



# Off and on all at once: curriculum reform and its challenges in Ethiopia

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## Abstract

Countries view curriculum reform as an essential and vital step in preparing schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and a world that is changing quickly. Many developing nations have been reforming their curricula recently in an effort to give pupils the knowledge, abilities, and competencies they will need in the future. Ethiopia is one of the countries mentioned above that totally discard former school curriculum to replace by the new one. Therefore; the aim of this study was to investigate Ethiopian School curriculum reform practice and challenges it faced during implementation. A Descriptive survey design was employed for the study. A total of 125 participants including 5 education experts and 120 school teachers were involved in the study. All participants were selected randomly. An online questionnaire procedure was followed to gather data. Analysis and interpretation was done via simple percentages and graphic representations. Findings reveal that the reform process followed was off and on in which the new curriculum discards the existing one. As everything was made from the scratch, teachers lack of readiness, unavailability of TLM, and problem related to school readiness were seen as major challenges during implementation. I recommend that curriculum reform should be progression and improvement of the existing one. If it is must to change everything in it, making all necessary things ready before the development and implementation is very important.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum, reform, challenges, discarding, curriculum implementation*

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## 1. Introduction

As a result of globalization, curriculum reform has become a widespread tendency (Waks, 2003; Yin, 2013; Sparapani et al., 2014). Around the world, including in the United States, Europe, East Asia, and all of sub-Saharan Africa, a number of curriculum reforms have taken place or are currently being developed, especially in the construction of new

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Dakamo

curricula due to social, political, and technological advancement (Yeung and Lam, 2007; Altinyelken, 2010; Kolmos et al., 2016).

Due to different global crises such as climate change, health related epidemics and the like, countries have increasingly considered reviewing the curriculum as a way to equip children with the knowledge, skills and competences needed for tomorrow. In most of the developing countries, change in government is forcing them to change school curriculum. This is evident even in Ethiopia. However, it is still not always easy to start such change in the best and most productive method. In other words, there is a gap between the aim and implementation of this curriculum renewal, which is known as the "implementation gap" in the literature.

While every country has a unique reform trajectory, several common themes such as the focus on well-being, learner agency, the capacity to solve challenges, and navigating an uncertain world appear in a number of them. The similarities and differences in curriculum change between nations are a reflection of the complexity of curriculum reform as a whole, which involves the interaction of local and global factors. On the one hand, curriculum reform is a national issue since it is anticipated to define the skills and information deemed most valued in society and required to prepare for the future (Pont B., 2018).

### **1.1. Curriculum Reform Defined**

Although the term "curriculum" may have many meanings depending on the context, it is essentially "a plan for learning" (Vandeyar and Killen, 2003). To put it another way, it is a series of instructions for what should be taught in the classroom and what the educational system should emphasize. According to a tighter definition adopted by Prensky M., (2014), curriculum refers to the books or other written resources that are utilized for teaching and learning. In contrast, Mawila J., (2007) evaluate curriculum in a broader sense, taking into account matters like teaching methods, class sizes, the distribution of learning hours, learning objectives, assessment methods, and examination procedures.

This article focuses on curricular changes that specifically alter the learning objectives, or the competences, knowledge, values, and attitudes that students should develop. According to this definition, curriculum has a strong cultural and political component since it establishes a society's worldview by selecting what knowledge and skills are the most important for its citizens and what knowledge is worth passing on. In other words, a curriculum represents a larger social and political consensus (Mohamed H., 2004), and it should develop and evolve alongside society.

### **1.2. Dimensions in Curriculum Reform**

As it was already noted, curriculum reform is a procedure intended to alter the goals of learning as well as how it occurs. The purpose and aim behind the change will determine how it is implemented. The main questions of what should be learnt, how it should be learned, and why it should be learned are addressed in policy design. It also discusses how the effectiveness of this learning is assessed and what materials are needed to achieve the stated goals (Pont B., 2018).



The goal of the curriculum change is indicated by the vision for curriculum reform. It addresses the issues of why a curriculum reform is required, the best type of curriculum, and how the desired changes could be implemented. The answers to these questions will have a variety of effects on how implementation turns out. The curriculum policy may suffer if it fails to win the public's and politicians' support in the absence of a compelling argument for the reform. Additionally, if there is no agreement on the type of support required, the divergent and even opposing viewpoints may make it difficult to adapt the curriculum (Mohamed H., 2004).

