Improving School Work in Challenging Context: Practitioners' Views following a Participatory Action Research Project from Eritrea

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Abstract

The paper discusses the views of school practitioners from challenging contexts of learning on roles and conditions for meaningful improvements of the learning and teaching process. It is based on qualitative data following an 18-month participatory action research (PAR) project conducted with teachers and school leaders (SLs) on how to effect change in their practice. The project enjoyed strong backing from a regional education office in one of the remotest and culturally diverse regions in Eritrea. Qualitative analysis was used to interpret 14 semi-structured interview transcripts of project participants from two study schools. Enriched by literature on school-based professional development and role of action research in improving teaching and learning, the paper attempts to make sense of views of practitioners from the PAR project on critical aspects of managing teaching and learning processes (TLP) and school practices. The analysis was based on the interview data, longer term engagements with the practitioners and review of relevant documents. Practitioners' views are synthesized into three main issues: focus on needs of learners, collaborative commitments and teacher professionalism. These issues discussed in the findings arguably constitute quality education in the study schools and beyond.

Keywords: teaching and learning; school improvement; teacher professionalism; action research; Eritrea

Introduction

National efforts in Eritrea to expand and provide equitable educational opportunities have not been yielding the desired quality outcomes. The latest Monitoring and Learning Achievement (MLA III) study reported that significant percentage of children are failing to learn basic competencies and the trend has been worsening from year to year (MoE,

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2017). Naib (2014) further showed disparities of educational outcomes among rural and urban secondary schools and flagged the fact that equitable provision of educational opportunities is seriously suffering a setback in the country. Similar trends in developing countries have been documented by Harber (2014). With expanded meaning of access to schooling, i.e., regular attendance, progression at appropriate age and attaining nationally set achievement targets, a much higher number of children are being "silently excluded" from educational opportunities in developing countries (Lewin and Little, 2011 as cited in Harber, 2014, p. 28). However, these gloomy accounts of the state of schooling in the developing world are being reported with assessment frameworks that have been problematized as focusing on aspects of education that are readily measurable (Alexander, 2015).

This article discusses views of practitioners on critical aspects of school improvements amidst multi-layered learning challenges. The practitioners took part in a PAR project conducted in two schools in part of a region in Eritrea with one of the lowest levels of school learners' performances and multifaceted school and out of school challenges. The region is also not typical in that the regional education office took initiatives to engage schools in research to address and improve their educational challenges. The project, facilitated by the authors, capitalized on this initiative and sought to empower school communities by engaging them in action research and reflections. The project, designed as "building bridges between research and practice", aimed at creating grounds for collaborative research and tackling educational challenges through the processes of PAR.

Views of practitioners (participant teachers and SLs) are captured after taking part in the PAR project to show critical areas of engagements for improving school practices particularly in challenging contexts. The paper attempts to explore the potential of recognizing and mobilizing schools' intramural capabilities for a contextually relevant and sustained change in the interest of learners and learning.

The following section puts the study into broader perspective by reviewing literature on improving school work in challenging contexts and the role of action research in developing school practices.

Improving school work in challenging contexts

Beyond providing opportunities to schooling for learners, focus on what and how learners learn has been central within the quality debates in education (Alexander, 2015; Westbrook et al., 2013). Understanding and improving the micro processes of schooling is accordingly emphasized and that the kind of "daily visible impact that teachers make on their students … is what quality education looks like" (Westbrook et al., 2013, p. 64). However, such efforts to introduce reforms in teaching and learning process (TLP), such as the learner centered pedagogy (LCP), have encountered myriad implementation challenges. Limited practice in teacher education programs (Vavrus et al., 2011, p. 71), conceptual and practical issues inherent in translating LCP guidelines in diverse school

contexts (Nykiel-Herbart, 2004), implementations that overlook the cultural, economic and political contexts that shape teachers' practices (Vavrus, 2009) are some of the notable challenges.

Recognizing schools as "sites of education reform" (Shirley, 1994, p. 28) could constructively counter the "top-down" educational reform attempts which failed to have meaningful impact in TLP (Schweirfurth, 2011, p.426). Understanding the determining role of context in educational practice is essential as we, by ignoring it, would not be doing justice to school problems and cases (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p. 376). Moreover, teachers' professional conduct conditioned by context has a lot of impact on learners' daily lives (Munje, 2018, p. 13). In challenging school contexts, e.g., rural schools, understanding educational challenges– including lack of resources, cultural, economic and political diversities, and community relations– is needed in ensuring the relevance of schooling (Çiftçi & Cin, 2017).

