

The Opportunities and Critical Challenges of Middle Education Curriculum Implementation in Primary Schools: A Case Study of Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the opportunities and critical challenges of curriculum implementation in middle education in case schools. The study adopted a qualitative case study research approach and purposely selected four teachers, representatives of students, and parents, and in the case of availability, principals participated in collecting primary data through interviews and FGD. Document reviews and observations were also conducted to collect the data. Data were analyzed by narrating and categorizing each theme, and finally triangulating the findings of the study based on the objectives of the study. The findings of the study imply opportunities, critical challenges, and directions for further improvement of the curriculum in case schools. According to the major findings of the study, there were some good opportunities in case schools, such as students and teachers with similar backgrounds in the case of first language or cultural aspects, existence teachers, and school principals according to the standard of qualification status of middle education and the availability of basic school facilities, even if there were utilization issues. The study has also shown critical challenges, such as the attitude and practice of stakeholders in the case of curriculum implementation, shortage of textbooks and training based on curriculum reform, and context-related variables. Finally, cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders are suggested to improve the practice of curriculum implementation..

Keywords: Curriculum, Middle education, Paedagogy

1. Introduction

In general, educational processes in the case of formal education and curriculum development were based on the conception of curriculum and its elements. Thus, the ways in which one conceptualizes the curriculum determine its success and challenges in its actual implementation. Similarly, the choice of model/s of the curriculum and curriculum development has also influenced the implementation of the curriculum.

The curriculum can be viewed as a political and social agreement that reflects a society's common vision while taking into account local, national and global needs and expectations UNESCO (2013). According to Mulegna (2019), curriculum can be viewed as a program of education; curriculum is what is taught in school; such an approach to education seems to limit learning to the school and then limit the curriculum to academic subjects; and another very common conceptualization of a curriculum is that of viewing it as content. Criticism of

this one is that considering curriculum as a subject matter is the most traditional image of a curriculum that depicts it as the combination of subject matter to form a body of content to be taught. The other area proposed to define the curriculum is the educational philosophical point of view that determines its construction, such as constructionism and pragmatism.

The conceptualization of curriculum implementation differs according to individual/organizational views, scholar/s background, and intention of the study. The major areas identified in the review by Ogar and Awhan (2015) regarding the definition of curriculum implementation were their views. Accordingly, it is the process of putting the curriculum into work for the achievement, translation of the objectives of the curriculum from paper to practice, proposal into action, the actual engagement of learners with planned learning opportunities, and the actual carrying-out of societal culture. In this study, curriculum and curriculum implementation were conceptualized in broad ways to analyze the effects of curriculum implementation beyond the academic achievement of examinations. It focuses on academic and nonacademic values concerning the relevance of curriculum implementation.

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In general, it includes what will happen or what are we waiting for after a certain period; it can be the performance of a formal curriculum, hidden curriculum, and null curriculum or a combination thereof. In all of these cases, there are factors influencing curriculum implementation, curriculum, and instruction. Here, the main focus of this study is the effects of curriculum implementation on the relevance of the curriculum and how it considers local issues and contemporary global affairs. According to UNESCO (2013), curriculum relevance is defined as the applicability and appropriateness of a curriculum to the needs, interests, aspirations, and expectations of learners and society in general. This can be achieved by considering local aspects with respect to global competition. One strategy for curriculum localization is the process of defining parts or components of the curriculum at the community/local or school level, normally with the involvement of local staff, stakeholders, and institutions, to address issues that are locally relevant and allow for more meaningful learning experiences. These will make the implementation of curriculum effective when educators consider curriculum above the scope of nationally approved textbooks as the only means of curriculum delivery. According to researchers in various literature reviews, taking into consideration the contribution of the intended curriculum, implemented curriculum, attained curriculum, and assessed curriculum to the learning outcome of students will provide holistic and comprehensive model/s on how to run curricular and instructional processes at the school level and classroom, respectively.

The tension between the national curriculum and the local context was discussed both nationally and internationally. Literature synthesis by Leite et al. (2018) implied challenges such as designing and applying methods in which students benefit when the curriculum is developed in ways that consider their social backgrounds and cultures, as well as local characteristics. Nepal's experience indicated a policy paradox between local and national education agencies (Sharma et al. 2019). He concluded from the study findings that content and context are both equally important in school education and curriculum contextualization, which incorporates the local knowledge, skills, pedagogy, and resource utilization that directly benefits learning. A local study in the case of comparisons with other countries conducted in Ethiopia in the case of history subjects identified the gaps of learning with respect to the benefits of current issues of Ethiopia (Sisay & Enguda, 2022). It was indicated that Ethiopia centrally prescribed one-size-fits-all content focused on national narratives that appear to intentionally overlook ethnic narratives. Finally, researchers suggested that for the Ethiopian educational system, the need to incorporate more content helps to

ensure peace and national understanding, settle ethnic-based clashes, and facilitate national integration and the nation-building process. To fill these gaps and other gaps related to diversity through curriculum implementation, teachers' awareness and skills towards curriculum contextualization or adaptation are important.