How the implementation process proceeds will depend on the tempo and timetable established for curricular reform. There is agreement that long-term commitment and persistence are necessary in both curriculum research and education policy research generally (Pont B., 2018). This is because seeing the effects of changes takes time, just as significant educational change does (Yin H., 2013). For instance, during Hong Kong's curriculum reform, teachers and administrators were subjected to strict deadlines that were thought to be impeding the policy's ability to be implemented effectively (Yeung and Lam, 2007). Similar long-term commitment for core supporting policies is advised due to the requirement for policy congruence.

## **2. Problem Statement**

As stated earlier, curriculum reform in different countries has different reasons. Studies reveal that some of the developing countries change their school curriculum due to their level of development. Others may be due to pressure from their government. This study was needed as the above reality is not evident from the Ethiopian context. Challenges for the new curriculum implementation were not clearly extracted as a lesson. Thus, the following basic research questions were tried to be answered by this study. These are:

1. How was the school curriculum reform conducted in Ethiopia?
2. What were the major reasons to realize the curriculum reform?
3. What were the main challenges during the implementation of new curriculum?

## **3. Method**

3.1. **Research Design:** Descriptive survey research design is one of the non-experimental and observatory designs in which researchers observe phenomena in order to describe. This study also followed all procedures that such kind of research design requires.

3.2. **Participants:** Sampling is the statistical process of choosing a portion of a population to study in order to make observations and draw conclusions from the data. To ensure that the conclusions drawn from the sample can be applied to the population of

Dakamo

interest, it is crucial to select a sample that is accurately representative of the population. Simple random sampling was used in this investigation. A total of 125 people from four different regions were chosen. The email addresses of all participants were obtained from the policy documents filed over a number of years.

3.3. Data Collection: A set of 15 close ended questions were forwarded online for all participants included in the study. First, participants were presented a written consent to help them decide on either to take part or with draw from the study. Immediately after their agreement, questionnaire was forwarded at the same time. Participants were told to return the filled questionnaire only when they are ready to do so. As it was stated earlier, all questionnaires were coded sequentially. Then, the information presented on each questionnaire was converted in to simple percentages and graphic representations. Data represented by percentages and graphics was interpreted according to the logical sequence of the research questions.

3.4. Ethical considerations: The researcher applied to the Addis Ababa University, Institutional Review Board via letter. The letter of approval was received and all consents forwarded to the participants were based on it.



### 3.5. Data Analysis and Interpretation

**Table 1.** Participants Profile and Representation

Position	Gender		Educational Level			Region			
	M	F	Dip.	Deg.	MA	Somali	Oromia	Amhara	Sidama
School Teacher	25(71.4%)	10(28.6%)	2(5.7%)	17(48.5%)	16(45.7%)	4(10.4%)	15(42.8%)	12(34.3%)	4(10.4%)
College Instructor	60(70.5%)	25(29.5%)	0(0.0%)	14(16.5%)	71(83.5%)	12(14.1%)	34(40%)	28(32.9%)	19(22.3%)
Expert	4(80%)	1(20.0%)	0(0.0%)	3(60.0%)	2(40.0%)	1(20.0%)	2(40.0%)	1(20.0%)	1(20.0%)
Total	89(71.2%)	36(28.8%)	2(1.6%)	34(27.2)	89(71.2%)	17(13.6%)	51(40.8%)	41(32.8%)	24(19.2%)

As stated in the table above, participants were taken from four different regions (4/11=36.3%). The regions were selected from southern, western, eastern and northern parts of the country for the sake of representation. Participants were (28%) school teachers, (68%) college instructors and (4%) education bureau experts. Almost all 89 (71.2%) of the participants were male. The same number 89 (71.2%) of participants were academically masters holders. Based on the number of schools and colleges in each region, most of the participants 51 (40.8%) were selected from Oromia region. The rest 41 (32.8%), 24 (19.2%) and 17 (13.6%) of participants were involved from Amhara, Sidama and Somali regions respectively.