Transforming challenges to opportunities by engaging with intramural processes of schools hence becomes critical part of school and educational development. The role of teachers and SLs is key in this process. In the era of globalization, digitalization, glaring inequalities and disadvantages, and increasing apathy for schooling (Harber, 2014, p. 31), teachers and SLs cannot be simply expected to 'deliver' content and scripted syllabus. They need to be reflective practitioners (Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008) and adaptive experts (Anthony, Hunter, Hunter, 2015) mediating diverse learners' needs, contextual realities, curricula demand with dynamic teaching strategies that are responsive and communicative (Westbrook et al., 2013).

School interventions, often externally driven, aiming at improving the quality of schooling in general and TLP in particular are widely practiced. Intervention studies focused on school-based professional development in sub-Saharan Africa report positive outcomes including improved attitude towards learners and learning, collaborative practices, teaching practices and integration of technology in teaching and learning (Hennessy, Haßler and Hofmann, 2016; Hardman et al., 2015). However, the sustained impact of interventions, mainly in relation to what extent practitioners internalize 'changed' practices, could be questionable. Working on a Senegalese continuing professional development project with primary teachers, Miyazaki (2016) found out that 'changed' teaching practices were not accompanied with intentionality of teachers as they focused on procedural aspects of practice and not on the reasoning behind it. The study provided insights into the need to balance prescriptive guidance and supporting reflective practice of teachers to improve their teaching practices in professional development contexts. As one way out of these limitations of school interventions, combining interventions with PAR holds huge potential. Furthermore, reflective accounts of practitioners advance our understanding on how teachers and SLs could relate learners' realities with a given curriculum (Westbrook et al., 2013, p. 64).

The next subsection reviews relevant literature on the role of action research in improving school practices.

Action research and development of practice

Action research is a methodology of improving practice by engaging with the complexity of educational practice and generating grounded knowledge (Cohen et al, 2018, p. 440). Elliot (1991) provided a biographical account of the developments of action research in education in the 1960s English schools as teacher-based initiatives attempting to transform the situation and structure of their practice. A characteristic feature, and the drive behind engaging in action research, is that "the practical situation is one in which [teachers'] traditional curriculum practices have been destabilized and rendered problemantic by the development of student resistance or 'refusal to learn" (Elliot, 1991, p. 9).

With convincing and highly relevant methodological premise in improving school work, action research has proven its potential in various educational contexts. James & Augstine (2018) review of the impact of action research in TLP concluded with potentials of action research outweighing the challenges. The question is not whether action research works, but its 'workabilitity' is predicated on "willingness to expose one's practice to scrutiny, motivation, trust, mutual respect, time spent within a situaional context and enabling resources" (p.340). Wood & Govender's (2013) action research with SLs in schools of disadvataged background in South Africa showed epistemological and ontological shifts of leadership practices of participants. Similary, Bosu, Dare, Dachi, and Fertig's (2011) work showed how empowering school leadership in challenging contexts through processes of action research could contribute to social justice. More closer to this study's context, Worku's (2017) collaborative action research betweeen a college and primary schools in Ethiopia showed how the process meaningfully contributed to the professional development of the educator and school practitioners. The study emphasized the need for genuine commitment on the part of university communities to work with schools in researching and developing practices.

Teacher's agentive role is central in fulfilling the potentials of action research. As reported by Pryor (1998, p. 225) in West African context, the lack of teachers' sense of agency compromises the potential of action research for improving practices. Investing on developing the culture of reflective practice through action research among school communities as a meaningful form of professional development and a genuine collaboration among university and school teachers is seen as a constructive condition for a brighter prospect of action research in the development of professional practice (Pryor, 1998). Overall, action research remains a highly relevant strategy for school improvement as it combines action and research opening up school communities for change, developing agency of practitioners in the process and generating locally relevant knowledge for improvement which could also be relevant beyond local contexts (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

This study, therefore, attempts to use PAR as a school improvement intervention in schools in a remote area of the country. Before discussing the methodology of the study, a brief background of the study region and the schools is provided in the next section.

