

Practitioner opinions on teacher education reform and its implementation in Ethiopia

Nigussie Kassahun, Faculty of Education, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia

The training of Ethiopian teachers began in 1944 in one classroom in Minilik II School (MOE, 1973). Today teacher education programs are run in 25 institutions of different levels: Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs), Teacher Education Colleges (TECs) and Faculties of Teacher Education (FTEs) (TESO Task Force, 2003). One of the faculties of teacher education is the Faculty of Education of Bahir Dar University. Bahir Dar is located 565 kilometres northwest from Addis Ababa. The town is located on the shore of Lake Tana, which is the largest lake in the country.

Teacher education at the Faculty of Education of Bahir Dar University started in 1972 in what was known as the Academy of Pedagogy by tripartite agreement between UNDP, UNESCO, and MOE, with the intention to train elementary school teacher educators for the teacher training institutions. At first it had a three-year degree program, but after the graduation of two cohorts it was raised to four years. The trainees studied pedagogical courses as their major and minored in subject areas.

Diploma courses were launched in 1980 to train teachers for junior secondary schools, and the name of the institute changed to Bahir Dar Teachers' College. In 1997 all the diploma programs were phased out and degree programs initiated to train teachers for senior high schools. In May

2000 when Bahir Dar University was inaugurated, the Teachers' College was renamed the Faculty of Education at Bahir Dar University. At present the faculty has 10 departments that train teachers to teach different subjects at the high school level, including the pedagogical science department, the graduates of which are also assigned to teach in TTIs. These graduates have composite majors and no minor; they major in both pedagogy and in a subject area.

Why the Teacher Education System Overhaul (TESO)?

Because the TESO program and the recent development and practices in the teacher education institutions are based on the objectives and strategies of the new Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia (ETP, 1994), it seems in order to give a brief explanation of the policy. This will also serve as a basis to understand the new trends or changes in the teacher education curriculum.

The policy document (ETP, 1994) indicates that education during the 'Derge' regime was entangled with complex problems in that it lacked relevance, quality, equity, and accessibility. In addition, inadequate facilities, insufficient training of teachers, overcrowded classes, shortage of books and other teaching materials are mentioned as indicators of low quality of education. On top of these, low participation rate (22%) of the relevant age cohort, wastage due to discontinuity of education and relapse to illiteracy are cited as major problems (ETP, 1994, p.3).

To overcome these problems, the Federal Democratic Republic Government of Ethiopia set a new education and training policy. The policy states general and specific objectives of education, an overall strategy and areas of special attention and prioritised action. Among the three areas of special attention and prioritised action, one focuses on teacher training and overall professional development of teachers and other personnel. The strategy set for staff development includes introduction of relevant pre-service and in-service teacher training and development of educational and subject matter competence among teachers. To this effect short-term training such as workshops for teaching and learning in higher education and diploma programs for teacher certification are being implemented.

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To facilitate implementation of the policy in the area of teacher education, a task force was formed to study the problems. The duty of the task force was to investigate the quality and effectiveness of the teacher education system. Their study report (May, 2002) showed that Ethiopian teacher education had multifaceted problems, and this led to a complete teacher education system overhaul, hence, the emergence of TESO.

Based on what is stated in the ETP and the findings of the study, rote and passive learning was to be replaced by active learner-focused education, which would require a teacher education system that develops higher-order thinking skills in graduates (TESO Task Force, 2003)

The implementation strategies

The policy document sets up implementation strategies, among which one is a change in the structure and content of the curriculum. In line with this the TESO program has brought about changes in time and content of the TEIs. For the degree programs the time has been reduced from 4 to 3 years. Emphasis is given to professional courses, unlike the previous curriculum, which emphasized subject areas. The old program allocated 52-56 credit hours for major area courses, 24-27 credit hours for minor ones, 30-34 credit hours for common courses, 30-32 credit hours for professional ones and 2-3 credit hours for teaching practice. The present TESO curriculum for the three-year program allocates 30-32 credit hours for majors, 18 hours for minor ones, 35 hours for professional courses, and 25 hours for practicum. New courses such as action research, civics and ethics, English communication skills and ICT are included.

