter the work place.

Ethiopian tradition of teaching and the employment of active learning

The attitudes and expectations of society in general and of the family of the learner in particular affect how learning is viewed and how teaching is organized. These attitudes and expectations vary from society to society, and attempting to copy a learning and teaching strategy from one society into another without trying to adapt it to the local conditions may not be successful. Most of the learning models available are based upon developed countries educational traditions. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze some differences in educational traditions that affect the ways in which teaching and learning are viewed.

Ethiopian tradition of teaching can be better understood against the background of traditional or Church Education. Education was a function associated with the church in Ethiopia from its earliest days. Few wealthy households employed clerics as tutors to their children. Furthermore, as stated by Girma Amare (1967) regardless of his/her wealth or social status, every Christian in Ethiopia has a confessor (father of the soul), who may be regarded as a part-time tutor, because a confessor is a counselor on all matters pertaining to religion and also an instructor on the virtues of the good life. Traditional Church Education provided and is providing a peculiar type of education that takes as many as 30 years to complete all levels of the church education. Mainly because of poor teaching methods, it takes about ten years to complete each level of church education. Students suffer from the unsystematic procedures of the church school system and the utilization of the Ge'ez language- a language which no student understands, as a medium of instruction, which leads to memorization as the only method of teaching and learning.

The Church Schools served as an important resource of educated people including teachers. Among other things, because most modern educators, most great intellectuals and teachers began their education in church schools, its influence on the strategies employed in the teaching learning process was and is very strong. Those teachers, who have church education background, teach the way they were taught. This traditional approach (Socratic method of teaching: oral exposition, lecture and explication) is not limited to only those who have church education background, but also transmitted to those who were taught by the teachers with this traditional teaching background. The distinguishing features of the traditional church schools' approaches employed in teaching and learning include:

- The emphasis it places on "obedience and complete subordinate to authority" to the extent that "individual initiative and inquiry are considered defects that have to be discouraged by severe punishment" (Girma Amare 1967, p7);
- A heavy dependence on rote learning -- especially in the early stages -- and a low requirement for understanding except at fairly advanced stages;

- the mastery of what is essentially a stable body of knowledge passed on through the generations - there is little sense of knowledge as dynamic and changing, of the need for creativity and invention (except within very narrow constraints), or for the personal construction of knowledge. “The traditional system of education is based on the theory that the present state of knowledge is all that could ever be attained.” (Hailu Fulass 1974, p 19)

These traditional educational practices are continued to provide the cultural framing for the practice of teaching and learning in ‘modern’ education. The writer of this article did not only confirm the dominant authoritative paradigm but also points to the way in which this paradigm has been transmitted from his own experience as both student and teacher. The tendency of using this approach was not only the reflection of teachers’ experience in their own schools but also the reflection of the way they had been taught in teacher training colleges. The majority of teachers in teacher training colleges tend to teach in the way they have been taught in the church schools and in universities. This is an indication of the impact of teaching tradition in the traditional Ethiopian education that has made teachers to perform in the way they are currently performing.

Moreover, obedience and politeness are the overriding goals in bringing up children among some Ethiopian nations and nationalities. Children are taught to fulfill without question any request made by any older person. The effect of Ethiopian socialization, then, is to inhibit rather than to stimulate the development of interaction and discussion. Thus, it is worth noting that for children who have had anything like this kind of upbringing, the reluctance to say anything more than is explicitly demanded of them will have been deeply felt as a matter of politeness and respect and not merely ignorance or hindrance. The notion of 'discovering’ information is linked with the idea of teachers failing to do their job properly or as evidence of the teacher’s ignorance. Dependence and passivity in learning are not values that any educational system admits to, yet many students passively attend classes due to the effect of traditional patterns of organizing teaching and learning. Thus, the traditional education and the Ethiopian tradition of child upbringing do not provide a good learning climate for employing an active learning strategy in Ethiopian Primary schools.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Educators broadly agree that teacher-dominated pedagogy, placing students in a passive role is undesirable. Government policies and implementation strategies encourage learner-centered, active pedagogy, cooperative learning and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Yet there is ample evidence that teacher-dominated pedagogy is the norm in the vast majority of Ethiopian primary schools. While experimental research continues to show the usefulness of active learning, this study indicates that little application of active learning methods is made. Relatively little use is made of active learning methods such as inquiry, discovery, community-based learning, and simulations.