The study region and schools

The Eritrean school system is organized into pre-school (2 years), elementary (5 years), middle (3 years), and secondary (4 years) school levels with regular age limits between 4 years in pre-school to 17 years when completing secondary school (MoE, 2016). Mother tongues (MT)[2] are used as a medium of instruction in pre-primary and elementary levels and English is used as a medium from middle to tertiary education levels. The MoE policy stipulates MT should continue to be taught as a subject in middle and secondary levels (MoE, 2011).

Gash Barka Region (GBR) is the biggest and most diverse region out of six in Eritrea, bordering with neighboring countries of Sudan and Ethiopia, with 33,200 km^2 area and a sparsely populated settlement estimated at 748,000 (MoE GBR branch, 2017). A total of 429 formal schools[3] are available from pre-school to secondary levels (MoE GBR, 2017). The two study schools, a middle school and a secondary school, are the biggest schools in the sub-region. The middle school was established in 2012 to accommodate the growing number of elementary school completers coming from the town and nearby villages. In the academic year of 2013/2014, it had 3,500 students and 85 teachers. The student population is very diverse with students coming from the dominant Tigrinya medium schools (74%), Kunama (13%), Nara (7%), Tigre (3%), and few number of students from Saho and Hausa[4] ethnic groups. The nearby secondary school has a much older history with 1,626 students and 46 teachers in the same academic year. There were equally diverse groups of students with students from Tigrinya group being the largest in number. This diversity of students is not reflected in teachers as majority of them come from Tigrinya ethnic group in both schools.

Methodology

The PAR context

The PAR project was facilitated by the authors (coming from a college of education), and conducted by teachers and SLs from two schools (middle and secondary level) in one of the most remote and diverse regions in Eritrea. On June 2013, the authors were invited by the regional education office to review and comment on research projects they initiated and that dealt with student dropouts, grade repetition, teaching multilingual students, and poor national exam performances. Though the original studies initiated by the region and the teachers were not framed as PAR, the process and outcomes

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[2] Eritrea has 9 officially recognized ethnic groups: Bidhaawyeet/Hidareb, Nara, Kunama, Saho, Tigre, Bilin, Afar, Tigrinya and Rashaida. All the languages of these groups are used as medium of instruction in schools; this system is commonly called as mother tongue education in Eritrea.
[3] Preschool-69, elementary-260, middle-83, secondary-17 schools
[4] Originally from Nigeria, the few Hausa settlers are said to have settled in parts of Gash Barka and Eastern Sudan as they attempted to travel to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, for pilgrimage.

of the research had critical hallmarks of PAR, e.g., allowing teachers to problematize their own practice (Pryor, 1998, p. 221). The initiatives created ground for the authors to engage practitioners in further participatory research and to learn the contextual realities, negotiate and co-construct possibilities for improving practices.

The announcement on involving potential practitioner researchers in the project was made in early November of 2013. The visit was aimed at discussing the proposal with potential practitioners, regional education personnel (REP) and directors. Two meetings were arranged by REP. The first meeting was with schools that the region identified as in need of researching. In the round table informal type of meeting with teachers, directors and REP, we briefed participants on the history of the project, design of the proposal and informal discussions on the nature and assumptions of action research in relation to conventional research. This meeting was more focused as the discussants seemed both welcoming and critical of the project as presented by the researchers. Key issues raised in the discussion mainly related to what extent research done by practitioners could improve complicated and deep rooted educational challenges and the roles of leadership in supporting practitioners' research.

One of the distinctive aspects of the project was that it intended to facililate practioners' own research on their own practice. The project provided a lampsum of 2,000 Nakfas[5] for each participant teachers and SLs as a contribution to cover expenses of respective PARs. It was carried through two consecutive academic semesters[6] for about nine months. The project was conducted in three phases: the reconnaissance phase of collaborative and systematic inquiry into teachers' views on their own practices, the action research phase conducted by practioners and the sharing phase.

