Examining Quality Issues in Primary Schools in Ethiopia: Implications for the Attainment of the Education for All Goals

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LA QUESTIONE DELLA QUALITÀ NELLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA IN ETIOPIA: IMPLICAZIONI PER IL RAGGIUNGIMENTO DEGLI OBIETTIVI DELL'EDUCAZIONE PER TUTTI

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the major educational problems that significantly influence the delivery of quality education for citizens and, ultimately, hinder the achievement of the Education for All goals in Ethiopia. Data collected via semi-structured interviews and «Focus Group Discussions» (FGD) from 31 purposely selected information rich participants were analyzed thematically by using verbatim quotes. This explorative study, still at the intial step, identified ineffective school leadership, poor training and low salaries for teachers, limited, often ineffective and problematic professional development opportunities, a focus on quantity rather than quality, a weak economic environment, low participation of parents and commercialization of teacher-training colleges as the major factors threatening the quality of education. The need to improve school leadership, focus on both quality and expansion, provide adequate funds, resolve teaching problems and support teachers, design effective professional development opportunities, and strengthen the parent school partnership are thus the areas identified which require specific action.

Keywords: Education, Education for all, Ethiopia, Primary School, Quality of education.

1. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged in a vast body of literature as an essential element in the process of national development (UNESCO, 2005; GCE, 2000; UNESCO, 1997; TGE, 1993; Lockheed & Verspoor, 1991; Psacharopoulos, 1985). Today, with a greater understanding of the function that education has in society and in the nation as a whole, the world is striving to deliver primary education to every child. This goal has been on the international agenda since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed in 1948 that elementary education was to be made freely available and compulsory for all children in all nations. This call was recently renewed by the Jomtien and Dakar framework for action *Education for All* (EFA) conferences and declarations. Accordingly, all nations, both developed and developing ones, are to prioritise the delivery of universal primary education.

Universal completion of primary education by 2015 was also included among the United Nations *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs). All (of the then) 191 members of the United Nations pledged to meet these goals. The Millennium Development Goals are eight international development targets set forth by the United Nations, adopted by world leaders in 2000 and set to be achieved by 2015. The advocates of *Universal Primary Education* (UPE) stated that mass education will result in an increased supply of educated human power, accelerated economic growth, greater social justice, reduced regional disparities and improved social welfare (Chimombo, 2005). Correspondingly, several authors (Auger, 1987; Haddad, 1990; Tahir, 2003) justified the need for universal primary education in the following way: it is a birth right of every citizen that promotes equality among members of society, a weapon for the eradication of ignorance, poverty and disease, an instrument for the development of national identity and unity, and a prerequisite for participation in politics, government, national development issues and in further learning for individual and social development. However, it is strongly believed that achievement of UPE depends on the quality of education (UNESCO, 2004). Improving quality of education is the best way to improve access to education. Similarly, the World Bank (as cited in Mirza, 2003) confirmed that the best way to improve access is to improve quality, which would make going to school or staying in school a more attractive option from both the parents and children's perspective.

Good quality primary education is increasingly recognised as an important foundation for economic growth and as instrumental in the attainment of other development objectives. As the proverb goes, «Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him how to fish and he will eat for life». People who have received quality education can not only fulfill their poten-

tial, but also contribute to their communities. Quality education is of critical importance and is very demanding in the 21st century, where countries are confronted with new economic, social and cultural challenges in which knowledge, skills, values and attitudes will play a central role. With the tremendous growth in school enrolments throughout the world, earlier priority to educational expansion and access is now being replaced by plans and policies calling for a higher quality of schooling. Concern with improving the quality of education in schools has started receiving the highest priority in almost all countries throughout the world. This concern has become universal in both developed and developing countries, in those that have achieved total access as well as in those still striving for access (Reddy, 2007). Both the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) recognise quality as a most important condition for achieving Education for All.

The Dakar Framework states that quality is at the heart of education. Goal 2 commits nations to providing primary education of good quality and no one should be denied this opportunity. Goal 6 includes commitments to improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills. Hence, the issue of quality in education has become a global concern. The EFA global monitoring report of 2006, by stressing the importance of quality, noted that a child denied the right to a quality primary education is not only deprived, but also disadvantaged for life – unable to cope with situations requiring reading, writing and arithmetic – unless given access to educational opportunities later, in adolescence or adulthood. Primary education is a solid foundation where the skills of the majority of the labour force and the knowledge of intellectuals are built. Therefore, the goal of achieving quality education should be emphasized in the course of universalising it. However, according to UNESCO (2005), in many countries that are striving to guarantee all children the right to education, the focus on access often overshadows attention to quality.

