Curriculum as Unquestioned Hegemony: Trends that Reveal the Exclusion of Ethiopian Primary School Curriculum Content from Researchers' Critical Look

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Abstract: Curriculum is the most central component of the broad package we call "education". Hence, the relevance and substance of the curricula offered in different academic subjects is naturally assumed to be the major focus of educational research. However, a glance at most studies on Ethiopian primary education indicates a serious neglect of curriculum content as the main focus of educational research. This paper is a review of 74 research studies available online and conducted between 1995 and 2015 on Ethiopian primary education and school children in order to understand what issues are often studied about primary education in Ethiopia, and to what extent curriculum content is given attention by researchers. The examination of the main focus of each study revealed that curriculum content is dealt with only by seven studies, among which, only three studied it directly. Possible reasons for this exclusion of primary school curriculum content from the focus of educational research and the way forward are discussed.

Keywords: Curriculum, educational research, hegemony, primary education, Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is the most central component of the broad package we call "education". Regardless of its delivery in a formal, non-formal, or informal mode, education always involves a certain conceptualization of valuable knowledge to be imparted, skills to be developed, and values to be inculcated (Flinders & Thornton, 2004; McNeil, 1996; Pinar et al., 1995). While these educational goals can generally be taken as the "contents" of education, the process of successfully imparting, developing, or inculcating them can be referred to as the "methodology" of education. Curriculum is comprised of both (McNeil, 1996; Schubert, 1986). A comprehensive scholarship on curriculum and instruction regards all these aspects as equally important focuses of educational research.

In Ethiopia, the basic framework of school curriculum contents are determined by a team of experts from each regional education bureau of the country that convenes through the coordination of the Ministry of Education. The syllabi and flow charts of the current textbooks in use in primary and secondary schools in Ethiopia were prepared in such manner

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in 2007 G.C. based on needs assessment conducted by the teams in sample schools from selected regions. Afterwards, regional education bureaus took the assignment of preparing the whole content of the textbooks for primary grade levels (grades 1-8) except for English language and civic education which were prepared centrally by the Ministry of Education.[2]

Given the fact that a centrally prepared school textbook is often the only resource teachers and students rely on for most school subjects in Ethiopia, it becomes even more imperative for researchers to scrutinize the quality of the information and perspectives presented in every textbook. They also need to examine direct and indirect impacts of the contents on the general outlooks of students. As such, the relevance and substance of the curricula offered in different academic subjects can naturally be assumed to be the major focus area of educational research in Ethiopia. However, a glance at most studies conducted on Ethiopian primary education indicates that this is not the case. The content of what students learn is not what educational and other researchers are often concerned with. Rather, teaching methods, language of instruction, technological modalities, primary education policies, school facilities, and the children's home lives are what gain the exclusive attention of researchers who study primary education from different angles.

This paper is a review of research conducted in the past two decades on Ethiopian primary education and school children. The purpose is to show what the most common focus areas of primary education research are, to assess how much of the content of the curriculum is (not) investigated in those studies, and to reveal the possible reasons behind this unjustified exclusion of the content from the focus of research on primary education. The three questions this review seeks to answer can be stated as:

1. What has been studied so far about Ethiopian primary school education in the past two decades?
2. How closely or comprehensively is the curriculum studied, if at all it is studied?
3. What implication does the way the curriculum is studied/neglected have for the way education and educational research are conceptualized in Ethiopia?

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, a total of seventy-four studies on Ethiopian primary education published between the years 1995 – 2015 were reviewed. Among these are forty journal articles, six conference papers, seven master's and doctoral theses, and twenty-one organizational reports (governmental or non-governmental) and working papers. The grade levels the studies dealt with are Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) (pre-kindergarten to KG-3), first-cycle primary education (grades 1 – 4), and second-cycle primary education (grades 5-8). Most of the studies were empirical studies in which data were collected, analyzed and discussed in

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[2]This information was collected from a semi-formal interview with a senior curriculum expert at the Ministry of Education.

different forms. Opinion papers by educators or other professionals (e.g., journalists and politicians) were excluded because the goal of this review is to demonstrate the exclusion of curriculum content from systematic study, and not necessarily from general public discourse.