## 1. How was the school curriculum reform conducted in Ethiopia?

**Table 2.** Participants response on Research Question 1

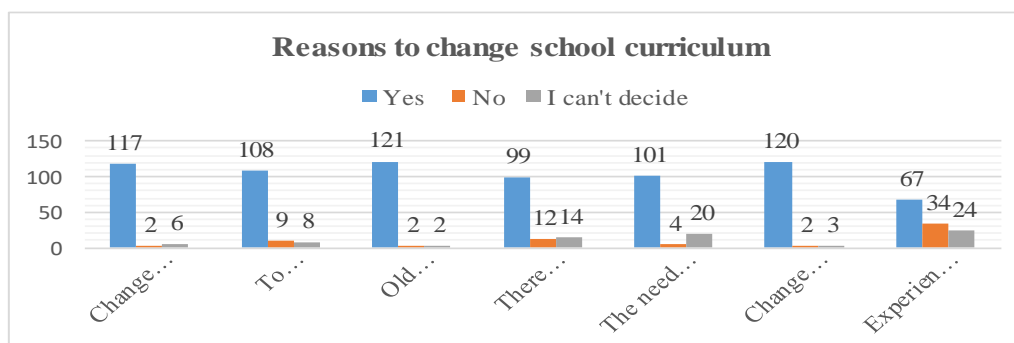
S/N	Items	Response Options		
		Yes	No	I can't decide
1.	Do you think need assessment was conducted before the school curriculum change?	112 (89.6%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (10.4%)
2.	All grade level old textbooks and teacher guides were removed once.	125 (100%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
3.	Relevant curriculum experts and teachers were involved and consulted in the entire process.	89 (71.2%)	11 (8.8%)	25 (20.0%)
4.	Do you think Ethiopian school curriculum reform was started from the scratch?	102 (81.6%)	23 (18.4%)	0 (0.0%)

The table above reflects that Ethiopian school curriculum framework went through different stages and steps of development. Almost all participants (112=89.6%) disclosed that the school curriculum reform was the result of research conducted by different experts at national level. One of the respondents wrote a memo under the questionnaire and it says the document entitled, “Ethiopian Education Road Map from 2018-30 was developed in 2018 prior to the curriculum reform made”.

Due to the school structure 1-4, 5-8, 9-10 and 11-12 was changed in to 1-6, 7-8 and 9-12, the old curriculum textbooks and teacher guides were totally voided as witnessed by 125 (100%) participants. Even though majority of the participants (89=71.2%) believe relevant subject teachers and curriculum experts were involved and consulted in the entire reform process, few of them (11=8.8%) blame it as not reality. The rest but significant number of respondents (25=20.0%) were unable to decide on the issue.

Lastly, 102 (81.6%) of the participants discussed that the curriculum reform done was from the scratch. Most of the subjects are newly added and no improvement to the existing teaching and learning materials was made. A number of participants (23=18.4%) were against the discussion and justification given above. They claim that the old curriculum materials were used as a base for the curriculum reform conducted. It was the issue of improvement of the materials.

## 2. What were the major reasons to realize the curriculum reform?

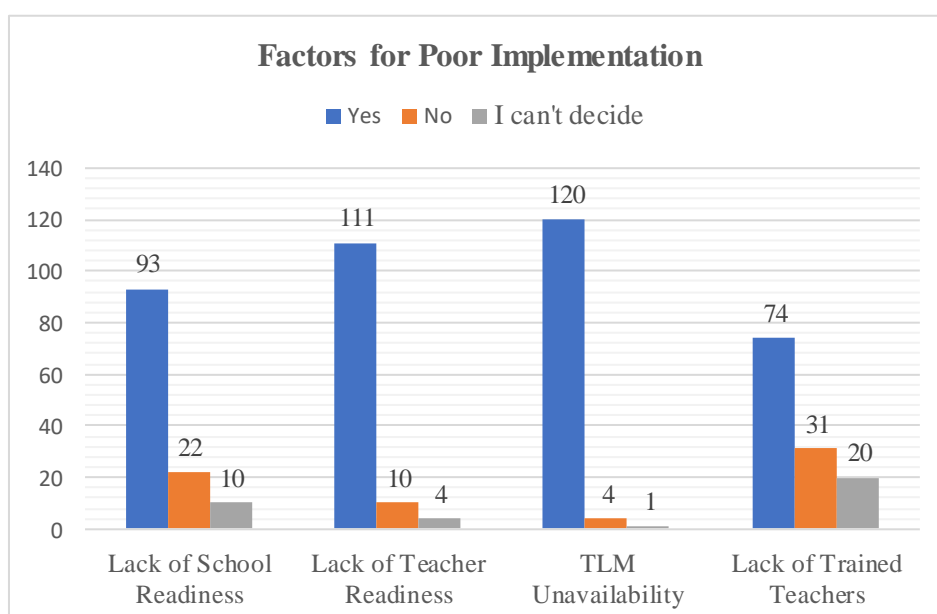


**Figure 1.** Participants response on reason to curriculum change

As indicated in the figure above, Ethiopian school curriculum changed recently has its origin on different reasons. One of the reasons disclosed by majority of the participants (121=96.8%) is an existing curriculum’s lack of quality. Approximately the same number of participants (120=96% and 117=93.6%) mentioned that change in medium of instruction specially for grade 1-6 and change in government respectively were additional reasons for the change in the curriculum.