In the first phase, the authors held three consecutive workshops to facilitate systematic inquiry into the context of practice. Working closely *with* practitioners enabled a deeper appreciation of the contextual challenge of teaching in the region in general and in the two selected schools in particular. And as Somekh (2006, p. 8) pointed out,

> …the advantages of working in teams with insider participants and outsiders collaborating together is not necessarily because outsiders bring specialist knowledge but insiders are necessarily constrained in their analysis of the larger framework in which the site of study is located by being enmeshed in its institutional culture and assumptions.

During the action research phase, workshops were held to collaboratively discuss and polish the stages of critical inquiry. These included: problem identification, identifying areas for intervention to address the problems, planning the intervention, ethical considerations, data collection, systematic monitoring and reflection, analysis and preliminary reporting. At the end of the academic year, a seminar was conducted to share the

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[5] In local currency, equivalent of $133 as per the official exchange rates
[6] Academic semester 2013/2014 between October 2013 and June 2014

practitioners' action research experiences during the region's annual education evaluation forum in April 2015.

Following the sharing seminar, interviews were conducted with 14 project participants individually to capture their experiences and views.

Participants

A total of 14 project participants - 8 teachers, 4 school department heads, 1 school director and 1 administrator - took part in the PAR projects and in the interviews, both of which are the focus of analysis in this article. The basic profile and diversity of experience of participants is tabulated in Table 1. Most of them (n=8) have more than 5 years' school experience showing a solid experience in the region. The diversity in terms teaching experience, responsibilities, and qualifications enriched the interview discussions. Participants were mainly from two ethnic groups and we had two expatriate teachers working in the secondary school.

Table 1: PAR participant interviewees profile and focus of their projects

Pseudo names, age and sex	Teaching experience (years)	Experience in GBR (years)	Qualification	Post	PAR project
Alexandro (32)M	3	2	BSc	Teacher SS	Improving English proficiency
Anita (49)F	14	14	MA	Teacher SS	Improving English proficiency
Kumar (43)M	21	10	MSc	Teacher SS	Improving exam cheating cases
Druf(59)M	22	22	BA	Teacher SS	Improving exam cheating cases
Nuru (33)M	6	6	Diploma	Teacher MS	Supporting minority students
Negasi (33)M	8	8	Diploma	Teacher MS	Supporting 8th grade repeaters
Paulos (28)M	8	4	Diploma	Teacher MS	Supporting 8th grade repeaters
Mengesha (34)M	7	4	BA	Teacher SS	Teaching methods in history
Alay (49) M	21	21	Diploma	Department Head	Socioeconomic difficulties of students
Zerit (37) M	8	3	Diploma	Department Head	Socioeconomic difficulties of students
Naty (40) M	17	8	Diploma	Department Head	Supporting minority students
Hatim (37) M	17	10	Diploma	Department Head	Supporting 8th grade repeaters
Fitsum (47) M	25	23	Diploma	School Director	Introducing school based teacher training
Amanuel (43) M	24	5	Diploma	School Admin.	Introducing school based teacher training

Key: GBR = Gash Barka Region; SS = Secondary School; MS = Middle School; M = Male

Interviews

During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about their PAR experiences in relation to their practices of teaching and managing the TLP in their respective schools. This paper will analyze perspectives on teacher and SLs roles as experienced by participants in relation to the contextual realities of teaching following the 18-month school PAR process. The discussions were mainly done in Tigrinya, a widely spoken language in the country, with occasional switching to English on convenience. Some of the interviews, mainly for the expatriate teacher participants, were done in English. Interviews were conducted individually and produced a 6-hours audio data. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in 201 pages. Data transcripts, mostly in Tigrinya, were studied and extracts used in this article have been translated to English by the authors.

Observations

In addition to interview transcripts, the analysis used observations from visits to the site and from long-term and continuing engagement with practitioners in the region. During the PAR project period (18 months), the authors made 11 on-average-one-week visits to the study schools which have allowed the authors to observe the action research process which potentially may have led to deeper understanding of the school culture and the processes of change (Solvason, Cliffe & Snowden, 2017, p. 6).

Analysis

The data from the interviews, observations and documents consulted is analyzed to examine the PAR process and its potential to engage teachers in tackling school based challenges. Through the close study of interview transcripts, field notes, documents and related literature, the analysis highlights "key incidents" and concepts and links them to "other incidents, phenomena, and theoretical constructs, and write it up so others can see the generic in the particular, the universal in the concrete, the relation between part and the whole" (Erickson, 1977, as cited in Asfaha and Kroon, 2011, p. 232).