The studies were accessed online through Google Scholar, Google, and elibraryUSA. Research articles indexed at JSTOR, ERIC, Academic One file, and ProQuest dissertation and thesis were searched by using different combinations of the words "Ethiopia" "primary" "elementary" "school" "education" and "curriculum". Also, general search was performed on Google to access reports of international organizations that are pertinent to Ethiopian primary education policy. Hence, one limitation that naturally arises out of this method of accessing literature is the fact that only materials available online were included in the review. Most studies conducted in Ethiopia are available in print format, and local and international journals that are available in libraries in print copies remain to be the most read by faculties and graduate students in higher education institutions in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, there are enough studies available online that can represent the different types of research conducted on primary education in the country.

Once the studies were accessed, I read each material thoroughly to identify the central focus of each study and to assess how closely or comprehensively the curriculum or content is investigated by the researcher(s) in relation to whatever issue they raised (gender, wellbeing, literacy, etc.). Although the research questions were given major emphasis in identifying the focus of each research, all sections were given due attention in case the researcher(s) discussed anything significant related to curriculum content. Other details such as research design, theoretical framework, data gathering methods, or data analysis approaches were not the focus of this review (although each were read as sections) as they have no direct relevance to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS

The review of the seventy-four studies revealed nine major categories of research focuses. Each category is presented in Table 1 together with the number of studies classified under it. Out of the total of seventy-four studies, only eight were found to be dealing with curriculum content (what children learn) relatively directly, and even those, mostly with limitations as will be discussed further in section 3.9. The remaining studies had their focus on areas other than the curriculum.

Table 1

Number of Studies Reviewed Categorized by their Research Focus

Category	Research focus	Number of studies
1	Access and Enrolment Rates	15
2	Children's Health and Wellbeing*	14
3	Improving Classroom Instruction	10
4	Gender parity in Primary Schools*	3
5	Mother-tongue Instruction	7
6	Early Language Literacy*	4
7	Classroom and Nation-wide Assessment	2
8	System-level studies	11
9	Studies on the curriculum content	8
	Total	74

*Categories 2, 4, and 6 have a vast body of research and literature. Only a few representative studies are incorporated here since the purpose of the review is to give an overview of the most typical issues studied under that category.

Studies on Access and Enrollment Rates

As indicated in Table 1, fifteen out of seventy-four studies included in this review dealt with school access and enrollment rates. The themes of these studies, some of which are indicated in their titles, can be listed as family and school factors in primary education enrollment progress (Kassahun, 2008), the situation of out of school children (MoE & UNICEF, 2012), rights, equity, and diversity in early childhood education (Woodhead, 2009), contribution of preschool education on first cycle primary school students' learning process and academic achievement (Tadesse, 2015), economic and cultural factors in rural children's deprivation of education in Ethiopia (Roschanski, 2007), progresses and challenges in delivering quality early learning (Orkin, Workneh, & Woodhead, 2012), prospects, challenges, and policy options towards meeting the Education for All (EFA) goals (Derebssa, 2005), the status of preprimary education enrollment (Tsegai, 2015), evaluation of approaching EFA goals in terms of universal primary education and girls' and women's education (Lasonen, Kemppainen, & Raheem, 2005), barriers to progress in early education enrollment and provision (Hoot, Szente, & Belete, 2004), challenges of free primary education in Ethiopia (Jeilu, 2009), socio-economic and demographic determinants of children's primary school enrollment in Ethiopia (Eshetu & Dula, 2013), the impacts of the characteristics of early childhood education and family views in children's enrollment (Szente, Hoot, & Selamawit, 2007), the impacts of responsiveness of school arrangement to household needs and teachers' attitudes towards teaching on enrollment (Verwimp, 1999), and household economy, gender roles, and family composition as determinants of child schooling and work (Tassew, Jones, & Bekele, 2008).