Post-1991 education and training policy has indicated that various reforms were conducted by providing direct attention to curriculum development initiatives. Some of these methods are presented in this paper. SIP (school improvement program): It has a great contribution in the implementation of the curriculum because teaching and learning is one domain of this program. CPD (continuous professional development): empowering professional teachers and school principals to contribute effectively to curriculum development and implementation. Competency-based curriculum (CBC), which has received significant attention for active learning methods, formative continuous assessment, and development of 21st century skills through curriculum implementation; in addition, various other programs and strategies were discussed in the education sector development programs (ESDP), one up to six, such as strengthening mathematics and science subjects and English language improvement programs.

In Ethiopia, MoE (2020, 2021, and 2023) has been introduced to strategies that facilitate the effectiveness of curriculum implementation, such as technology integration, indigenous knowledge integration, and vocationalization of academic subjects of each grade, and relating co-curriculum programs with formal curriculum programs, among others, has been emphasized. This shows that there are various programs and strategies designed at the national level to improve the quality and relevance of curriculum implementation. The effectiveness and relevance of each program will be based on the lower or front-line implementers of the educational and curriculum programs developed.

The points that provoked researchers to conduct this study were the existing research output of related study areas under the mentioned topic, and nationally conducted research regarding educational processes and curriculum implementation. Both local and international studies had limitations in considering the two wings of the educational purpose of upper primary education and incorporating constructs of curriculum implementation. The main question should be "what is behind, adjacent to and front side of curriculum implementation?" from the researchers' perspectives. In this study, the educational process or curriculum implementation includes the process related to curriculum implementation and the factors that influence it.

The success of curriculum implementation is dependent on the program, people, and processes (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). It has been shown that the

implementation of curriculum influences local level up to international aspects related to human and nonhuman interaction, resources, and educational policy; research has been conducted in 13 countries in Europe concerning the topic “balancing curriculum regulation and freedom across Europe.” One of the questions raised was ‘Who is constructing the curriculum?’ The synthesis of response explained in Kuiper and Berkvens (2013, 39) that large differences exist as to how curricular responsibilities are appointed to central and local levels in the case of prescriptive national curriculum, national core curriculum that can and is expected to be shaped locally, and recognize the value of involvement of the main stakeholders, that is, teachers, school leaders, subject experts, and policy-makers, but the way stakeholders are involved differs widely.

Previous studies have identified aspects related to curriculum implementation. Challenges and success factors of curriculum implementation researched were differentiation of instruction (Tomlinson, 2014); parental involvement (Epstei, et al., 2002); students’ attitude towards different subjects (Mazana et al., 2019; Donga, 2019); analyzing and practicing 21st century skill gaps of teachers and students (Pacific Policy Research Center, 2010); preparation and publication of textbooks considering different areas of specialized professionals and principles of textbook publication (Fan, 2010); perspectives and practice of assessment of learning (Brainard (2021:96); Sato, 2015; Muskin, 2017; Alismail and McGuire, 2015; Styron and Styron, 2012; Wondifraw, 2021); framework of assessment in the case of CBC (MoE, 2009; 2016; 2018/19; 2020; 2021&2023; KICD, 2017; and Wafubwa, 2021). These all lead to developing the assumptions of the study because it investigated the level of motivation of human aspects, reforms of educational or curricular programs, involvement of stakeholders, effects of curriculum, and mechanisms of assessment.

In the case of Ethiopia and local studies, there were gaps in the practice of curricular activities in the 1991 educational reforms. Various reforms, such as active learning methods, continuous assessment, CPD, SIP, and CBC, were not implemented as planned (MoE, 2021; MoE, 2018/19; MoE, 2016, MoE, 2011; MoE, 2010a; MoE, 2006; MoE, 2010b; and MoE, 2002). All these reforms are directly and indirectly linked to the implementation of the curriculum of upper primary schools. However, in the study area or zone, no research has been conducted with full package or success factor curriculum implementation. To address these problems, the objectives of the research and basic research questions were listed based on one case school in order to examine good opportunities and their application in the case of upper primary school. The objectives of this study were: a) to explore critical challenges in the implementation of

curriculum in upper primary school or middle education, and b) to provide suggestions about the success of curricular activities in the case of upper primary school or middle-level education.

The corresponding basic research questions were as follows:

- a. How does a case school use opportunities in the implementation of the curriculum?
- b. What are the critical challenges that hinder the practice of the curricula in the case school?
- c. How will primary schools promote the success of curriculum implementation in the Wolaita Zone?

Based on SDG related to education, national policy and programs of education support the idea that “equity and inclusive quality education for all”; the CBC model in different parts of the world, including Ethiopia; and the influence of curriculum implementation on the relevance of learning outcomes for local communities and global competition. Therefore, theories of constructivism, connectivism, and humanism led this study. Constructivism is defined as a general philosophy of education that encompasses several learning theories. Connectivism is positioned as a new philosophy of education for the digital age, making Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) more edible and stretching it to include learning that lies outside the learner, in social networks, and technological tools. It has also been presented as a new and important theory linked to constructivism. According to Joao (2018), these theories include active, situated, authentic, experiential, and anchored learning.