A number of reports indicated that in the effort to guarantee primary schooling to every member of society, a focus on access has been complicated by many problems which affect the quality of education that the children receive (World Bank, 2007). Likewise, the problem of quality in primary education has become a serious concern of the Ethiopian government, educators and teachers. The national student assessments carried out in 2000 and 2004 on grade 4 and 8 pupils revealed serious problems with quality and with overall low achievement in basic academic skills (National Organisation of Examinations, 2000a, 2000b, 2004a and 2004b). School principals play

a crucial role in leading and managing the planning, delivery, evaluation and improvement of the education of all students in a community through the strategic deployment of resources.

The role of principal leadership in all aspects of school success has been highlighted and confirmed as the link between effective school leadership and effective schools (Fullan, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2001; Barth, 1991). Acknowledging the important role that school principals play in the education system, this study was designed to examine barriers to the delivery of quality primary education in Ethiopia from in-service trainee principals of Ambo University, in order to gain insights into their own experience. To pursue this objective, the study analysed the major educational problems found in primary schools and that threaten the quality of education. The research paper also puts forward some recommendations relevant to the findings of the study.

2. Overview of quality

Quality has become a controversial issue internationally and is interpreted differently by individuals, institutions and organisations. It is an elusive concept that has as many definitions as there are categories of stakeholders. This is mainly due to the fact that quality in education is a complex and multifaceted concept embedded in political, cultural and economic contexts (Reddy, 2007; Fredriksson, 2004; Mirza, 2003). In the same vein, Csizmadia (2006) states that quality has no single, absolute, agreed or universally accepted definition; there exists a range of overlapping interpretations. Its definition is open to changing contexts and to a new understanding of educational challenges (UNICEF, 2000). Although it has become a concept which people confidently talk about when marketing or selling their products or services in business, education and training environments, defining it is not as easy. As Reddy (2007) explains, this has been largely due to a broad interpretation of the term both within and across countries, reflecting the values and priorities of the different stakeholders along with the complexities of the teaching-learning process. Adam (cited in Reddy, 2007) views quality as a process and suggests that the nature of intra-institutional interaction of students, teachers, administrators, materials and technology in educational activities, as well as how the «quality of life» of the school is valued, determines quality. Furthermore, he remarks on the difficulty of measuring the educational process.

According to Harvey and Green (1993), quality can be viewed as *exceptional*, as *perfection* (or *consistency*), as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money*

and as *transformative.* The same authors describe these concepts in the following way; *Quality as exceptional or excellence* – as something special, distinctive, something that exceeds very high standards and passes a set of required standards. *Quality as perfection or consistency* results in flawless outcome. The quality culture of ensuring that things are done right the first time is being promoted by this notion, which proposes that the product or service should be judged by its consistency or, in some cases, its reliability. *Quality as fitness for purpose* means that quality derives its significance from the purpose of the product or service. Quality is thus judged in terms of the extent to which an institutional product or service meets its purpose. Moreover, *Quality as value for money* situates quality within the context of return on investment. If the outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, the customer has a quality product or service.

This approach views the performance of any programme or institution from the financial perspective. Finally, according to the notion of *Quality as transformation*, quality is judged in terms of change. In the education and training sense, transformation simply refers to the empowerment of learners as a whole. They enter certain programmes with no knowledge or limited knowledge and their participation allows them to learn, which implies transformation or change. All in all, researchers have suggested that the concept of educational quality is complex, elusive, multidimensional and embedded in social contexts, values and cultures. Hence, different definitions of quality have been adopted. Although quality is an elusive concept that has as many definitions as there are categories of stakeholders, quality as fitness for purpose seems to fit our context (Ethiopia).

3. Research aim and methodology

The aim of this qualitative study is to examine the major educational problems that significantly influence the delivery of quality education to citizens. To this end, the study aims to identify problems that threaten the quality of education, and to propose solutions. An attempt is also made to examine the implications of the findings to achieve the EFA goals.