As can be understood from the above list of studies and their focus areas, factors affecting primary school enrollment, such as parental education, household wealth, distance to school,

incompatible global policies regarding schooling and child labor, etc. are the major research emphases in this category. Some are studies on the progress rate of school expansion and enrollment (e.g., Tsegai, 2015). Others are about ways of increasing enrollment and expansion through different means such as raising school funds (e.g., Jeilu, 2009), considering alternative modes of delivering education (e.g., Hoot, Szante, & Belete, 2004), decentralization of administration (e.g., Derebssa, 2006), and restructuring the school system (e.g., Woodhead, 2009). In relation to the main research questions of this review, what is notable about this category of research is that, even when suggestions on the importance of making curriculum relevant to "household needs" are forwarded in some studies (e.g., Verwimp, 1999), the main focus of discussion is not on the curriculum, but on convincing more parents to send their children to school and increase enrollment by improving school activity, teacher effort, calendar flexibility, and infrastructure. The curriculum is not investigated for what it is achieving or missing in terms of building children's understanding of their social and natural environment.

Studies on Children's Health and Wellbeing

Fourteen studies that dealt with issues related to children's health and wellbeing were classified under this category. While thirteen were direct reports from empirical studies, the fourteenth study included here is an annotation of forty studies on children's lives (Poluha, 2007). These studies are not necessarily conducted by educational researchers; professionals from other fields such as sociology, health, anthropology, and social work were also involved in investigating issues that affect the health and wellbeing of school children and their academic progress.

Based on their topic areas, these studies can be further categorized as those dealing with prevalence of illness among primary school children (e.g., eye-sight problems, stunting, anemia, and poor hygiene) (Desalegne, Berhane, Kefyalew, Balew, & Tarekegn, 2014; Poppe, 2014; Sintayehu, Kassahun, & Molla, 2014; Tilahun, Abraham, & Berhanu, 2015; Vivas, Gelaye, Kumie, & Williams, 2010), safety issues among school children (e.g., corporeal punishment, violence in school, sexual abuse, harmful traditional practices, and bullying) (Abraha & Belay, 2008; Save the Children Denmark, MoE & MoWA, 2008; Yisak, Workneh, & Asham, 2009), issues related to conceptualizations and practices of children's rights (e.g., child labor, children's access to media and other services, policy incompatibilities, etc.) (Poluha, 2007), parental and societal conceptualization of childhood, child roles, gender identity development, and good/bad behavior (Poluha, 2004), at-risk children (e.g., child prostitutes and street children) (Selamawit & Hoot, 2006/7), and using qualitative research methodologies with children (Bethlehem, Griffin & Camfield, 2009; Tadesse, 2011). In all these studies, curriculum is seldom touched upon; or when it is brought up, it is in the context of student socialization with teachers and amongst themselves (e.g., Poluha, 2004).

Studies on Improving Classroom Instruction

Thirteen studies were found to be concerned with ways of improving instruction in the classroom. The studies generally had two focus areas, i.e. student-centered teaching approaches or other particular instructional strategies, and the use of ICT to support instruction. In the first area, the studies of Asmaru, Adane, & Daniel (2006) and Solomon (2014) dealt with the prospects of enhancing active learning through primary school teachers' peer and self-reflections, whereas three other studies focused on the implementation condition and status of active learning strategies in Ethiopian primary schools (Frost & Little, 2014; Meles, 2011; Wudu, Tefera, & Woldu, 2009). Desta's (2006) study was on the role of meta-cognitive strategies for better science learning in primary schools, whereas Derebssa (2006) investigated the tension between the traditional, teacher-centered approach of education versus the modern innovative approach in Ethiopian primary schools.

The second focus area in this category is the role of ICT to enhance instruction in the classroom. The studies by Hare (2007), Szente (2006), and Tilson & Demissew (2000) were on the status of the use of ICT in Ethiopian schools, and the prospect of the use of computer-assisted instruction and relatively old innovations such as radio and TV to improve quality of education by creating more opportunities for practice and collaboration (Szente, 2006; Tilson & Demissew, 2000).