Empirical evidence from existing studies has revealed the aspects and contexts of curricular practices in Ethiopia. Some of the key problems identified are the conception and conceptualization of continuous assessment, externalizing concern of assessment by school teachers, and alignment between purposes of assessment and actual practice (Abiy & Chali, 2019; Sintayehu, 2016; and Misgana & Alemayehu, 2015). To improve the implementation of curricula at the school level, teachers’ understanding and practice of the three kinds of assessment (assessment as/for/of) learning will have many advantages. Second, the issues related to CPD were investigated. Problems influencing the implementation of CPD include the conception and commitment of teachers, leadership and management of schools, support from experts, resources, and working conditions of teachers (Fekadu, 2021; Fekede, 2015; Haftu and Yalew, 2013; and Ewnetu and Firdisa (2010). It also affects the implementation of curricula in different ways, because teachers are the main implementers of curricula at the school level. Moreover, teachers should consider their role at school level in the micro level,

acting as curriculum designers, developer evaluators, and modifiers to improve the instructional process of their schools.

The conceptual framework of this research was based on key constructs extracted or formulated from empirical evidence from various studies. Thus, the investigation of opportunities and challenges of curriculum implementation was based on the context in which curriculum developed (it can be local or national context); policy and program related to curriculum development and implementation; stakeholders' attitudes and involvement (teachers, students, school principals, instructional supervisors, educators, and parents); process and practices related to curriculum implementation (instructional method, assessment, instructional resource preparation and utilization, instructional supervision and leadership, and other complementary activities); and curriculum reform.

2. Method

The purpose of this article was to explore good opportunities and critical challenges in the curriculum implementation at the case school middle educational level. This study adopted a qualitative case-study design. Accordingly, the research method, population and sample, data collection instruments or tools, data collection procedures, and data analysis are discussed in the following subsections.

There are two main research approaches, quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative research approach is based on logical positivism, whereas that of qualitative research is based on interpretive paradigms (Best & Kahn, 2010). Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative studies admit subjectivity and focus on developing themes from the data collected (Creswell, 2012, 2018). This approach was employed to gain insight into stakeholders' views about the challenges through the collection of qualitative data from primary and secondary sources. Qualitative research is effective when the researcher aims to gather data related to attitudes, motivations, and opinions (Yin, 2003 & 2014). A qualitative approach was employed because the types of responses sought were largely opinion-based, which required some degree of explanation. The nature of the problem in this investigation demands a qualitative approach to obtain detailed information and understand opportunities and critical challenges in the implementation of the curriculum.

Population and sampling techniques: The study was conducted in one upper primary school, called the case school in the case of middle education (grades 7 and 8) curriculum implementation. Thus, the population of the study included teachers, school principals, learners, and parents' representatives or internal stakeholders. Sampling techniques were based on purpose from the

mentioned stakeholders, and in the case of teachers, based on categories of subjects such as English, Mathematics, Social Studies, Biology or General Science from each of the two teachers, either in FGD or personal interviews were selected to participate.

Source of data and instruments: For qualitative research, the data were gathered from multiple sources. To examine the opportunities and critical challenges that influence the practice of curriculum implementation, data were collected from interviews with stakeholders, FGD of purposely selected case school teachers, national and school level document review, observation of school facilities, and classroom instructional process.

Data collection procedure: The data collection procedures were based on keeping ethics of research by taking permission to conduct the study from concerned offices, schools, and individual respondents' consent for the interview.

Data analysis: To analyze and interpret the already collected and organized data, core themes and patterns were developed by meticulously examining the transcripts to unfold the lived experiences and perceptions of the study participants. Developing themes from the data consisted of answering the research questions and framing a deep explanation of the factors contributing to affordances and problems in the implementation of the curriculum. The discussion and summary of data analysis were based on triangulating findings from different sources of data with similar themes to answer basic research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and interpretation of data collected by primary sources, such as personal interviews, FGD, and the observation and analysis of document review. The first category included thematic analysis and narration of interviews and FGD conducted with stakeholders, the second was school level and classroom instructional process narration of qualitative data observation, and the third category included national and school level selected document reviews.

3.1. Interview and FGD

The study findings were categorized into four themes. These are the attitudes and involvement of stakeholders, policy and program, context of curriculum implementation, and curriculum reform.

3.1.1. Theme one: attitude and involvement of stakeholders

Purposively selected respondents reported their views concerning the attitudes and roles of stakeholders in curriculum implementation as follows. Study participant teachers reported their perspectives on student learning as follows:

A major part of students' attitude and role is very low in the implementation of curriculum due to academic different socio-economic factors (teacher 2, 4 & 5).

The other informant also added issues related to the stakeholders.

When we send students who have some disciplinary concerns to bring parents or guardians, they come with other individuals because parents are unwilling to discuss issues at school (Teacher 3).

The issues discussed with respondents indicated that both learners and parents had a low attitude towards student learning. According to the grade level of the students, there was also a difference:

Grade 8 students act as those who receive scholarships or behave as university graduate students with a few days remaining for graduation. Grade 7 students were trying to do what was expected from them more than grade 8 students (teacher 6).