Social science research is complex, diverse and pluralistic. However, there is no single best research approach that fits all research problems. Each research approach has its relative strengths and weaknesses (Dawson, 2002) and no single approach is necessarily ideal (Hamersley, as cited in Lloyd-Jones, 2003). The selection usually depends on the researcher's perception regarding the construction and production of knowledge and the suitability

of a research approach for a particular context. As Bryman (1984) describes, the problem under investigation properly dictates the method of investigation. Bearing this in mind and the purpose of the study, we chose the qualitative approach, which is holistic and contextual, and focuses on design and procedures to gain real, rich and deep data for a greater understanding of the entire situation. Moreover, we adopted the qualitative approach because our concern is to define the issue under investigation, seeking insights into the actors' perspectives rather than statistical analysis.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), a person's own biography helps to define a study; that is to say, his or her interests or concerns about certain events or situations would be suitable criteria. In addition, it should be important to the researcher because «Without a touch of passion, you may not have enough to sustain the effort to follow the work to the end». In the same vein, Merriam (1998) asserts that a case can be selected based on personal interest. Guided by the aforementioned assumptions, the Institute of Education and Professional Studies, Ambo University, which is located about 110 km to the west of the capital city, Addis Ababa, was selected for this study.

The target population for the study consisted of school principals coming from all parts of Ethiopia to attend an in-service training programme in the field of educational planning and management at Ambo University. With regard to the sampling method, participants were located purposefully. As Merriam (1998) states, qualitative researchers should locate a group of participants rich in knowledge and experience. Selection proceeded until we ensured that no new perspective or data were obtained from every participant, since the purpose was to maximise information on the issue under consideration. Therefore, participants were located based on the following attributes: *Time Commitment* – their agreement to participate in the study; *Participants' Workplace* – to examine the experiences of different regions; *Participants' Experience* – year of service; and *Participants' Gender* – both male and female participants were involved.

The study involved a total of 31 participants, 5 of whom were female principals. The qualitative research method was selected for this study in order to generate data rich in detail and embedded in the context. Accordingly, we collected data using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions since our main concern was to seek greater understanding of the phenomenon under study. Each selected participant was interviewed separately, but focus group discussions (consisting of 6-10 individuals) were conducted to see how members debated with each other. Qualitative data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, and between description and interpretation (Merriem, 1988). Qualitative enquiry involves

the simultaneous processing of description, analysis and interpretation. A description seeks to construct data out of people's experiences and their views of reality. Analysis of collected data is ongoing in qualitative research and begins with data collection (Glesne, 1999; Merriem, 1988). Taped interviews and *Focus Group Discussions* (FGDs) were transcribed verbatim and the data organised, categorised, synthesised and thematically analysed to generate a description of information about events. Finally, we interpreted the data by sorting the responses, identifying similar responses and noting unique responses. Then we searched for meaning of words and phrases.

We grouped the individual answers into the topical areas that we established to identify patterns of responses. The sorting, grouping and deriving of meaning assisted us in making sense of the data. The phrases frequently voiced by the participants were taken together as a theme and one of the quotes that describes the theme in a better way used in this research report. This was done instead of repeatedly writing similar quotations having the same meaning under the same thematic areas. Validation of the study was achieved through a triangulation of data (i.e. the data was collected through multiple sources: interview and FGD), member checking (the informant served as a check throughout the analysis process) and peer examination (several colleagues were consulted at different phases to comment on the whole research process and to gain outsider perspective).

4. Results

To identify the main problems threatening the quality of primary education, discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were conducted with the principals attending in-service training at Ambo University. The analysis in this section attempts to describe their perceptions of barriers to the delivery of quality education. To this end, the issue can be categorised into different themes and examined in detail.

4.1. *School leadership*

Although school leadership plays a paramount role in enabling students to learn, achieve and develop (Susi, 2000; Domenici & Moretti, 2011), all the participants remarked that it was beset by many problems. They further stated that it was one of the causes of the decline in quality education. The feelings of most participants were summarised in the following quote:

> Everybody agreed that school leadership made a difference on students' learning by coordinating the efforts of teachers, motivating staff and creating a conducive environment for learning. However, the current nature of leadership in school was not playing its role as it should, and was surrounded by many problems. From the very beginning, the assignment of a principal was not based on merit, but on the political view of that person (i.e. a matter of political affiliation). This in turn led to the perception of school leadership as a servant of a political party on the part of students, teachers and the community, and resulted in a lack of trust among teachers, students and school administrators. Moreover, unnecessary interference from local administrators on school matters was significantly harming the discretion of school administrators.