The studies in this category brought up the issue of curriculum in one way or another. However, the focus was only on *how* students learn, rather than on *what* they learn. Even in the case of the study by Derebssa (2006) in which the curriculum was discussed relatively directly, it was examined for its convenience to engage students in active learning strategies, rather than for the quality of the very content itself incorporated in the textbooks.

Studies on Gender Parity in Primary Schools

Gender parity in primary schools is one of the most frequently studied issues in Ethiopia. The prospects and challenges of increasing girls' school enrollment is a relatively exhaustively studied field. Both native and foreign researchers, as well as federal and non-governmental agencies follow up the status of girls' enrollment in primary schools. In this review, only three studies are included as examples to showcase how curriculum is often overlooked from the researchers' critical scrutiny. The first is the study of urban and rural primary school girls' aspirations and educational experiences (Camfield, 2011). Camfield (2011) wanted to go beyond the traditional enrollment and dropout studies, and employed both quantitative and qualitative methodology to understand the girls' experiences with their education. She assessed the social, material, and political-economic factors that affect girls' educational experiences, but never directly studied the curriculum. The second study by Rose and Al-Samarrai (2001) dealt with household factors such as income, nourishment, and parental educational level, on primary school children's enrollment and persistence in school. The researchers compared the degree of impact these factors had for girls and boys, and found

that girls' school enrollment was more frequently affected by constraints directly linked to these household factors than boys. The study did not touch upon curriculum. The third study selected for this review dealt with similar issues – household economy, gender, child labor, and inequality in educational opportunities among boys and girls living in rural and urban areas (Tassew, Bekele, Jones, & Alebel, 2005).

Studies in this category have close resemblance to those under Category 1 in that they both focused on increasing access to education and achieving universal primary education. There is a tradition of studying curriculum separately in light of gender-responsiveness and gender mainstreaming qualities. For example, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which oversees studies like the one by Rose and Al-Samarrai (2001) has a well-developed guideline for educating school teachers and leaders about gender-responsive pedagogy, and ensuring schools' gender responsiveness in sub-Saharan Africa (Mlama, 2005). Perhaps the only question raised on the curriculum in regard to its gender-responsiveness is the degree to which the content is free from sexist languages and gender stereotypes, and whether or not women of great achievements are included in the textbook/teaching material. Researchers fail to examine and comment on whether or not the curriculum is beneficial for girls' present or future lives and struggles when they study their enrollment or school experiences.

Studies on Mother-Tongue Instruction

Seven studies that dealt with mother-tongue instruction were reviewed in this category, and there are more studies that have the same focus area but not included in this review. This is due to the sufficiency of the present studies to support the central argument of the paper, which is, the exclusion of curriculum content from educational researchers' critical scrutiny. The studies reviewed here are seen from two perspectives. The first one is that mother-tongue instruction is vital for students' learning, and the second is that mother-tongue instruction is a political and colonial legacy that is outdated. Those who supported the first viewpoint studied the impact of mother-tongue instruction on the enrollment and retention of Ethiopian children in schools (Ramachandran, 2012); the political, financial, pedagogical, and social challenges to implement mother-tongue education in all ethno-linguistic groups in Ethiopia (Hirut, 2007); the comparative success of multi-lingual education in Ethiopia compared to mono-lingual education systems (Heugh, 2009); and the impact of learning in one's mother tongue on the academic achievement of grade eight students (Teshome, 2007). Researchers who employed the second perspective made an assessment of the history of language policy (Getachew & Derib, 2006), the values and philosophies behind the language policy in comparison with other multi-national countries such as the United States (Daniel & Abebayehu, 2006, 2011). The first researchers acknowledged the achievements of the language policy, but with a serious warning on the importance of basing language policy decisions on professional consultations rather than on politics. Similarly, the latter questioned the compatibility of the current mother-tongue instruction approach with both local and global realities, dubbing it as "politically motivated" (Daniel & Abebayehu, 2006, p. 154).