In the case of teachers' attitudes and commitment towards instructional activities, participating parents and student representatives explained similar issues. In particular, student representatives said that we learn daily from six periods to three to four periods, and there are teachers who lost instructional time in different cases. Teachers investigated the challenges related to the classroom teaching learning process. Inclusivism of instruction is also an instructional strategy that is reflected as follows:

In our school up to last year, there was a segregated classroom for five students with disabilities. However, currently, there is no such class. We teach all classes using integration or inclusive methods. I know students with disabilities because I am from this community. After identifying in a segregated classroom, they began learning, but after a certain time, students left school (teacher 3).

This implies that teachers have limitations in the conceptualization and practice of inclusive instruction. Another informant explained how to support students by category of academic achievement and gender.

I support students based on their academic achievement levels (low, medium, and high achievers). In addition, in our school, teaching female students outside of the regular period is mandatory, but most of them have a low interest in attending tutorial classes (teacher 4).

It is good, but how much this one is practical will need deep investigation because other respondents replied that a majority of the students had a low attitude towards learning in the case of a regular period. Variations among learners are very large, and some of these are difficult to consider in the instructional process. Therefore, instructional differentiation during the classroom teaching learning process is better than that during segregation.

There are several hindering factors in student learning. Some of these are shortage of textbooks, ratio of students to section, teachers' socio-economic status, lack of satisfaction in the profession, and students' internal and foreign migration. All participating teachers, students, and principals reported similar issues in the case of curricular materials.

Instructional supervision will have many advantages in improving the classroom's teaching learning process and other supportive activities. The suggestion provided for schoolteachers concerning instructional activities preparation and implementation will provide opportunities for future improvement. Thus, based on the interview items collected, the level of practicality was discussed.

Previously, we conducted supervision activities effectively, but currently, no such practice has been implemented. The practicality of supervision was reported by one schoolteacher as follows:

Our school offers three types of supervision. First, a cluster supervisor was employed in classroom observations during the teaching-learning process of the selected teachers. Second, the teachers themselves observe each other's instructional processes. Third, there was an inbuilt supervision committee led by academic principals and senior teachers. It was held monthly and semester wise. However, after a few years, it decreased (Teacher 2).

There is good theoretical knowledge in supervision, but the practice has declined due to the low levels of school-level educators, and another teacher added the difference between principals and cluster supervisors.

Principals were trying to support instructional activities, and there was peaceful communication between the teachers and school leaders. However, cluster supervisor roles are very limited in supporting teachers in professional instructional activities. (teacher 4).

They monitored the annual and weekly lesson plans. The main tasks of the principals were those who entered and did not enter the classroom. The instructional supervision roles of both the school principals and cluster supervisors declined after 2019. They complained about missed periods with the teachers. The application of instructional leadership and supervision roles to understand how instructional processes are going in the classroom of educators has been minimized.

After a few years our school joined teachers who do not reply with an exact name when you ask "who is your cluster supervisor." The cluster supervisor focused on his communication with the school principal and on taking some necessary information and data from the principal. The contribution of instructional supervision, other academic activities,

and contact with teachers has reduced in the last three years (Teacher 3).

These are all indicators of reform, and changes in governmental systems and other national contexts are influencing factors in the implementation of the curriculum. Most of the listed issues reflect the professional commitment of educators and attitudes towards the implementation of the curriculum. Generally, the findings of the study indicated that learners (grades 7 and 8 students), teachers, parents, and cluster supervisors were not involved in improving practice at the school level.

3.1.2. Theme 2: Assessment and Evaluation

The contributions of assessment and evaluation will have many advantages in improving the relevance, alignment, and coherence of curriculum implementation. In this section, assessment and evaluation focus on how students learn and achieve the objectives of each subject's curriculum. The study participants reported their views concerning the practicality of assessment and evaluation in the following ways.

Grade 8 students paid little attention to the various forms of assessment participation. However, grade 7 students showed better progress in involvement in class activities, group work, project work, quizzes, and tests according to their abilities (teacher 4).

The summative assessment of grade 8 negatively influenced students' involvement in the formative assessment. Still now, this needs school-level stakeholder commitment to change students' negative attitudes regarding assessment. Those who have no interest in continuous assessment cannot succeed or score better in summative assessment. In short, when someone ignores formative continuous assessment, he/she is on the way to ignore the overall teaching learning process.

Time utilization and assessment related to an issue were raised by respondents as follows:

Regional examinations were prepared from grades 7 and 8 textbooks, but most students were not interested in reading grade 8.

Furthermore, FGD also discussed students' perspectives concerning assessment and forwarded their evaluation points. Thus, some of the problems related to students' attitude and practice are in wrong ways observing assessment of learning, viewing the purpose of education in the case of short-term materialism, without hard work or study to get grade 8 certificates in short paths by copying examination answers during the examination period, and not giving attention to instructional activities expected from them.

One interviewee explained that bad habits interfered with the assessment and evaluation of students' academic progress as follows:

Some bad habits were found in our surroundings, which made students weak in the past. To facilitate

cheating on examinations, students shared some amount of money (reported in FGD).