Likewise, another FGD group provided this account:

> The attention given to academic issues by school administrators was very limited because much of their time was taken up in dealing with non-school issues. They were given much work to do by the woreda cabinets. Since they were assigned by those cabinets, they respect and follow their (cabinet's) order irrespective of its benefits to the school to secure the position of principalship.

The above quotes indicate that all the respondents were dissatisfied with the current state of school leadership. It was also clear from the descriptions given that the leadership failed to ensure that schools provided high quality teaching and learning. Moreover, it was evident that more time was devoted to non-instructional activities.

4.2. *The quantity versus quality dilemma*

The effort to achieve Universal Primary Education – one of the Millennium Development Goals – places heavy pressure on the Ethiopian government, which is doing what it can to reach this objective. However, the respondents with whom we spoke during the data collection phase of this study strongly remarked that the focus on quantity (having as many children as possible) to meet the UPE goal overshadows the emphasis on quality of education. Here is an excerpt from one of the interviews:

> Currently, more than ever before, the issue of universal primary education is on the lips of everybody. This is mainly because the time limit for the realisation of UPE is approaching i.e. 2015. So, much of the effort was given to expansion and to having many children in schools, and nobody cares about the quality of education. The implementation of a general education quality improvement programme did not bring the expected improvement … the priority was on quantity. For example, students were promoted to the next

grade regardless of their performance because it was believed that if students fail to pass to the next grade, they may drop out of education; and this in turn resulted in an increment of the number of students out of school and went to influence the UPE goal.

Correspondingly, another FGD group offered the following account:

> When someone builds a house, he first lays down a very strong and firm foundation which can support the whole building. If the foundation is not strong enough to support the building, it will fall down within a few years. The same is true for primary education. If we have good primary education, we have good secondary and tertiary education. It is a foundation for other successive levels. However, primary education has not received the attention it deserves, especially with regard to quality. Rather, the focus is on massification – having many children in schools … this will dysfunction the whole system of education.

The participants were clear that not having good primary education would make the students lose the desire to learn; as the content becomes more difficult, the increase in schooling level will result in dropout and loss of human capital. There is credible evidence that educational quality is of paramount importance in equipping learners with the required tools to face present and future challenges. However, the findings of the study revealed that the standard of education was poor and not given attention. Simply put, expanding enrollment has compromised the quality of education. This confirms the finding of the World Bank (2007) that the educational quality in developing countries is much worse than educational quantity (school enrollment and attainment). Likewise, Kedir (2006) argues that although politicians have been pushing for numerical growth, its consequence, as regards quality and relevance, is extremely devastating.

4.3. *The economic environment*

The importance of the economic environment for the delivery of quality education is unquestionable as the economy and its level of development impact organisational effectiveness. The respondents stated that the weak economic environment significantly influenced the education system in general and its quality in particular. The following quote was taken as illustrative of this opinion:

> The community was expected to provide recourses (financial and material) for the schools in their vicinity. However, because of the current inflation and

growth of life expenses, the communities were unable to provide the resources expected of them to support the school. So, the school system was running a critical shortage of resources to effectively run its various programs. Owing to this, equipping schools with different reading materials, computers and ICT, preparation of instructional aides, construction of new buildings and the maintenance of the old ones was impossible for the school. Those problems impede the delivery of quality education … this weak economic environment diverts the attention of students toward searching for jobs to address their immediate needs such as food and water rather than concentrating on their education.

The following excerpt from the FGD participants affirms this view:

> The socio-economic status of the student population was varied. Some parents were able to support their children while some were not. Students failing to gain support from parents do not attend their lesson properly because they have to engage in some work to generate income to meet their physiological needs and to support their education. So, they attend the class on alternate days, i.e. if they attend class on one day, they then participate in some kind of income generation labor the next day. This takes up much of the students' time and prevents them from focusing on their education … on the other hand, as capital per income of each household is low, it is difficult for a school to obtain funds from the community to run its program smoothly. The community has failed to support children's education and the school due to economic problems.