Table 1. Teachers' and Students' Views on the Implementation of a Learner-centered Approach

	Rating Scale							
	Teachers				Students			
	Agree		Disagree		Agree		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The lecture method teaching strategy is more situated to the current curriculum and students background	104	86.6	16	13.0	488	81.3	112	18.7
Most teachers use lecture method because it is the method they know well.	108	90.0	22	10.0	496	82.7	104	17.3
Teaching is the sole responsibility of teachers.	112	93.3	8	6.7	574	95.7	23	4.3
Students have adequate prior experience and understanding of active learning	4	3.3	116	96.7	110	18.3	490	81.7
Students role is listening to lecture, note taking and response to questions upon request	107	89.2	13	10.8	538	89.7	62	10.3

When asked why teachers are using the lecture method strategy (See Table 1), 86.6% of teachers and 81.3% of students responded that the lecture method of teaching is more suited to the current curriculum and students' background and 90.0% of teachers and 82.7% of students replied teachers are using this method because they know it very well. They furthermore responded that they are teaching the way they were taught in schools and teacher training colleges and institutions, which is the result of the Ethiopian tradition of teaching.

It is not only teachers' attitude that affects the effective implementation of a learner-centered teaching approach. The attitudes and expectations of students also affect how learning is viewed and how teaching is organized. Learning is student-centered in the sense that students take initiative and responsibility for their own learning. This is not the case in Ethiopian primary schools, where 95.7% of the students replied that teaching is the sole responsibility of teachers, and 89.7% responded that the responsibility of students is listening to lecture, taking notes and responding to questions upon request

This is associated with students' lack of prior experience of active learning as replied by 96.7% of the teachers and 81.7% of the students. It is also worth noting that for children who have had the kind of upbringing where they are expected to be silent unless they are demanded, responding without being requested is considered as impoliteness and disrespect.

Institutional context and the application of active learning in Ethiopia

The quality and availability of learning materials strongly affect what teachers can do. The application of active learning should not be the sole responsibility of the individual teacher. Changes in teaching and learning methods are likely to mean that the institutions' resources facility will become more important to the quality of teaching. Teachers are often teaching in a situation where other factors do influence. Being a good teacher is sometimes

Table 2. Teachers' Response to Active Learning and Resources Requirement

	Agree		Not sure		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The classroom setup is conducive for carrying out active-learning	0	0	10	8.3	110	91.7
learning resources are adequate for employing active learning	0	0	25	20.8	95	79.2
Class size is appropriate for carrying out active learning	10	8.3	12	10.0	98	81.7

a matter of being allowed to be a good teacher. Creative and innovative teaching does not flourish in a vacuum. The classroom starts becoming learner-centered and takes on a different feeling when learners are provided with the appropriate resource supports.

From the classroom observation and response of the majority of teachers (91.7%), it was found out that the classroom seating arrangement does not allow teachers to employ active learning (See Table 2). Front to back seating arrangements encourage only one-way communication. It is hard to talk to the back of someone else's head. Front to back seating arrangements discourage students from talking among themselves but they do focus attention on the instructor. They complained that the large size of classes does not allow them to change such type of seating arrangements. They (81.7%) replied that in a typical classroom containing 80 or more students, only a very small proportion of the students ever speak out to respond to questions.

Furthermore, the employment of active learning calls for the availability of ample teaching resources. With appropriate resources, teachers can spend more of their time assisting students in their quest to learn. In this regard, the majority of teachers (79.2%) replied that they were constrained by lack of adequate resources from using an active learning approach. The available teaching aids in the pedagogical centers were only used by teachers to assist their lectures.

Active-learning and curricular materials in Ethiopian primary schools

The curricular materials (teachers' guide and students' textbooks) need to be designed for use in the context of a class organized along active-learning lines. They should consist of carefully sequenced sets of guiding activities designed for the learners and should be intended to be used actively by students. However, as replied by the majority of teachers (87.5%) and also observed from the curricular materials, the activities in the materials are not presented in a way to encourage independent, purposive and a reflective way of learning (See Table 3). They were not written to be used in active learning classrooms. Most teachers (85%) complained that the teaching materials are full of large amounts of information to be memorized by students and thus, many teachers feel responsibe to cover the curriculum in the available time.