One of the interviewees provided an evaluation of the student's performance concerning disciplinary issues relating to it without punishment. According to him, the cause of students' disciplinary issues and academic decline was the absence of punishment. He explained that bad sayings inhabit students' academic performance. Some of these were dominant and frequently debated are: examination answers come from the upper level for all students for assessment; demoralizing who study by his/her effort by saying you will get answer somewhere so you can do other activities which will have economic benefits; and be ready to use mobile devices during the examination period (teacher 3).

Senior teacher of the school was discussed during interview session about assessment and evaluation of students in a good way: It was stated ...

I propose that the students go with their feet. For more than ten years, I observed that there was a problem in the Grade 8 regional examination examining processes and administration. The examination was open even if packed, and the invigilator was opened during the examination session. One reason for this was that some students completely blackened their answers before distributing the question paper. Students who lost time by reading/studying for examinations and teachers were not satisfied with the results. It demoralizes high performers because the existence of clever cheating students who work for him/herself scored 50, but those who copied from somewhere or outside scored 99. This indicates that the examination was not secret. It expired even if it came to school with security forces. (Teacher 5).

Weaknesses and challenges related to assessment and evaluation were only focused on paper and pencil tests and examination of cheating. None of the respondents stated how to assess and evaluate the factors that triggered unethical activities, such as examination cheating. Thus, the lack of a critical review of the causes and consequences of assessment-related issues influenced the implementation of the curriculum and its impact.

3.1.3. Theme three: context factors

Social and economic factors hinder student schooling. Some of these issues are discussed below, which were identified from responses to interviews and informal communication or discussions of researchers with educational communities during the data collection period. Practically, the effect of some socioeconomic factors was observed by researchers during the data collection period.

The synthesis of interviews with teachers and most frequently raised issues in the interview sessions, informal discussions, and FGD main ideas with the corresponding factors explained were social factors of

rural students, latecomers, economic factors, influence of covid-19, famine and drought, national peace and security, comparison between teacher life and impact of migration at the local level, rate of unemployed university and college graduates with parents, and utilization of mobile technology and related things.

Integrated factors were mentioned in the major interviews and FGD participants. Some of these are critical challenges of students learning directly and indirectly influencing are female students' migration, observing university graduate students who are unemployment in each community, presence of economic problems teachers searching and involved with other supportive businesses, famine and nationally the government engaging with peace and related mission

In summary, the factors discussed have directly and indirectly interrupted the practice of the instructional process. To minimize the degree of intervention capacity, the building of human resources is important. Finally, all issues discussed under each theme and sub-theme implied that the implementation of the curriculum in big rural schools was influenced by the attitude and involvement of stakeholders, classroom instructional activities, assessment and evaluation techniques, and context factors.

3.1.4. Theme four: Curriculum reform

In both personal interviews with individual teachers and FGD, all study participants agreed that the implementation of the new curriculum was hindered by the shortage and absence of textbooks and teachers' PDs. This is briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

Critical challenges discussed with FGD members and personal interviews with stakeholders were discussed in depth. Most frequently explained during the interview sessions and FGD were shortage and absence of textbooks and teacher's guide; political intervention; hopelessness and low motivation of learners; shortage of qualified teachers with respect to each subject; limitations in the involvement of stakeholders based on their roles and responsibilities; content overloaded in the new curriculum; presence of issues in the preparation of teachers at higher education (universities and colleges); absence of clearly stated pass points or promotion policy of students; low level of teachers' professional skills; language of instruction and issues related to language difficulty for teachers and students; and absence and limitation of modern technologies in major parts of primary schools in our school. This is not an issue because we have around eight computers and big television, relating curriculum to economic issues and surrounding employment opportunities, and psychological problems of teachers caused by economic issues. Moreover, there is external pressure, such as ordering schools to take students

left/absent from learning more than a month and above or returning stage of students to school.

Most issues related to shortage of availability of instructional materials and capacity building of teachers were continued by adding depth to the implementation of curriculum reform when compared with former curricular implementation. These problems cannot be critical when local and national educational structures have the financial resources to fulfill immediately. Economic factors have interrupted curriculum reform to achieve the planned goals.

When researchers compared the challenges related to new curricular material accessibility and professional development according to reforms launched in a case school with previous curriculum implementation, the challenges increased for all students, teachers, and school principals. According to research participants, issues related to curricular materials, such as textbook distribution in a short period of time, will improve step-by-step in line with the socioeconomic status of the school community and updating teachers according to reform.

3.2. Observation of classroom instructional process and school resources

The instructional activities of the selected teachers were observed during the teaching learning process in the classroom. To some extent, strength and interruptions are commonly observed among teachers. Accordingly, teachers tried to translate many words from English to Amharic and the mother tongue (Wolaiyatoo Language in the case school) to make the subject matter more understandable. However, this method has its own advantages and drawbacks. Other limitations most frequently observed during classroom observation were the limitations in using active learning methods and the low-level involvement of students.

Differences among the teachers were observed. Qualitative observation of the classroom teaching-learning process implied that the objective was more focused on lower levels of cognitive domains; instructional process was not participatory because some students were doing other subject homework and major parts of learners were not involved actively; low trends in the case of relating the lesson of the topic with locally visible issues; few students were involved in repeatedly answering the questions; method of assessment for students learning only focused on oral questions; lack of giving chance for slow learners and issues related to diversity; and generally, school teachers' instructional process did not consider the principles of differentiation of instruction and diversity of learners.

