Civic education in Ethiopian schools: Adopted paradigms, instructional technology, and democratic citizenship in a multicultural context

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A B S T R A C T

After nearly two decades of military dictatorship, democratic civic education has been integrated into the Ethiopian school curriculum. This paper examines the policy–practice concordance in implementing the civic education curriculum based on empirical evidence generated on the philosophical underpinnings, curricular contents, pedagogical approaches, and the role of instructional technology. Data were gathered through a questionnaire survey on 179 randomly selected high school students, key informant teachers, and content analysis of students' textbooks, teachers' guides, and official policy documents. The findings reveal that the existing civic and ethical education curriculum is eclectic in its character blending the minimal interpretation of democratic civic education with the inclusive conception of ethno-cultural diversity relevant to multicultural societies. Nevertheless, the manner in which the TV-instruction is used in classrooms is found to hinder interactive learning that is instrumental to nurture democratic and active citizens.

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia is located in the Horn of African Region with a population of over 85 million belonging to more than 80 ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious groups. Economically, it is one of the poorest in the world with GDP per captia of 1000 USD where agriculture accounting for about 50% of GDP and 85% of total employment (CIA, 2011). Nevertheless, there has been a steady economic growth since the mid-2000s that favorably affected other sectors. Likewise, the general education system has been expanding with primary and secondary net enrollment ratio (NER) climbing respectively from 44% and 6.6% in 2005 to a high of 83% and 13.8% in 2009 (MoE, 2010). The rapid expansion of the higher education subsector also yielded a staggering annual growth rate of 1% in enrollment (GER) to make up for the decades lost while the country was embroiled in internal armed conflict (Semela, 2011). To protect the new found peace and stability, Ethiopia has since 2003 introduced new civic education curriculum in schools and universities.

Nonetheless, citizenship education is not entirely new to Ethiopia except it existed with different names in divergent political contexts and state ideologies. In effect, its' historical existence can be traced back to the beginning of indigenous education that parallels the introduction of Christianity in the 4th century B.C. Since then, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the vanguard institution of citizenship education through the offering of moral education primarily meant to instill the unconditional acceptance of, and loyalty to the ruling class. As the 19th century draws to a close though, the hegemony of religious institutions as dominant centers of education had gradually been eroded. Even then, moral education of significant religious-accent continued to occupy a central place in the newly introduced Western-style modern education which began with the opening of Minilik II School in 1908. The Imperial regime (which came to an end in 1974) used 'moral education' as an instrument of nation building underpinned by the cultural and religious values of the ruling elites.

With the demise of Emperor Hailesallassie I in 1974, however, the version of citizenship objectified by religious moral education had to confront with the harsh reality – the replacement of moral education buttressed by Orthodox Christian values, with its' diametrically opposite, atheist communist political education. Thus, the old school curriculum had to be swiftly replaced by the fresh socialist-oriented counterpart. In strikingly the same way, its' successor, the Military junta, used 'Political education' for a nation

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building project of its own. Given its overarching aim of producing "all-rounded socialist personality", political education was partisan; and as such, exclusively meant to impart communist values, attitudes, and world outlook. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, however, the government had to reluctantly abandon its communist ideology which subsequently resulted in the elimination of political education from the school curriculum.

Evidently, Ethiopia's violent past did not allow a smooth political transition to maintain a degree of continuity to a school curriculum. It is more so when it comes particularly to ideological education. Perhaps not surprisingly, the advent of a new government in 1991 brought with it an education and training policy (FDRE, 1994) which among other things, gave way for a different form of citizenship education (which has come to be known as "Civic and Ethical Education") curriculum. Hence, since 2003 civic and ethical education is offered as separate and statutory subject in schools and universities (MoE, 2006). The purpose of this article is to examine the policy–practice concordance in implementing the secondary school civic and ethical education curriculum in Ethiopia. In so doing, empirical evidence will be gathered to determine the philosophical underpinnings of civic and ethical education, its impact on the selection of curricular content and pedagogical approaches, and the role of instructional technology with particular emphasis on the current practice of plasma TV application for classroom teaching.

