



Improving teacher training in Ethiopia: Shifting the content and approach of pre-service teacher education



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HIGHLIGHTS

- READ-TA established capacity in literacy content knowledge and pedagogical skill.
- Teacher educators at the CTEs are striving to incorporate student-centered pedagogy.
- Participatory training resulted in knowledge retention for the teacher educators.
- Sustainability depends on teacher education, instructional resources, and pedagogy.

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education in Ethiopia has undergone multiple reforms, yet primary students still struggle to learn to read. The USAID-funded Reading for Ethiopia's Achievement Developed - Technical Assistance project aimed to reform the primary school curriculum and teacher education to improve instructional approaches to teaching reading and writing. We examine the process and effectiveness of the project's pre-service teacher education component. Impacts on teacher educator pedagogy were observed at Colleges of Teacher Education, including less lecturing and greater use of student-centered teaching and learning approaches. Sustainability depends on the government's efforts to invest in long-term solutions and promote student-centered pedagogy.

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1. Introduction

Over the last 25 years, Ethiopia has experienced policy shifts on curriculum, language, teacher qualifications and pedagogical approaches in addition to a great expansion of the education system. Gross enrollment rates (GER) have jumped from 20 percent in 1992-93 to over 96 percent in 2008-09, with a strong commitment to full enrollment of girls, vulnerable children, and children in rural

and pastoralist areas (Method et al., 2010). However, Ethiopia's education system struggles to produce fluent readers.

Recent assessments of reading revealed very low skill levels across many parts of the country. The 2010 Mother Tongue Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) results revealed that only 5% of children in first cycle of primary school met the fluency benchmark of 60 words correct per minute, and between 10 and 62 percent of grade 3 students were unable to answer a single comprehension question, depending on region (Piper, 2010; Smith, Stone, & Comings, 2012). This was followed by the 2014 EGRA, which was administered in two Ethiopian languages, Wolayttatto and Hadiyyisa, and similarly found that 36% and 62% of children were unable to answer any reading comprehension questions correctly (RTI International, 2014).

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One of the central issues challenging progress in early grade reading is the complexity of the language landscape in Ethiopia. Currently, more than 20 languages are used as the language of instruction (LOI) for primary grades 1–4, although many students have very little access to reading materials in the LOI. In some regions, the locally dominant language is used for instruction for students attending grades 1–8, whereas others introduce English as a LOI when students reach grade 5. Still other regions use the local language as the LOI for Science and Mathematics courses in upper primary school. Due to this diversity and the extreme budgetary restrictions faced in a low-resource context, most schools lack reading materials printed in the LOI beyond subject-area texts.

Beyond language issues, Ethiopia struggles to adequately prepare reading teachers for the classroom, which is hypothesized to be one of the major causes of reading failure in students (Brady & Moats, 1997). Teacher educators are unable to impart foundational literacy skills knowledge and literacy education techniques to student teachers when they themselves have not received adequate training on these concepts (Joshi et al., 2009). Teachers' knowledge of content and pedagogy (Borko, Davinroy, Bliem, & Cumbo, 2000; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Piasta, Connor, Fishman, & Morrison, 2009; Piper & Korda, 2011), and teachers' expectations of student performance (Raban, 2002) are directly related to student achievement (DFID, 2013).

As a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country, Ethiopia has implemented language and education policies that have a profound impact on languages of instruction (LOI) used in the various regions and in teacher education at various levels. Prior to 1994, the language policies adopted by previous governments focused on a language use policy which encouraged the use of Amharic (Getachew & Derib, 2006) in earlier grades (1–6) and English in later grades (7–12). The current government has adopted a very different language policy and has implemented an approach that gives autonomy to regional states for primary education, although the federal government may have a stronger influence in curriculum decision making than regional governments (e.g., UNESCO, 2010). Under this policy, regions are required to use mother tongue languages (MT) as the medium of instruction for the two cycles of primary school (grades 1–4 and grades 5–8), with Amharic and English taught as subjects. In practice, however, some regions begin using English as a language of instruction between grades 5 and 8. (Method et al., 2010).