Some of the weaknesses observed are a few students participating in the conservation, not assessed students by giving group work or asking some silent students to reflect on what they understood with respect to

indigenous trees found in their neighboring areas in the case of general science.

In summary, four teachers' classroom observations indicated that there was a limitation in the instructional process. The most frequently raised reforms in education are learner-centered methods of teaching and assessments of students' learning practices that were not free from debates. Similarly, teachers have problems with pedagogical adaptation. This means that relating to or modifying the contents of the lesson, objectives, instructional resources, methods of instruction, and assessment are not at the expected level. Moreover, classroom observation and school-level documents or things posted on notice boards have little relation because, at the school level, there were committees such as inclusive education, female and academically weak students' supportive committees, and others. However, practically, the classroom teaching learning process indicated that one size fits all. Thus, it is possible to conclude that there are gaps between teachers that have conceptual and practical dimensions in the case of curriculum implementation, inclusive of applying democratic pedagogy, differentiating instructional elements, and pedagogical adaptation.

Observations of school facilities were conducted in major areas of instructional facilities. Accordingly, case schools have around 16 desktop computers at computer laboratories, pedagogic centers with sufficient locally developed materials, television, library, and laboratory for science subjects, wide land/compound used for playing and agricultural activities, offices of academic and administrative staff, and transportation access for nearby towns. However, informal discussions with different stakeholders indicated that these resources have not been used effectively to improve curricular activities at the school level for various reasons.

The findings of the study were presented based on document review-related curriculum aspects, data collected by interviews and FGD with purposely selected stakeholders, and observation of school facilities and classroom instructional processes. The findings of the study have shown some of the strengths or success factors of curriculum implementation and the challenges that embed the actual practice of curriculum implementation in the case of triangulating data analysis.

The deviation between planned and actual practices was one of the issues in the implementation of the curriculum. Both national and school level document reviews indicated that the reforms, such as active learning methods and formative assessment, but classroom instructional process observation and reports of interviews have differences. The causes may be low-level motivation of students, teachers, and curriculum elements.

The findings of the interview, FGD, and observations were consistent with other previously conducted studies in the case of curriculum implementation (Asrat, 2020) in general and its subcomponents, such as classroom teaching learning processes, instructional resources, disciplinary issues of students, and issues related to the role of different stakeholders. Context factors and curriculum reforms also influenced the implementation of the curriculum.

3.3. Document review

A review of national documents included ESDP VI, curriculum framework, ETP, and selected textbooks. A review of the document narration and analysis is presented as follows.

Review of ESDP (education sector development program)

The major challenges listed in the educational development road map, general education curriculum framework, ESDP, and ETP related to the implementation of curriculum and the roles of key stakeholders of curricula practice were identified at ESDP VI (MoE, 2020; 2021; 2023) and are listed below.

Inadequate follow-up and monitoring of the classroom practice of trained teachers and low parental participation in students' learning and teaching processes.

Cocurricular activities that are instrumental in promoting social competence and moral development are not part of the curriculum. (MoE, 2018: P16)

The policy and curricular materials were very rigid. The period allowed is not sufficient to cover the content because the yearly schooling days are fewer than the lessons provided each day. In addition, in different cases, the instructions were lost.

How do we integrate academic subjects' soft life skills? These are businesses of higher- and middle-level educators that supervise taking remedial actions soon rather than waiting for 20 years of educational policy change, and there is a lack of explanation regarding the curriculum of general education. After addressing the gaps, possible suggestions were provided. Some of these are: introduce competence –based comprehensive approach focusing on from what to how practical, life skills, and aesthetics contents enhance the development of problem solving and creative minds need to be incorporated into the curriculum; support the learning-teaching process by ICT; ensure the curriculum enhances unity within diversity; and introduce extra-curricular activities that promote ethical/moral education, patriotism, multiculturalism, and prepare and administer national examinations at the end of lower secondary completion (grade 8). When these are applicable, they will have the advantage of improving the quality and relevance of curriculum implementation in the case of middle education.

The Ethiopian educational system based on the ETP of the 1994 curriculum framework was prepared for the first time in 2009. Some of the very important aspects explored in this document and intended to improve the quality and relevance of curriculum development and implementation are:

- a) *This Curriculum Framework adopts the principles of active learning and a competency-based approach to education as the most flexible means to achieve desired changes.*
- b) *This Curriculum Framework aims to encourage flexibility in teaching and learning methodologies and strategies, and will require a shift in teachers' thinking to enable them to include a variety of more appropriate activities to enhance students' participation in their learning (MoE, 2009).*

This explanation implies that the curriculum framework has ample space to contextualize curricula. In addition to the flexibility of curricular materials, it has also provided the freedom to employ pedagogical adaptation. Regarding the vision, mission, values, principles, and theoretical views of curriculum development, there are similarities between the 2009 and 2020 curriculum frameworks of Ethiopian general education. Very big challenges have been applied to national- and regional-level curricular materials development and school-level practices. Supporting ideas were reported by case school teachers as challenges related to instructional materials to employ active learning methods.