Method-wise, this represents a shift from teacher-centred passive learning to learner-centred, active learning by advocating techniques such as problem solving, inquiry, and practical activities that provide for more student participation.

As regards evaluation, continuous assessment of student progress, involving practical exercises and students' products, is suggested. In addition, institutions are expected to become centres of excellence and to establish effective means of quality control.

Inquiry methodology and findings

The 107 national teacher educators at the Faculty of Education of Bahir Dar University are taken as the base population of the study. In order to survey practitioners' opinions a representative sample was selected. The Dean, Assistant Dean, and 10 department heads were purposefully included in the sample, since they are the ones who usually attend seminars, workshops and meetings to determine the nature and structure of the curriculum. In addition to these, 10 teachers who were ex-deans and office holders were included, adding up to 22 members in the sample.

A questionnaire of 10 items referring to policy matters and TESO documents was prepared and administered to the sample population. Nine (9) items are statements where the respondents are asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with what is stated on a four-point scale which ranges from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree, given values of 4, 3, 2, or 1 respectively. Whenever they disagree with what is stated, they are asked to state their reasons of disagreement. The 10th item requests the respondents to list solutions to what they have identified as problems. The data obtained are calculated using the mean score of the response alternatives as a cut-off point. The observed mean score is to be compared with the calculated mean score of 2.5. If the observed mean score is below 2.5, it means that there is disagreement and if above 2.5, there is agreement. The reason given for disagreement is tallied, and if an issue is repeatedly raised by at least 25 % of the respondents, it is taken as a serious issue and discussed; otherwise it is rejected.

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Table 1. Findings of response analysis

Item	Mean Score
1. TESO program is based on the new education and training policy	3.07
2. The new education and training policy provides for staff development. The advanced diploma for teacher certification, training workshops on teaching and learning in higher education, in-service and pre-service courses are indicators.	3.23
3. Faculty staff, department heads and others have participated in seminars and workshops to determine courses to be offered in each department. This shows that the new approach provides for faculties' participation in determining the content and structure of the curriculum.	1.92
4. Courses are to be written and modules are to be developed by practitioners (teachers). This shows the provision for teacher participation. Therefore, there is no problem in course allotment.	2.14
5. Since new buildings for laboratory, library, classroom, etc. purposes are constructed and books, equipments, and furniture are bought, there is no input problem in implementing the TESO program.	2.07
6. Classroom arrangements and class size are not problems in implementing a learner-centred approach.	1.38
7. Since faculties are made aware ahead of time to employ teachers as may be required, there is no problem of shortage of teachers.	1.46
8. Practicum is an answer to the long-awaited problem of shortage of time for teaching practice.	2.61
9. Universities, Regional Education Bureaus, schools and other concerned bodies were oriented about the practicum ahead of time and as a result there were no problems of transportation, acceptance at school, cooperation etc.	1.99

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As regards the open item (number ten) the problems cited were: There is a lack of qualified teachers, they are simply not available; there is a lack of knowledge about the magnitude of the problem; there is a high intake of students at the universities (now about 2445 in the Faculty of Education) and as a consequence the classes become large (60-80), hindering the modelling of learner-centred approaches; there is a problem with the implementation of the practicum due to lack of available schools, two in the case of Bahir Dar; there is a lack of cooperation, and quality seems to be compromised for quantity. Further, the construction of labs, libraries, classrooms etc. is lagging behind; there are too few academic subjects; the changes recommended are not well taken; there is too much time for the practicum and for professional courses; and module writing is done hurriedly, making overload a major problem.

Solutions recommended were: The program structure should include 2-3 years for specialization and 1 year for professional course and the practicum; offering the 25 credit-hours practicum in one block, i.e. during the 2nd semester of the third year, would enable students go to different schools of their choice; module writing should be given enough time; improvement of salary and living conditions is needed to attract teachers; participation of institutions in decision making needs to be enhanced; the program should be adapted to the local situation; and there should be a revision of content and type of courses.