While the studies in this category bring up crucial issues that need to be discussed in Ethiopian education, they showcase the consistent absence of content from the list of main issues to be investigated in primary schools. Language of instruction is a lot more discussed among pedagogical and language researchers than the quality and relevance of the content and perspectives that are being introduced to learners using whatever language.

Studies on Early Language Literacy

Like gender parity and mother-tongue instruction, language literacy, especially early reading fluency in Amharic, English, or other ethnic languages, is a widely studied area in Ethiopian primary schools. For this review, four studies were selected with different language emphasis: an analysis of the English literacy of primary school teachers and librarians (Borssum, 2012), factors affecting early Afan Oromo reading fluency and facilitating/impeding factors (DeStefano & Elaheebocus, 2010), early reading fluency of Ethiopian children in Amharic and Afan Oromo (Piper, 2010), and practices and impeding factors in the teaching of English in the first cycle (grades 1-4) at public primary schools (Eba, 2014).

One may be led to assume that relatively better discussion of the curriculum is seen in these studies because the teaching-learning materials are discussed more closely than in other categories of research. However, it is possible to understand from what is presented above that this is not because content (quality of ideas, values, perspectives, etc. children are exposed to) is considered in these studies, but it is simply due to the oneness of the language and its curriculum; meaning, it is not possible to discuss the language separately from the English language subject and the materials used in the classroom. Even suggestions for preparing or selecting supplementary resources do not go beyond reading difficulty levels of content and why (Piper, 2010).

Studies on Classroom Assessment Practices

For this review, two studies were accessed online that dealt with classroom assessment practices: a correlation study of the relationship between text anxiety and achievement (Raju & Abebech, 2009), and a published master's thesis on the ways of integrating curriculum goals and objectives, instruction, and assessment (Animaw, 2012). Both studies did not deal with questions regarding relevance or appropriateness of content of the curricula. While the first study dealt with constructs/variables such as academic self-concept, study habits, and parental involvement, the latter focused on the importance of practicing formative/continuous assessment that ensures the alignment of the teaching-learning process with assessment. During the search for this review, I was able to further observe that classroom assessment practices were often studied at secondary school level and above than at primary level.

System-Level Studies

Eleven studies which have a wider focus area regarding primary education were reviewed in this category. Their focuses include the conflict between demands of universal primary education and the centrality of child labor in rural household economy (Tatek, 2008); community understanding of children's transition and poverty (Yisak & Camfield, 2009); conception, practice, and facilitation strategies of community participation in primary schools' leadership and quality assurance (Obsaa, 2010; Swift-Morgan, 2006; Yodit et al., 20005); comparison between private and public schools' expansion and performance in response to policy reforms and opportunities (Berhanu, 2003); the influence of external assistance ("donor agenda") and national politics on the education sector of aid-recipient African countries, including Ethiopia (Takala, 1998); a study on whether expansion of primary education is associated with economic growth (Paulos & Mekonnen, 2004); children's perspective on choice between working and going to school (Alebachew, 2009); an assessment of the instrumentality of quality reform efforts in bringing about aid effectiveness (Berry & Solomon, 2011); and the impact of a dual-system of primary education in which children receive education of a different kind based on economic class (Asayehgn, 2012). In all of these studies, several important issues related to the wider-context in which the Ethiopian education system operates are raised. Curriculum relevance is often brought up as a discussion point and fundamentally questioned; but it is not sufficiently and specifically pursued. Curriculum content is not closely evaluated or commented on. One reason is associated with the fact that most of the studies had large scopes, but the other is related to the implicit sensitivity of the issues investigated. There seems to be a tacit agreement that no one has the right or authority to question curriculum content in schools.