Researchers have argued about the period allowed per week, because the context of Ethiopian primary schools has not been thoroughly evaluated. To promote the quality and relevance of education, increasing periods or schooling time is good, but considering socio-economic and cultural aspects of community and existing infrastructure of schools does not allow full-day education in my view in the rural parts and some urban areas. In rural Ethiopia, to achieve objective education for all, thinking about the context is important. Here, two aspects are visible in the two curriculum frameworks. Searching for alternative and flexible curriculum delivery mechanisms is important. The period allotment of 35 period's week is not a new phenomenon in the 2020 curriculum framework; in the 2009 curriculum framework, it was stated as an alternative. Flexibility and overload of content have been challenges in applying the good reforms of education and curriculum (CBC models and others) launched so far.

Some Challenges and problems in the implementation of the new curriculum and reviewed by schoolteachers were discussed and narrated in the following paragraphs. Some of the challenges reflected from the interview participants of grade 7 mathematics teachers are as follows:

Searching for a supportive body to evaluate the curriculum (Teacher 8).

The content of some topics was above the scope of students (Teacher 3).

Absence of answers for some questions of grade 7 mathematics (teacher 4)

One of the Social studies teachers stated the difficulty level of the topic. Taking unit two about "population" the contents from university and grade 10 Geography has made the subject matter to grade 7 made the learning too complex for students to understand. It is better when improving the topic and corresponding concepts and calculations based on students' backgrounds rather than teachers' competency.

The teacher will teach by reading based on what he/she learned in higher education and referring to different books, but it is not considered a student's level of understanding (teacher 9).

English teachers briefly reported the challenges influencing the implementation of curricula. Some of these issues are discussed below:

- a. Incorporating new contents in grade 7 without updating teachers skills
- b. Shortage of textbooks and absence of teacher's guide; workload of teachers; lack of instructional aids/media (Teacher 1).
- c. Mismatch between periods allowed and students' achievement level (Teacher 7).

According to teachers' observations, there are problems in the readiness of government bodies beginning from the woreda/district level up to the Ministry of Education. To begin the new curricula, training was provided for teachers in the second week of November 2021; later, the books were sent to the school in March 2022, with problems of book publication and distribution, quality, and irrelevance of training. How can annual lessons be covered within six months? Therefore, it is necessary to develop a common understanding. In addition, one critical problem is the attitude or motivation of students; they have ideological issues such as saying that the lesson is not understandable.

According to the Ethiopian calendar or the second week of March, 2022. This is one of the problems faced by teachers and students in curriculum implementation practice. In addition, the teacher's guide still has not reached school (teacher 10). He concluded his views on the implementation of the new curriculum as follows:

When curriculum materials are developed and prepared by keeping time, they are good. The new curriculum implementation was not based on appropriate preparation, as a political mission or activity ordered to achieve it quickly in whatever case. It was conveyed as a political foundation. In the future, without quality preparation, there will be no profit for professional performance. They should be

prepared as suitable or appropriate for instructional planning. Moreover, textbook preparation and the teacher's guide should have a visible alignment (Teacher 9).

A review of selected educational policies, programs, and curricular materials was presented and discussed. The areas of assessment and evaluation were based on how top-level prepared/developed materials provided freedom for school-level curriculum implementers in the context of curriculum contextualization. The contextualization of the curriculum, flexibility of educational policy, curricular programs, and curricular materials will have advantages in improving the relevance of the curriculum and making curriculum implementation inclusive. Finally, diversity impacts and influences the practice of educational activities and improves students' learning outcomes. Directly and indirectly, the main issues that triggered the issues of flexibility and devolution power in curricular activities were to promote students' learning competency.

A qualitative document review of the case schools has some strengths and weaknesses. The strong sides of the four case studies were the presence organization and plan for the curriculum improvement program, CPD, inbuilt instructional supervision, co-curricular programs, and other committees supportive of the inclusiveness of curriculum delivery, such as inclusive and special education committees, female students' supportive committees, and school improvement programs. Weaknesses were observed in four (all) observations conducted in the schools. These were limitations in the case of implementation and absence of performance reports in major parts of the programs.

Discussions of the major findings of the research were based on the findings presented in the previous section with respect to interview, FGD, observation, and analysis of selected documents. It was based on triangulating the key constructs and themes of the study by considering the purpose of the research.

The findings of this study showed that the implementation of the curriculum was interrupted by the attitudes and practices of stakeholders. This was consistent with a study conducted in Ethiopia's urban schools in the Addis Ababa city administration; however, the case school is in rural parts of southern Ethiopia. According to Asrat (2020), curriculum implementation was ineffective for various reasons, among which the shortage of materials and students' problems are worth noting. Similar to the current study findings or this research finding, such as shortage of adequate instructional materials such as textbooks, teachers have encountered teachers to bring about the required changes in the performance of students through the delivery of various activities and experiences.