If an active learning approach is employed, the majority of teachers (85%) regretfully

Table 3. Teachers' Response to the Situation of Curricular Materials (student textbooks and teachers' guide) in Relation to Active Learning

	Agree		Not sure		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The activities in the materials are presented in a way to encourage independent active learning	5	4.2	10	8.3	105	87.5
The teaching materials are full of large amounts of information to be memorized	102	85.0	0	0	18	15.0
The curriculum can be covered if active learning is employed	18	15.0	0	0	102	85.0
The curriculum can be covered if only lecture method is employed	105	87.5	15	12.5	0	0
The curricular materials provide opportunity for discussion and collaborative working	0	0	5	4.2	115	95.8
The curricular materials address the needs of students	15	12.5	15	12.5	90	75.0

admitted that their students never get the chance to look at some topics in-depth, for there is always too much to be covered. Most teachers (87.5%) replied that the only way they can 'get through' their subject in the available time is to deliver it in a formal didactic style, with as little 'distraction' from students as possible. This indicates that even if students want to participate in their learning, they will be discouraged by their teachers. Furthermore, 95.8% of the teachers confirmed that the curricular materials do not provide opportunity for discussion and collaborative work. Many teachers (75.0%) reported that students have no real understanding of what they are supposed to do with information in the textbooks, for it does not address their needs nor match to their readiness.

The implementation of active learning requires a certain amount of time to think about and explore each topic. Such strategies may take more time than a straight lecture. Teachers complain of having heavy workload and excessive material to cover and this force them to emphasis on coverage. In such circumstances, it is the teacher who gets through the teaching material rather than the students and the saving of time can represent a false economy.)

Teachers' concern about the employment of learner-centered approach

The pedagogical shift from the traditional teacher-centered approach, in which the emphasis is on teachers and what they teach, to a student-centered approach, in which the emphasis is on students and what they learn, requires a fundamental change in the role of the educator from that of a didactic teacher to that of a facilitator of learning. The common element in the active learning approach is that teaches are removed from their role of standing at the front of a classroom and presenting the material. Rather, the students are placed into the position of teaching themselves, and the instructor is converted into a coach and a helper in this process. Active learning demands that not only are teachers experts in their fields, but also that they understand how pupils learn. It is a challenge for teachers to accept an active

Table 4. Teachers' Concern about Active Learning

	Agree		Not sure		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers recognize participatory learning	105	87.5	10	8.3	5	4.2
Staff qualification and experience are appropriate	60	50.0	20	16.7	40	33.3
Student' access to teachers' expertise may be decreased if active learning is used	75	62.5	0	0	45	37.5
Students participate to learn sufficient content through active learning	28	23.3	7	5.8	85	70.8
Students rely mainly on notes and absorb facts, details and procedures related to exams only	102	85.0	0	0	18	15.0

learning approach and thus it is not easy to get teachers to join an active learning. It was in cognizance of this fact that teachers were asked about their opinion and expertise on a learner-centered learning approach.

The majority of teachers (87.5%) recognized the importance of active learning in principle, although, some feel (62.5%) that the adoption of more student-centered approaches will limit the access that students have to teachers' knowledge and expertise in the subject (See Table 4). Asked about their competence of employing active learning, only 33.3% have doubts while 50.0% are confident that they can employ active learning with the absence of other constraints. Many teachers broadly agreed that teacher-dominated pedagogy, placing students in a passive role is undesirable, although they are frequently using teacher dominated pedagogy. Those teachers (87.5%) who recognized student-centered approaches in principle, replied that they were unable to do so because of a lack of confidence or knowledge (33.3%) about what such approaches might entail. The other reason for not using active learning as replied by 70.8% is the fact that teachers' feel that the employment of active learning involves risks—the risks that students will not participate and use higher-order thinking, or learn sufficient content—that they felt might occur due to loss of control and lack of necessary skills.