One specific incident during a focus group discussion for a study reported by Swift-Morgan (2006) brings to light the above-mentioned reality. Swift-Morgan (2006) extensively studied how community participation was conceived by teachers, parents, school administrators, and government educational officers in the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region in Ethiopia. Community participation was understood by almost all participants as financial contribution and/or the provision of materials for the construction of infrastructure. Some also viewed it as including meeting with teachers to discuss students' academic performance, to evaluate teachers, and even make administrative decisions such as hiring and firing teachers. However, Swift-Morgan (2006) mentioned that a definition of community participation forwarded by one teacher was exceptionally opposed by others, i.e. participation in teaching children about topics such as Ethiopian culture. Teachers strongly contended that parents should have no role in lesson content and instruction since they themselves are uneducated and should leave that to teachers. The toleration of conception of community participation as extending to hiring and firing teachers and not allowing community participation in teaching Ethiopian culture, indicate a deeper ideological issue regarding who has the authority to question or decide content rather than structural problems of defining community participation as an aspect of quality of education.

Studies on Curriculum Content

Among the seventy-four studies reviewed for this paper, only eight studies dealt with curriculum/content of primary education. Some closely studied the primary school curriculum; others provided a relatively expanded comment on issues related to curriculum relevance although they did not directly study the curriculum itself. For example, the study by Onwu and Agu (2010) is an examination of some aspects of Alternative Basic Education (ABE) in Ethiopia. They explored issues such as definition of ABE, access, capacity, leadership and finance, curriculum relevance and quality, quality ABE delivery in the classroom, teacher-related issues, and transition to the formal education system. With regard to the curriculum content, they assessed the perspectives of different stakeholders about the curriculum's relevance to beneficiaries' preparation to the world of work and progression in the education ladder. They stated that the *woreda* level government officials see ABE as satisfactory, whereas parents and community members viewed it as not localized enough to prepare learners for the world of work. They also reported the views of NGO supervisors, who were found to be less inclined to reveal their opinion about curriculum relevance. The researchers acknowledged the difficulty to understand how the curriculum actually contributes to the skills development learners need for their daily life and the world of work. A similar conclusion is reached by Ambissa (2014), who studied students', teachers', school principals', deputy principals', supervisors', and heads of district education offices' perspectives on the practice of curriculum contextualization in situations that are relevant and meaningful to students' lives. He found that, although the issue of curriculum relevance is seen as overriding by all participants, in practice, the effort to contextualize curriculum through the inclusion of elements of curriculum contextualization into teachers' performance assessment or textbook evaluation guides is "terribly lacking" (p. 49). Yishak and Gumbo's (2014) study on the education policy and strategy documents analyzing provisions that support the indigenization of primary education further supports the observation of Ambissa (2014). Their analyses confirmed that, although the policies make provisions for indigenization, they also support standardization, making the decentralization of primary education through the inclusion of cultural themes and local contents difficult. These studies confirm the central argument of this paper; i.e., curriculum content is not closely studied or commented on by educational researchers and practitioners. Its relevance is often questioned, but it is not systematically studied or critiqued.

A related comment was made on the primary curriculum by two conference papers presented at a conference with a theme *Urban Public Service Delivery in Ethiopia* organized by the Forum for Social Studies (FSS) in Addis Ababa in 2014. The papers presented by Tadele (2014) and Getachew (2014) (referred to as "FSS, 2014" in the reference list) discussed different issues related to primary education provision in Addis Ababa, one of which was the issue of content. Based on the report of their study, the Forum underlined that there is a need to tackle the problem of frequent changes in the print of textbooks without substantive content improvements. The Forum also concluded that the inconsistency between schools' curriculum and teachers' preparation should be lessened to relieve parents from increased

cost burden that comes as a result of a forced choice they have to make to enroll their children in private schools (FSS, 2014).

The remaining three studies reviewed are examples of a very close study of the curriculum (Hawani, 2014; Pankhurst, 2008; Taylor & Mulhall, 1997). In my review of studies on Ethiopian primary education so far, these kinds of studies are rare. Educators need to do more of such studies if addressing curriculum relevance and quality is a genuine goal in the field of education.