Most of the respondents (108=86.4%) noted that the new curriculum was emerged so as to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the education system. Others (101=80.8%) told that the need to restructure the school system initiated the curriculum reform. Large number of participants (99=79.2%) informed that the school curriculum was changed because of the over dosed contents in the previous curriculum. Lastly, a significant number of participants (67=53.6%) stated that the experiences gained from the developed countries triggered the reform.

**3. What were the main challenges during the new curriculum implementation?**



**Figure 2.** Participants response on factors for poor implementation

The figure above represents participants response on how Ethiopia is facing challenges during new curriculum implementation. Almost all participants (120=96%) debated teaching and learning materials for the new curriculum are not ready enough.

Teachers of all grades are forced to use soft copies until the hard copy gets ready. Almost all respondents (111=88.8%) claim that teachers lack readiness to accept and implement the new curriculum. As medium of instruction for grade 1-6 is intended to be local language, teachers with other language background were somehow challenged to apply the new curriculum.

Approximately the same number of participants (93=74.4%) also stated most of the schools are not ready to practice the new curriculum. One of the reasons for it is the limited financial capital and absence of infrastructures. Launching all grade level reforms in the same time was another factor that challenged the school's readiness.

More than half participants (74 that account 59.2%) discussed that lack of trained teachers was a major challenge to implement the new curriculum. Most participants in their footnote mentioned that science contents for grade 7 and 8 are integrated in to a single subject with no teachers with such professional profile. A newly added KG1 program also requires a number of new teachers. This shows some programs lack properly trained teachers and at the same time science teachers with single subjects may not be assigned to grades until they study integrated science.

#### **4. Findings**

According to the analysis and interpretation presented above, the following findings were developed.

- Ethiopian government was changed before the last three years ago. This change initiated the new school curriculum reform that is already in progress.
- Need assessment was conducted before the emergence of the new curriculum reform.
- All textbooks and teacher guides of the previous curriculum is directly replaced by the newly developed school curriculum.
- Even though the new curriculum was started from the scratch, subject specialist teachers and experts were involved in the new curriculum development process.
- It is revealed that intention to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the education system, change in school structure, existing curriculum's lack of quality, unnecessary content dose in the old curriculum, change in medium of instruction and experience gained from the developed countries were the major reasons for the new school curriculum reform.
- The new curriculum reform is facing challenges such as unavailability of textbooks and teacher guides, teachers lack of readiness, school readiness problem, and lack of properly trained teachers specially for KG and grade 7 and 8.
- As grade 1-6 is intended to be taught by the local language, teachers with other language background who have been teaching at this level faced challenge of incompatibility.



- Specially science teachers who were graduates of single subject again faced challenge to be assigned as integrated subjects' teachers.
- Due to the challenges listed above, the new school curriculum implementation across different regions is no quite uniform.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the findings discussed above, the following conclusions were drawn. One of the conclusions is that change in government necessarily initiates changes in systems including school curriculum. The other one is, curriculum change is not easy task that can be done with poor readiness. It requires an intensive need assessment, skilled experts, experienced teachers and financial capital that facilitates its reality. Replacing the existing curriculum by the new one all at once results challenges during implementation. Again, the entire process of school curriculum reform needs to be done very carefully. That is why it does not disturb the whole education system unless the development process misses the right way.

## **6. Recommendations**

As a researcher, I forward the following recommendations for the further improvements.

- ✓ Change in government should not be the only and primary reason to conduct school curriculum reform. Because of the intention to satisfy politics, things may go with null financial and human resource readiness.
- ✓ School curriculum reform should be realized through a bit-by-bit process. All grade levels should not be replaced by the new curriculum rather it must be piloted in some grades in a given year.
- ✓ Curriculum improvement is better than curriculum change. Therefore, it is good to improve the existing curriculum materials in the framework of the new thought intended to be realized.
- ✓ In school curriculum reform teachers, medium of instruction, school readiness and learner's context should be taken in to consideration.

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