The expansion and delivery of quality education requires a sufficient amount of money to build schools. However, the participants remarked that the weak economic environment harms the quality of education delivered to citizens. Although it was believed that communities can play a variety of roles in the provision and management of learning, the current state of the economy hinders this. Since the majority of the Ethiopian population is on a low income, the struggle was to meet the basic needs (i.e. food, shelter) of survival.

4.4. *Teacher-related issues*

The importance of teachers in educational change and school improvement was stressed by many scholars (Muhammad, 2006; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2004; UNESCO-IBE, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Berry, 1998; Louden, 1991). It is what teachers think, believe and do in the classroom that eventually shapes the learning of young people (Louden, 1991). The insightful responses of the participants about the major barriers of quality education revealed that the way teachers trained, the salary they were paid and their

professional development were major problems that threatened the delivery of quality education. The excerpt of an FGD participant clearly shows this:

> The knowledge and skills teachers received during training were insufficient and failed to prepare teachers for the world of work. This was clearly shown by the teachers' inability to perform their roles and exercise their responsibilities effectively when they graduated and were assigned to schools. The complaints from the students where they taught also revealed this truth. Although they were trained and certified to teach at any grade level in primary schools, they failed to do so.

Another informant offered this comment:

> Colleges are producing dozens of ill-equipped, inefficient, incompetent and poor quality teachers not having the required knowledge, attitudes and skills to meet the demands of today's work place, i.e. graduates who are not able to teach in today's schools.

It is generally acknowledged that promoting teacher quality is the key to improving primary and secondary education. According to the *European Trade Union Committee for Education* – ETUCE (2008), a high quality teacher education is essential at all levels, as well as the high status of the profession itself. This description strengthens the argument that there is no educational system that can rise above the quality of its teachers. Given this truth, the participants all agreed that the training teachers acquired failed to prepare them for the realities and demands of the workplace. So it can be inferred that the inability to produce qualified teachers (who will effectively discharge their roles and responsibilities) was jeopardising education, which relies heavily on the preparedness of its teachers (Adeosun *et al.*, 2009). These findings accorded with Jerome's (1997) contention that, in today's education system, students are graduating from college unprepared to meet the demands of society. The teacher is the most important factor influencing the quality of education (Hattie, 2003; Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Emphasizing the importance of teachers, Darling-Hammond (2006) argues that, among all educational resources, teachers' abilities are especially crucial contributors to students' learning. Conscious of this, the government of Ethiopia established a reform agenda for the teacher education program – making lessons student-centered and providing adequate schools based on real life experience. The intention is to address the deep-rooted problem of quality in primary schools by providing teachers with a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and relevant educational experience. Indeed, improving teacher quality usually does improve student achievement and this can occur when teachers are appropriately trained. What and how teachers teach directly impact

what and how students learn. And what and how teachers teach depends on the knowledge, skills and attitude they bring to classroom. Hence, if there is a need to improve the quality of education, teachers must be provided with powerful learning opportunities that meet the demands and realities of 21st century schools. Sharma (1993) argues that the quality of teachers depends on the teachers' educational qualifications and quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training. Teacher training thus takes on great importance in building and achieving quality education. So, it is imperative for the government of Ethiopia to reconsider and take the necessary steps to assure that teacher trainees receive adequate training and experience. In discussing teacher-related issues, all the informants from the FGD and the interviewees strongly agreed that the teachers' salary is a key issue of education. The interviewed principals revealed that a «low salary» influences the quality of education because it affects the motivation of school staff. This was substantiated by a discussant of the FGD:

> In comparison with other government workers, teachers have a low salary. The other benefits and incentives teachers receive are also either very poor or non-existent. This leads teachers to hate the teaching profession and regard it as a bridge occupation i.e. they want to stay in teaching only until they find another job. Teachers are leading a very low standard of living. They fail to cope with the current cost of living. So, teachers are not worried about the teaching-learning activities. Their attention is not on what the students learn and how they learn, but rather they are worrying about their life … with this problem, how can teachers be interested and initiated to maintain the quality of education?

To this may be added a comment from another FGD informant:

> When we compare the salary of teachers with other workers working in different sectors, teachers are not well paid. We are living and working in the same environment; we consume raw materials from the same market, the same shop with other workers. By observing the salary structure of workers, someone can easily understand that teachers are less paid.

In particular, one of the informants felt strongly about the issue of low pay:

> Paying a low salary for teachers is unrecognizing their effort of helping and preparing the generation. Paying less in another language is saying that he is not doing a productive job. This is very disgusting. So, it is very difficult to find someone who is interested in being a teacher, as teaching is suffering.