The overall findings of the studies or triangulation of data analysis indicated that factors related to the involvement of school-level stakeholders (teachers, learners, principals, and parents) and the deficiency of curricular materials hindered the practice of reforms such as CBC and its sub-contents, such as active learning methods and formative continuous assessment. As a result, the chalk and talk method of instruction is highly practiced by teachers. This also confirms the findings of Asrat (2020:40). According to him, this has resulted in killing the interests and stimulus of the learners but has terminated the generation of disciplinary problems on the part of the learners.

Other areas of discussion were availability and quality of curricular and instructional materials, curriculum reform, and other issues and affordances related to curriculum. The findings of the study were indicated as success factors of curriculum implementation for CBC and the presence of major parts of school curricula and annual co-curricular program plans. In addition, most teachers and principals were attempting to run instructional programs according to their conceptualization to achieve the goal of education. However, the findings of the study indicated that the implementation of the curriculum is not effective in the case of applying CBC models. This is consistent with the research findings of Mulenga (2019) in the case of applying new curriculum implementation reforms. CBC requires the professional competence of teachers, pedagogical leadership, and supervision of school principals.

Previous research indicated that human and material resources interrupted the practice of curriculum and consisted of the findings of this study. Accordingly, the major hindering factors identified for the effective implementation of curriculum in upper primary schools are generally related to students, teachers, schools, and resource- and equipment-related factors (Wudu, et al. 2019). Therefore, both human resource- and material-related factors hindered the implementation of active learning methods, continuous, and reduced motivation levels of implementers.

Challenges related to the implementation of the curriculum in upper primary schools were investigated in this study. These issues relate to the attitude and role or practices of school stakeholders, absence of curriculum adaptation guidelines at the school level in the case of mainstream curricula, conception and practices of curriculum reform, PD of teachers and principals, shortage of textbooks and absence of teacher's guide, attitude towards assessment of learning, limitation in using learner-centered methods of teaching, and low socioeconomic status of parents. Accordingly, findings related to assessment, evaluation, and contextualization of the curriculum were consistent with previously

conducted research findings, such as Ambissa (2014), Leite et al. (2018, 2015, 2013), and Karakuş (2021). The findings of these studies focus on the drawback of giving more attention to paper and pencil tests and criticism of the weakness of assessment of learning in the implementation of curriculum rather than focusing on improving the relevance of curriculum for learners and society by applying principles of curriculum contextualization. This shows that the effects of curriculum implementation to academic achievement of students in paper and pencil tests is one of narrow conceptualization of learning outcome and it contradicts with CBC model launched in Ethiopia since 2009 (MoE, 2009, 2020 & 2021).

Case school leaders and teachers face conception and practicality utilization issues in the case of curriculum reform. Good things were disclosed in the educational sector development programme. Some of these were indigenous knowledge integration, technology integration, strategies of curriculum contextualization, CBC, 21st century skills development through curriculum implementation, and co-curriculum programs integrated with curricular programs. Thus, this study confirms other context findings with respect to limitations on understanding and performing reforms internationally accepted in different countries' educational systems ((Sylvestre et al., 2018; p1); Tsindoli, (2018:76); Soetan (2020:63-74); Soto (2015), and (Sharma, 2019). Moreover, this understanding of the influence of the hidden curriculum, null curriculum, and co-curricular activities also influenced the implementation of the formal curriculum. Understanding and analyzing different kinds of curricula and their influence on formal curriculum implementation (Stojanoska et al., 2016: p1615), hidden curriculum influence (Alsubaie, 2015:115), influence of null curriculum Siddique (2016:147), and the nature and extent of the null curriculum. To some extent, these findings are consistent with the current study's findings because major implementers have a low level of conceptualization vis-à-vis different curricula and corresponding contributions.

4. Conclusion

There were some good opportunities in case schools, such as students and teachers with similar backgrounds in the case of first language and cultural aspects, presence of computers, school having sufficient agricultural land, transportation accessibility, television, pedagogic center, and laboratory for science subjects and youngest principals and teachers at school level with academic background first degree. Generally, the ways of using opportunities are hindered by other internal and external factors, such as the socio-economic status of teachers and commitment problems. In addition to these school

principals and upper-level educators, monitoring and supervision were limited to applying opportunities to promote implementation of the curriculum and, finally, to positively contribute to the competence of students.

The study has shown critical challenges that hinder the practice of the curriculum in case schools. These were low-level attitude or motivation and commitment of internal stakeholders, balance of national curriculum and educational reform with lower-level implementers of curriculum, shortage of curricular materials such as textbooks, attitude of grade 8 students towards regional examination, and other contextual factors. Directly and indirectly, issues related to the economic status of the family, community, and country influenced the implementation of the curriculum as planned.

To improve the practices of curriculum implementation in the case of the Wolaita Zone, strategies on how to involve all stakeholders are suggested. Most of the issues will be resolved step-by-step when front-line implementers of the curriculum strengthen cooperation and collaboration. Finally, we analyzed the contextual factors and attempted to contextualize the implementation of the curriculum by taking into consideration the relevance of the curriculum, which motivates internal stakeholders (students, teachers, school leaders, and parents) and preparing learners for global competition in the case of a lifelong learner dimension will be suggested.

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