In Ethiopia, primary school teachers are prepared in Colleges of Teacher Education (CTE) while secondary school teachers are prepared in universities. Although there are different selection criteria, the major requirement to be admitted to a CTE is completion of grade 10 with a score of 2.00 on the grade 10 national examination. Students who meet the grade requirement for university preparation will be promoted to grade 11. Most of those enrolled in CTEs are therefore students who could not gain entrance to university preparation programs. Hence, these teacher education programs face many challenges in preparing students to become effective MT educators. The MT teacher education program includes 13 MT courses, a teaching practicum, several courses on general pedagogy and assessment, and science, math, and English language bridging courses. Students graduating from the MT teacher education program are eligible to teach mother tongue languages from grades 1–8 at their regional schools. The graduates of the MT programs are therefore at the front lines of the effort to improve early reading outcomes in Ethiopia.

In this paper, we first discuss the literature on teacher training reform and provide contextual background on Ethiopia. We then describe our role in the current teacher training curriculum reforms in Ethiopia and assess the extent to which the new curriculum and training programs have succeeded in changing the content knowledge of teacher educators and the teaching approach taken at

Ethiopian teacher training colleges. Finally, we discuss the successes and limitations of this approach to improving literacy instruction.

2. Background

2.1. Teacher training structures in Ethiopia

The Constitution of Ethiopia, approved in 1993, decentralized administrative and policy functions to the regions, including administration and policy for education. The decentralization created nine Regional State Education Bureaus (RSEB) reflecting a regional structure generally based along dominant ethnic lines (Afar, Tigray, Amhara, Oromia, SNNPR, Benishangul Gumuz, Ethio-Somali, Harari and Gambella), and two administrative regions (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa) (Method et al., 2010).

Before 2008, teachers for grades 1 to 4 underwent one year of teacher training preparation after completing grade 10. A diploma structure was adopted in 2008, where primary school (grades 1–8) teacher candidates were required to finish grade 10 and then complete three years at one of the 37 colleges of teacher education. These institutions graduated approximately 43,041 students (40% female) in the 2014–15 academic year (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016). New primary and secondary level teachers are encouraged to continue their education once they enter the field via a two-year induction program. With the expansion of primary education in order to universalize primary education and the relatively high teacher attrition rate (MoE, 2014, 2015), there are shortages of teachers in some regions. Due to this, CTE students are sometimes hired as primary school teachers after their second year at the college of teacher education (and complete the third year via summer in-service). In areas with extreme teacher shortage and teacher attrition, teachers are hired as early as after completing grade 10. For the 2014–15 academic year, more than 2000 teachers were 16–19 years old (MoE, 2016).

Despite the numerous education system reforms implemented over the past several decades, as discussed further in the following section, and a national Continuous Professional Development program, teachers in Ethiopia (as well as their students) still view the teaching/learning process as the act of a teacher transmitting knowledge to the students, rather than the students discovering and constructing their own knowledge through participatory learning activities (Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2011). The reality is that CTE instructors (teacher educators) have few classroom and technological resources for their own professional development and instruction; therefore, they continue to train pre-service teachers in (and are primarily using) teacher-centered, non-participatory pedagogy (Frost & Little, 2014; Teshome, 2012) which does little, if anything, to directly address the teaching of early grade reading skills (RTI International & Florida State University, 2013).

2.2. Reforming teacher training

Teacher training practices in many East African countries tend to be weak. When teachers are afforded training and education from a college, the focus tends to be on theoretical aspects of teaching rather than methodological concerns, with little if any application to real classroom practices (Moja, 2000; Westbrook et al., 2009). Minimal practical teaching experience and a curriculum of teacher-centered instruction (from teacher educators lacking experience in primary schools) dominates many pre-service teacher training programs (Hardman, Ackers, Abrishamian, & O'Sullivan, 2011).

Following theshussation policy, various reforms were implemented to improve the skills of primary and secondary teachers, incorporate active learning techniques into classrooms (Mekonnen, 2008; MoE, 2003a), and effect change in pre-service teacher

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