Assessment techniques and the implementation of a learner-centered approach

Accomplishing active learning starts with involving the learners in making decisions about their progress. The learners should be made fully aware of the institutional requirements for submitting grades, but also instructed on the details of the importance and relevance of the self-directed learning experience. However, since examinations have a very high priority in the Ethiopian education system, active learning tends to be viewed with suspicion by students. With the constant focus on 'the right answer' to an examination question, students commit a large part of their time to memorizing chunks of information, as replied by 90.3% of the students because teachers mostly emphasize facts and information in their questions for exams /tests. Assessment, particularly in the form of examination, which emphasizes

Table 5. Students' Views of the Assessment Procedures

	Agree		Not sure		Disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Teachers mostly emphasize facts and information in their questions for exams / tests	542	90.3	22	3.7	36	6.0
Teachers' encourage participation of students	165	27.5	0	0	435	72.5
Teachers' assessment techniques encourage active learning of students	178	29.7	21	3.5	401	66.8
Teachers' provide detailed and prompt feedback on time to students' activities	192	32.0	33	5.5	375	62.5

recall of a wide range of very specific information and problem solving by formula, does not encourage active learning.

Regarding the questions whether teachers encourage students to actively participate in learning, 72.5% of the students replied that teachers are not showing sufficient enthusiasm and encouragement of active participation by students (See Table 5). Provision of detailed and prompt feedback to students is poor as replied by 62.5% of the respondents. As replied by many students (66.8%) the assessment system employed by teachers only allows students to pass by replaying information from lectures and textbooks. The purpose of evaluation in the learner-centered learning approach is not merely to rate the learner's performance and to maintain academic standards, but it should be used instead to encourage independent learning and critical thinking.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Despite the concern for quality, current conditions in most primary schools throughout Ethiopia is both compelling and disturbing. As the government strives to expand basic education, it also faces the challenge of ensuring that students receive quality education. For ensuring quality education, the government has emphasized improving the quality of teaching by calling for the employment of active learning. This study therefore was aimed at analysing the extent to which participatory and/or an active learning approach as demanded by the education policy, is understood and properly implemented by teachers and students in Ethiopian primary schools, identifying the factors that militate against its implementation and providing recommendations on how to improve the teaching-learning process.

It is found out that traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen dominate most classrooms. The common obstacles and barriers to the employment of active learning in Ethiopian primary schools are the Ethiopian tradition of teaching and learning, lack of institutional support and learning resources, teachers' lack of expertise, inappropriate curricular materials and students' lesser preference to actively participate in

learning due to lack of prior experience.

Implications for effective learning

To create an effective learning situation for the employment of active learning in the classroom, the following issues need to be considered:

1. **Employment of partnership approaches**: On the spectrum running from traditional 'chalk-and talk' teaching to 'open-ended' instruction, a combination of direct instruction, guided practice and independent learning, in which teachers present some amounts of material and encourage active participation of students is recommended in Ethiopia. In this model, power is shared between learner and teacher for it demands a fruitful collaboration between the teachers and learners, where each has complementary roles, rather than one being subsidiary to the other.
2. **Re-writing curricular materials**: Preparing students for the world of work and life-long learning involves teaching skills to analyze problems, synthesize information and tackle wide range of tasks. Curricular materials therefore should be re-written in a way that they involve activities to process the new material, linking it to what the student already knows. Tasks should be authentic, set in a meaningful context, and related to the real world. They should not just involve repeating back facts as this causes 'surface' learning. As student's learning will involve errors, tasks should offer opportunities for self-assessment, correction, peer discussion, teacher feedback and other 'reality checks'.
3. **Ensuring the availability of learning resources and school facilities**: Students become active seekers rather than passive recipients to knowledge, when they are provided with the necessary learning resources. Employment of active learning requires the meeting of minimum standards of physical infrastructure and other resources. It requires attractive classrooms with enough space for making proper seating arrangements suitable for active-learning. The current class size of 80 and above in some cases needs to be reduced to the national standard which is 50 per section in the primary schools.
4. **Provision of appropriate training to teachers on active-learning strategy**: The evidence from this study indicates that if we want teachers to be confident and innovative users of active learning, we must provide teachers with the appropriate training, the time and the facilities they need. The government has made a good start in demanding teachers to be innovative, but must also continue with empowering teachers with the necessary skills they require for proper implementation of interactive teaching and learning.
5. **Emphasizing on continuous assessment**: Failure to periodically solicit student feedback in a course about how it is progressing is very important in creating a conducive environment for an active-learning approach. Regular, reliable, timely assessment is a key to implementing active learning. The purpose is to give learners feedback and to

improve learning and teaching practices. Local circumstances, however, prevent the practice from being widely used. Adequate resources, teachers trained in assessment techniques and relatively small class sizes are required.

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