The participants' explanations generally suggested that the vast majority of teachers used up their monthly salary before the month ended. They indi-

cated that their salary disappeared from their pockets without covering the expense of basic costs (food, house rent, etc.). Owing to this fact, teachers do not worry about what and how the students learn, instead they have their own concerns. Continuing their discussion, the participants remarked that people develop negative attitudes towards the profession and choose to leave if they have other options. They believed that they did not receive the benefit they deserved from the profession, which left them dissatisfied. They further explained that the issue of salary also dissuaded young people from becoming teachers; it is a challenge for the teaching profession to attract academically capable students. The response indicated that most teachers were looking for other options (to be employed in other sectors). It seems logical, therefore, to improve the standing of all teachers by ensuring that they are paid a salary comparable with other professions requiring the same level of qualifications and responsibilities, and that it is possible for them to live with dignity and not be forced to look for other jobs. As regards teaching barriers, according to the participants, the present continuous professional development opportunities were very limited and problematic. Maintaining this view, one FGD participant explained that:

> From the very beginning, we (principals) don't have the required information about the continuous professional development currently under implementation. Owing to this, we were confused about what it is and how it is implemented. Because it was designed at the top (i.e. by the Ministry of Education) and prescribed to us (the schools) for implementation. We don't have sufficient awareness about it, so what we (principals) did is to tell teachers to participate in it. When asked to explain the issue by teachers, we told them it was the Ministry of Education's plan, so do it … we were confused and confusing our teachers … teachers did not accept it positively.

Another informant similarly explained:

> Professional development is something imposed on us from the outside. Therefore, we do not have other options rather than participating. We participate to comply with the rule and not to be punished. No one is there to support teachers and to explain the activities to them. So, it is something done to us, not for us.

For Komba and Nkumbi (2008), teacher professional development provides opportunities for teachers to explore new roles, develop new instructional techniques, refine their practice and enhance themselves both as educators and as individuals. Correspondingly, Guskey (2002) argues that high quality professional development is a central component in nearly every modern proposal for improving education. Adding to this argument, Fredriksson

(2004) states that the professional development of teachers is a key guarantee of quality education and must be linked to all phases of teacher training and educational research. However, information obtained from the respondents indicated that the current professional development of teachers had many defects and was not positively perceived. According to the American Federation of Teachers (2002), without professional development, school reform and greater achievement among all students will not happen. It is, therefore, imperative to give due attention and to provide support for the professional development of teachers if the quality of education is to be improved.

4.5. *Parents' participation*

The role of parents in managing children's educational experiences at home and at school has long been considered critical for success. Indeed, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) assert that if pupils are to maximise their potential from schooling, they will need the full support of their parents. However, the participants with whom we spoke during the data collection believed that the current state of parents' participation is low and not as expected. The following excerpt was taken as an illustration of this:

> Parents didn't follow the progress of their children. They didn't support them. When students commit disciplinary violations, we inform the parents about the misbehavior of their children, but they deny and reply «my child didn't misbehave» instead of correcting and advising them … there is almost no communication between the school and the parents. They contact the school infrequently, when obliged to, or when their children commit a disciplinary violation … we can boldly say that parents were isolated from the school and did not help the school effort to improve school performance.

A number of research studies show that parental involvement in children's learning activities positively influences their levels of achievement and their motivation to learn (Epstein, 1992). However, the findings of this study indicated that parental involvement was low; they did not support the school system to improve students' learning. During the discussion, the participants claimed that the parents' educational level and socioeconomic background were the main reasons for this low involvement. In the course of data collection, the discussants argued that «because illiteracy parents don't follow the progress of their children's learning: what do they learn? How do they learn? Why do they learn?». This response corresponded to UNESCO's (2000) finding that parents' level of education has a multifaceted impact on children's ability to learn in school.