Among these three studies, an earlier one by Taylor and Mulhall (1997) assessed the possibility and effectiveness of situating primary school subjects in the context of agriculture in countries with a predominantly agrarian economy, including Ethiopia. They assessed pupils' responsiveness to activities such as measuring land area in math lessons using problem questions such as calculating how many radishes they can plant in a given area. The authors suggested such innovative approaches of integrating agriculture into several primary school subjects in the context of different countries.

Hawani's (2014) study used Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Yosso's community cultural wealth theory to explore the integration of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into ECCE programs in Addis Ababa. The finding was that the Ethiopian alphabet, traditional practices, and religion, which are core elements of Ethiopia's indigenous knowledge, are devalued in ECCE programs. A similar note is made by Pankhurst (2008), who, after a long observation of early childhood and care programs, suggested that the curriculum for women who care for and teach young children should be revisited to include practical training in child care and education, as well as curricular improvisation to make the content more integrated with Ethiopia's artistic, musical, historical, and cultural assets.

The above seven studies are the exception rather than the rule for the usual trend in primary education research. Even among them, only three studies directly dealt with content and made suggestions on how to revise it. The remaining four studies showed the exclusion of this research area from scholarly and public discourse – confirming that there is an unexplained silence among academia regarding why students learn what they learn. Interestingly though, students are expected to question why they learn what they learn as they grow in their education – an unreasonable expectation requiring them to demonstrate qualities and dispositions which educators themselves are not willing to exercise in their research.

Possible Reasons Why Primary School Curriculum Is Not Directly Studied

From the perspective of the researchers, there could be several reasons why they do not take curriculum content as a direct subject of their investigation. I will try to point out some possible reasons based on my review, which I think have contributed to this neglect.

Coming from another Field of Study

One possible reason is, understandably, the research interest that comes from some of the researchers' field of interest that is different from education. For example, Paulos and Mekonnen's (2004) study on whether or not primary education is related to economic growth is because the authors are affiliated with the Institute of Development Research, rather than some institute closely working on *curriculum* research. Nonetheless, studying content is not just for educators affiliated with curriculum studies because professionals in all fields are stakeholders in the country's education system. They need to demonstrate a stronger interest in what students are learning and what they are not.

International Commitments Emphasizing Access

Another possible reason for the absence of primary school content from researchers' critical focus is the call for Universal Primary Education (UPE) officially endorsed by the Education for All (EFA) agreement among international organizations and several countries including Ethiopia. Consequently, assessment of access and equity in primary education has been the dominant focus of research in primary education in the past twenty years. Among the seventy-four studies reviewed in this paper, fifteen of them directly dealt with access, and significant number of the other studies in the other categories indirectly dealt with the same topic.

The Urgency of Addressing Children's Wellbeing Issues

The third likely reason why content is not adequately researched is the fact that dealing with children's wellbeing and adequacy of basic school resources sounds reasonably urgent compared to their cognitive enrichment. This is again understandable given the fact that many Ethiopian children go through poverty-related crisis such as poor health and malnutrition issues, and several schools around the country are under-resourced and poorly staffed. However, researchers should go beyond the sense of urgency and immediacy created by the circumstances, and maintain a far-sighted research goal to contribute towards a quality and relevant education capable of shaping children's problem-solving ability, optimistic future outlook, and broader orientation.

The Emphasis on Breadth of Scope Rather than Depth in Research

The fourth reason could be the general tendency among academia, especially, in Ethiopian universities, to consider only those types of studies which have breadth of scope as capable of influencing policy and practice. The research culture in general and the quantitative bent among education researchers in particular encourages wide-scale survey-type studies with a strong focus on methodological rigor and an attempt to maximize response rates rather than an in-depth investigation of educational processes and their long-term outcomes. Knowledge produced through large scale studies are considered as more reliable, objective, and scientific.

This has prevented many educational researchers from being interested in small-scale studies which study the interplay of education, personality, behavior, and setting in the school system. Studying the relevance of content requires zooming in to what is happening (or not happening) to learners as a result of what they learn. Unfortunately, this subject does not seem to be the focus of most researchers of Ethiopia's primary education.