In subsequent parts of this article, we will discuss the significance, rationale, and research questions followed by literature review specifically focusing on paradigms of civic education, and the effectiveness of TV-instruction in ordinary classroom contexts. After presenting the study methodology, and the results and discussion, we will identify the limitations and implications in the conclusion section.

1.1. Significance and rationale

The data generated in this study is expected to provide valuable evidence on implementation of school-based civic education with important implications to existing practices at national, regional, and global levels. At national level, even though civic and ethical education was started nearly a decade ago, it has received little research attention. In turn, little is known about its current state as empirical data is sparse to make informed educational decisions. In this respect, the present study is a pioneering attempt in terms of addressing the current state of civic education in Ethiopian secondary schools. Furthermore, generating empirical data on school-based civic education in Ethiopian context will have important implications for multicultural societies within the African continent and beyond. Evidently, understanding the potency of civic education in nurturing democratic citizenry in Africa (e.g., Schoeman, 2005; Enslin and Horsthemke, 2004; Sifuna, 2000; Sailh, 1997) is equally important to the rest of the developing world where lack of peace, democracy, and ethnic conflict remains a daunting challenge to ensure national survival and socio-economic progress.

1.2. Point of departure and research questions

There are two specific issues that the present study seeks address with important implications to civic education research, and understanding the degree congruence between policy and practice of curriculum implementation. Both issues revolve around the use of TV instruction (rather than classroom teachers) used to deliver all secondary school subjects including civic education. Firstly, the present study attempts to validate whether the sustained criticism against the plasma TV lessons for lack of interactivity and overly didactic approach (e.g., Abera, 2011;

Shibeshi et al., 2009; Bitew, 2008; Dahlström, 2007; Lemma, 2006; Kassahun and Zelalem, 2006) also applies to civic and ethical education. Secondly, beyond determining the pedagogical features of plasma TV transmitted civic and ethical education lessons, this study takes keen interest in revealing the extent to which the aim of nurturing democratic and active citizenry could be achieved with near exclusive use of TV-instruction.

In view of the above, this article tries to answer the following research questions:

- Which philosophical approach(s) to civic education underpin the Ethiopian 'Civic and ethical education' curriculum (as implemented in secondary schools)?
- Are the teaching strategies suggested in the students' textbook and teacher's guides in par with the aim and purposes (philosophical foundations) of civic and ethical education declared in the official policy documents?
- Can civic education warrant the development of active and democratic citizens considering the manner in which plasma TV is being used?

2. Literature review

This section reviews the existing literature in view of providing theoretical and empirical backdrop by way of giving tentative answers to the key research questions. Accordingly, it offers condensed analyses on: the conceptualizations and paradigms of civic education, the systematic relationship between the typologies of civic education paradigms with pedagogical approaches or teaching strategies, and the mediating role of instructional technology (specifically focusing on instructional TV) during the learning and teaching process. Finally, to offer a background on the central issues raised in this paper, we will closely examine research findings focusing on the use of plasma TV-instruction in Ethiopian secondary schools.

2.1. Paradigms of civic education

In recent decades largely due to the attention given to citizenship education, there has been increasing research and theorizing (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Marri, 2009; Banks, 2008; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Kerr, 1999; McLaughlin, 1992) on the philosophical underpinnings of civic education. Despite their continued effort, however, researchers were not able to come up with a single, yet inclusive conceptual framework. Nevertheless, there has been an ongoing attempt (e.g., Cohen, 2010; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004; Kerr, 1999; McLaughlin, 1992) to develop a somehow broader conceptualization of civic education to accommodate the range of existing interpretations. McLaughlin (1992) and Kerr (1999), for instance, conceived civic education along a continuum with the two extreme poles respectively representing *minimal* and *maximal* interpretations. The *minimal* interpretation tends to be largely content-led and knowledge-based focusing on formal education programs. In terms of pedagogical approaches, according to McLaughlin, the *minimal* interpretations concentrate on didactic transmission of knowledge focusing on history and geography, the political structure its processes, system of government and constitution. In contrast, the *maximal* interpretations relies on a broad combinations of formal and informal approaches creating opportunities for students to use their initiative through discussion, debate, project work and other forms of independent learning (Kerr, 1999: 13).

Looking through a critical lens, Banks (2008) came up with a related framework distinguishing between two types of citizenship education which, he termed as *mainstream* and *transformative*