4.6. *Commercialisation of the teacher-training programme*

Although the expansion of the teacher-training institute is considered an opportunity for the government to address the shortage of qualified teachers, all the participants agreed that it significantly harmed the quality of education. The following quote is reflective of this view:

> Using the critical shortage of teachers as an opportunity, private institutions were opened in every corner of the country with poor resources, ill equipped library, no ICT center, no sport facilities, unqualified teaching staff and improper classrooms mainly constructed for other purposes (not as classrooms). Their major concern was the profit they make out of this. The fact that the candidates joining the private institutions were those who cannot join government higher education because of their low Grade Point Average was also a critical issue that worsens the problem. Because these candidates need a very strong support from the very beginning. The screening power of their evaluation mechanism was also weak with the intention to promote all students with the next year level so that they can have more students to have more profit. The highly corrupted individuals within the system of the government structure at different levels, such as zone and region, who were in charge of monitoring and controlling the quality of education they delivered were creating a supportive environment for them and were worsening the situation.

Another informant reported that the way teachers trained was a cause for declining quality, as it was only considered a profitable area, like any other commodity.

> If you look at the *Cumulative Grade Point Average* (CGPA) of new graduates from private institutions, it is really amazing. You don't believe it. You can't see anyone below 3.0 Cumulative Grade Point Average and the majority of them were above 3.5. However, when you evaluated them in practice, they are very poor in many aspects like content knowledge, teaching methodology, classroom management etc. … this is because the concerns of training institutes were not of equipping them with the required knowledge, but the profit they make.

Research on teaching has demonstrated that qualified teachers can improve student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2000), and achieving this for all requires educators to pay closer attention to what teachers do in the classroom (Gore *et al.*, 2001). Such a move seems logical in order to have well qualified teachers in the system. The data obtained from the participants clearly revealed that teacher-training institutes were treated as commodities; the rise in the number of private teacher-training institutes was viewed as a massive profit-making opportunity. As a result, the focus on profit overshad-

owed the focus on quality. The participants further indicated that corrupt individuals within the government created an environment within which private colleges could operate in very poor conditions that significantly affected the quality of education. This finding supported Girma's (2010) observation that the massification of private higher education institutions leads to lower standards. Undoubtedly, private higher education institutes play a significant role in the nation's human resource development. However, the problem is the ideology behind theses corporate organizations. Driven by profit-making desires, they consider students as consumers. More importantly, they admit large numbers of students for profit, recruit under-qualified staff, operate in poor conditions and make quick programs to maximize their benefits or economic rewards.

The quality of teachers' preparation has been overlooked and compromised. Within this context, the humanistic conception of people as learners and active participants in their world was undermined. The conception of teacher-training institutes as a business and of students as consumers has a devastating effect on countries like Ethiopia, where the majority of the people are in the throes of poverty and resources are very scarce. This is also characterized by what Paulo Freire called deskilling or dehumanizing, as it failed to prepare teacher candidates for today's changing and challenging world. For countries like Ethiopia, where classrooms are overcrowded, libraries are ill equipped and impoverished, chairs and buildings are dilapidated, the knowledge, skills and dispositions teachers bring to the classroom have a crucial role to play. To be specific, high-quality teaching is indispensable to improve the quality of education. Therefore, it is time to subvert the commercial orientation of teacher training and to regain the real purpose of teacher training.

5. Conclusion and implication for practices

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in 1948, efforts have been made by countries (both developed and developing ones) to universalise primary education. This movement was renewed by the recent Jomtien and Dakar Framework for Action – the Education for All conferences and declarations. The Dakar Framework for Action (2000) recognised quality as the most important condition for achieving Education for All. Ethiopia, like other countries, was committed to the achievement of this goal (i.e. the delivery of quality primary education for all citizens) by implementing various strategies including the general education quality

improvement programme. It was strongly stressed that the EFA goals would be achieved with the delivery of quality education to all citizens. With this understanding, the present study aimed to examine the major obstacles to quality education that ultimately impact the achievement of EFA goals from the principals' experiences and perspectives. To this end, data were obtained via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. In order to understand what principals viewed as barriers to the delivery of quality primary education, discussions (FGD) were held and in-depth interviews conducted with the participants. The findings revealed that the delivery of quality education for every citizen had not been addressed.

The study further found that the quality of schooling was declining due to the following factors: ineffective leadership, poor training of teachers, low salary for teachers, limited and often ineffective and problematic professional development opportunities for teachers, a focus on quantity rather than quality, a weak economic environment, low participation of parents and the commercialisation of teacher training colleges. The study showed that the effort to provide quality education for all citizens remains a challenge for the government. On the basis of these findings, it can be stated that the Ethiopian government has a long way to go to achieve the EFA goals within the established stated timeframe. Poor quality primary schools compromise the entire system of human capital development as this results in students who are unprepared for secondary and tertiary education, and ill-equipped for lifelong learning. Hence, improving the quality of education for students in primary schools is a prerequisite for developing the human resource base required to meet the changing demands of the twenty-first century. It is also crucial to achieve the EFA goals that stress the delivery of quality primary education for every citizen before 2015.