The Lack of Collaboration between Experts and Curriculum Developers

The fifth possible reason that should not be neglected is the unfortunate reality that those with an updated understanding of the fields in different subject areas often do not "come back" to the education sector to help revisit the school curriculum. Recent study of the Ethiopian education system by Verspoor and Joshi (2013) made a strong comment on secondary school textbooks, suggesting that contents are often not updated, and this lack of dynamism has caused a downward shift of much of the contents to lower grades raising the difficulty level of the curriculum in general. Their study, which went beyond the curriculum in assessing the Ethiopian secondary education system, got much attention by higher officials and the Ministry of Education for its implication of the need for a serious overhaul in secondary education. This is impossible without the increased intervention of professionals in different fields to update the primary and secondary school curricula. Yet, researching content is largely left to teacher educators, educational psychologists, and curriculum experts due to the narrow understanding of the implication of different fields of specializations when it comes to addressing a cross-cutting issue like school curricula.

Tendency to View the Curriculum as Default – A Hegemony

The most powerful, yet implicit, reason behind the exclusion of school curriculum content as a major focus of educational research is the tendency to consider the curriculum as an unquestionable hegemony. The facts, perspectives, values, assertions, and questions included in the curriculum, as well as the way they are selected and organized, are considered as *the* curriculum by almost all stakeholders. Few researchers dare to systematically question relevance or quality of content although many raise the issue or relevance and quality in their works. Parents do not feel capable of officially commenting on the curriculum, and teachers leave that to curriculum experts, who probably leave it to the government, and the government to different western scholars who do not (and need not) go beyond offering field specific suggestions and assistance to make a more comprehensive proposal for more relevant and harmonious curricula.

CONCLUSION

Despite the frequent mention of relevance and quality, the predominant trend in Ethiopian primary school educational research in the past twenty years has been very much neglectful of the relevance and quality of curriculum content. Most studies done on primary education over the last two decades focused on access (increasing enrollment), children's wellbeing,

literacy (mostly about reading fluency rather than content), mother tongue instruction (political versus pedagogical justifications), and teaching methodology. The studies which focused on primary school curriculum content are too few to be considered significant. Among the seventy-four studies reviewed in this paper, only three studies dealt directly with how to make curriculum relevant and contextualize it within children's lives, and other four studies indirectly dealt with the curriculum content by showing the lack of effort to investigate curriculum content or make it more relevant. Some possible reasons that have contributed to this neglect are international commitments emphasizing access, the urgency of addressing children's wellbeing issues (rather than the curriculum), the emphasis on breadth of scope rather than depth among researchers preventing them from taking a close-up look at the curriculum, and the lack of collaboration between curriculum developers and experts in various fields which prevented collaborations on investigating and updating school textbook contents. But, in my view, the most important reason that accounts for this neglect of content from being the most central focus of educational research is the tendency among stakeholders to regard it as an unquestionable hegemony—*the* education—that is universally prescribed to children of all types and schools.

I conclude my paper by suggesting that it is time for educational researchers in general and curriculum researchers in particular to ponder on questions like the following in their subsequent investigations of quality of primary education in any grade level or subject area:

> ➢ Is this the best content we can think of to achieve the learning objective/goal?
> ➢ Is this content developmentally appropriate?
> ➢ Does this content create the best positive impression on students' minds about that topic?
> ➢ Is this the best topic we want to present to children about the world? Should we really begin from there?
> ➢ Should this particular content be presented from this perspective?
> ➢ What content can catch children's attention and shape their thinking in a certain way?
> ➢ What kinds of content would pass the child's superficial attention and successfully reach the child's mind and emotions to shape his/her personality and future outlook?

While the lessons that were learnt from this review are significant, future studies with more comprehensive scope of review including both online and print copies of studies, as well as an empirical data from teachers, supervisors, students, curriculum developers, graduate students, and educational researchers on why content is neglected as central topic of research studies would be the lesson more complete.

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