Discussion

In improving the teacher education programs, both the education and training policy and TESO have strengths in that there is inclusion of new courses such as action research, ICT, Civics and Ethics, Communicative English Skills etc., which are very basic and essential. Moreover, allocation of more time to the practicum, continuous assessment and active learning are accepted as favourable outcomes.

Despite this fact, however, practitioners are of the opinion that curricular materials, class size and classroom situations do not favour the implementation of a learner centred approach.

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As regards professional development of teachers, they are expected to develop competencies in subject matter knowledge, and in methods, while developing the desired personality traits. These are similar to the “know”, “be” and “do” categories of evidence of competence which are difficult to assess (Hayes, 1999). The TESO document, referring to the study of Quality and Effectiveness of the Teacher Education system in Ethiopia, concludes that teachers’ knowledge of the subject matter is unsatisfactory, their professional competence deficient, their know-how very basic etc. As stated by Apple (1993) this seems to be blaming teachers for things they are not responsible for. Regarding the structure and content of the curriculum, the practitioners did not deny that they should participate in workshops and seminars, but they say that their suggestions are not well taken. If that is the case in practice, it will be similar to the case in Namibia (Dahlström, 2002), where the shift in paradigm was an intentional intervention initiated and sanctioned by the new political and educational leadership, but to some extent it failed to include a full participatory approach, due to different reasons than in Ethiopia. As such the shift becomes a top-down process. However, Fullan (1993) points out that in times of educational reform, teachers should not expect changes made to them or for them but should be forces for change themselves.

The implementation of the practicum has become a major problem of the TESO program. Part of the problem is that the number of the students is too large to be accommodated by the existing schools. For instance, in case of Bahir Dar, there are only two high schools where more than 2000 students go for the practicum. Another part of the problem is logistical: transporting students from the university to the schools. This aspect is recognized in the TESO document but left without a recommended solution.

Another point of argument is the credit hours allotted for subject area courses and professional courses. The TESO curriculum is said to have allocated more time for professional courses, i.e. 70 credit hours (65%) of the 108 total credit hours. The argument is that a balance should be maintained between the two, for teachers must be knowledgeable and able in both what they are teaching and how they are teaching.

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In general, there seems to be a gap between what is stated in the document and what is practiced. This might be due to lack of knowledge of the magnitude of the problem, which has had a negative effect on the strategies chosen and their implementation. Referring to the ERGESE finding (see below) and the implementation problem, Negash (1990, p. 100) has pointed out that the state of knowledge on Ethiopian education, in spite of the remarkable survey by ERGESE and the voluminous reports stored at the MOE, is far from satisfactory. He believes that most of the policy makers within the Ministry of Education and the government are indeed aware about the crises of education but have difficulties with articulating, firstly, the dimensions of the crises and secondly, the strategies for their resolution. This time care must be taken not to repeat the errors. One is also likely to raise questions such as:

- Is the change initiated by traditional intellectuals seeking power or by organic intellectuals seeking real change (Gramsci, cited by Dahlström, 2002)?
- Is the strategic plan the case of a fragile state planning beyond what it can accomplish to satisfy the interests of donor agencies (Fuller, 1991) or does it represent an indispensable change that can be implemented and bring about change?
- During the Derge regime, a project of Evaluative Research of the General Education System of Ethiopia (ERGESE) was conducted and the study group members were all Ethiopians. This time it was external experts who carried out the study on the Quality and Effectiveness of the Teacher Education System in Ethiopia. Is this a case of the Western State Building the Third World School (Fuller, 1991) or is it in need of expert knowledge?
- A last question is related to the theme of this publication: What is the potential within the recent attempts to ‘overhaul’ teacher education to develop a holistic view of educational change and reform through practices like Critical Practitioner Inquiry and by that create ownership of the changes amongst practitioners?

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Answering these questions one way or another cannot be done at this point in time, since the TESO program is at an initial stage of implementation. To get to the answers, we will need a broader and closer investigation in the coming future.

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