The findings of this study are believed to have some practical implication, which might highlight areas of intervention to improve the quality of primary education. To this end, below are some of the major implications to address.

The first implication of this research study is the need to improve school leadership, which is the greatest determinant of an organisation's success. Similarly, it plays a pivotal role in improving the quality of education that promotes effective teaching and learning for all students. It is, therefore, imperative for the government to develop school leadership by making the assignments of principals based on merit rather than political affiliation. In this way, they can help their schools meet ever-evolving and increasingly complex expectations.

The second implication of the results was the need to balance the quantitative and qualitative development of education. Education of the highest

quality is essential and enables people to face social, cultural, economic and technological challenges. In order to meet this objective, an education system must maintain its quality along with its expansion.

The third implication of the results was the need to provide adequate funds for schools. As the findings of the study revealed, schools were suffering from a lack of resources. Relying on the surrounding community was not promising as its income was not enough to sustain its members, let alone fund schools. For this reason, intervention was needed by the government to provide adequate funds so that schools are equipped with the necessary teaching-learning materials and have additional classrooms and chairs.

The fourth implication of the results of this study was resolving teachers' problems. Teachers constitute a very prominent component of the educational system. What they do matters more for student learning than any other single factor. Hence, the following points should be considered by prospective stakeholders in order to make more effective use of school teachers:

- Ensure that teachers receive proper, adequate and relevant initial and in-service training/education at university level to prepare them for their work as teachers.
- Provide a salary comparable with that of other professions requiring the same level of qualifications and responsibility.
- Ensure that teachers receive the recognition appropriate to their level of qualifications and responsibilities.

The fifth implication of the findings of the study was the need to design effective professional development opportunities. We are living in a very dynamic, complex and interconnected world. This in turn requires schooling to change continuously in order to meet the needs of a changing society and to address the existing problems of education. To this end, designing effective, school-based and collaborative professional development opportunities is vital as it improves the processes of teaching and learning. The school system also needs to provide all the resources and information required by teachers so that they can approach their work with an orientation to change. Moreover, the principals need to empower staff members to be responsible for their own professional development.

The final implication of the findings of the study was that of strengthening the relationship between parents and schools. Parent/family involvement significantly contributes to improving student performance in a variety of ways. However, parental involvement in education is insufficient and, therefore, it is very important to increase their role in promoting the social, emotional and academic growth of their children. It is also fundamental for schools to recognise the interdependent nature of their relationship with parents, who should be valued as essential partners in the education process.

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Riassunto

Lo scopo di questo studio è quello di esaminare i principali problemi educativi che influenzano in maniera significativa l'obiettivo di un'istruzione di qualità per i cittadini ostacolando il raggiungimento degli obiettivi dell'istruzione per tutti in Etiopia. I dati, raccolti attraverso interviste semi-strutturate e un «Focus Group» (FGD) che ha coinvolto 31 partecipanti selezionati appositamente, sono stati analizzati tematicamente utilizzando l'analisi verbale. Si tratta di uno studio esplorativo in fase iniziale che ha evidenziato una leadership scolastica inefficace, una scarsa formazione iniziale, stipendi bassi, limitate e, spesso, inefficaci opportunità di sviluppo professionale per gli insegnanti, concentrazione sulla quantità piuttosto che sulla qualità, un ambiente economico debole, scarsa partecipazione dei genitori e «commercializzazione» degli istituti di formazione come principali fattori di ostacolo alla qualità dell'istruzione. La necessità di migliorare la dirigenza scolastica, l'attenzione alla qualità insieme con l'allargamento dell'istruzione, un adeguato investimento economico per la risoluzione dei problemi degli insegnanti e la progettazione di efficaci opportunità di sviluppo professionale nonché il rafforzamento della collaborazione dei genitori nella scuola, si rivelano, pertanto, aree cruciali che richiedono interventi specifici.

Parole chiave: Educazione, Educazione per tutti, Etiopia, Qualità della formazione, Scuola primaria.