The overall objective of the ethnographic perspective adopted in the study is the participatory generation of contextual knowledge for the purpose of empowering participants. It is centered around the conviction that:

> ethnographic problem-posing has the potential to incite praxis – the transformation of ethnographic insights into knowledge for use by, and of benefit to, research participants – while democratizing the research process through the co-participation of university- and site-based researchers. (McCarty, 2015, p. 83).

Findings

Challenging learning context

This section explores major challenges of TLP in the study schools as experienced by participant interviewees. The subsequent section provides an overview of major actions taken by participants in improving some of the challenges as part of the PAR project.

Significant achievements in providing access to education have been registered in the country, with elementary school enrolment, for example, reaching more than 350,000 in the academic year 2015/2016 from about 200,000 in year 1993/1994. This increased schooling opportunities, however, was not paralleled with quality. In this line, a participant stated:

> Everywhere you go in the country you find schools with flags… but I cannot say there is effective learning and teaching… it seems we have only built schools and failed to properly educate… many schools do not have effective management, for example, I can come and start my class in the 3rd period and no one holds me accountable for it as long as I am in the school. (Paulos)

This view exposes systemic and institutional management malpractices that adversely impacts the quality of TLP in many schools in the country. The focus of the Ministry of Education (MoE) on providing adequate number of teachers without due consideration to their quality (Khalid, Yonas, Mohammed Ali., 2017, p.51) seems to be seriously compromising the quality of learning and teaching in schools. An extensive national study on exploring the educational needs of elementary school children and its implication to preparing proficient elementary school teachers found inverse relationship between number of teachers and extent of approval and appreciation by their grade five students (Berhane, 2014, p. 109).

Learning process happen to be overshadowed, particularly in the study area, by frequent dropouts, lack of interest in schooling and failure in academic subjects. For project participant, Alay, one of the reasons is survival: "Many of our students are breadwinners to their families or guardians."

Moreover, increased incidents of border crossing[7] distracts many of the students. Alay, provides a telling anecdote on this revealing an intersection of teen migration trends and peer pressures.

> I asked one student in 6th grade who was detained and released after his attempt to cross the border, why he did it… he said two 8th grade students [usually labelled as over-age students] insisted that I cross the border with them… I didn't have much difficulties back in my home. Now this is the state of many students, they are usually pressured by their peers and do not think much about it… if they refuse they fear of being labelled as cowards by their peers.

Generally, the TLP barely relates to students' situations and needs and focus mainly on "content coverage" (Naty) of subjects. Accordingly, students' character and behavior

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[7]To the Sudan or Ethiopia

were stressed as a critical challenge in the schools, as one participant stated, "students' hearts and minds are not in schooling" (Alay). Another participant stated that "over-age 8th grade students are problematic to handle" (Paulos).

Critical limitations in the support systems such as very limited professional collaboration among teachers, school leadership and region's education office; low involvement of parents in the school's activities and students' follow up; and low morale of school leadership personnel were raised by discussants as hampering quality learning and teaching in the schools. In the profile of our interviewees, all the school leadership personnel had diploma qualification unlike teacher discussants some of whom had BA degrees. Given the critical role of leadership in quality learning (Wood & Govender, 2013), this may indicate to the need to focus on educating and empowering school leadership, at least in the schools in the study.

The following subsection provides overviews of the major action strategies implemented to improve school practices amidst the learning challenges raised in this subsection as part of the PAR project. The subsequent subsection analyzes participants' views on critical areas of TLP following their PAR engagements.

Overview of the action research projects

Table 2 summarizes identified problems and major action strategies. Five reports were relatively well written and submitted during the sharing seminar.

Table 2: AR Output Extracts

Number	Action research title	Problem identified	Major action strategies implemented
1	Improving English language proficiency	Limited opportunities to practice communication skills in English at school and home environment	Activating the school English lab by resourcing it and using it for extra English lessons; Making use of students' mobile phones to disseminate English audio materials (e.g., mini-stories) downloaded from the internet; Introducing new teaching methods (e.g. use of motivational proverbs)
2	Socioeconomic difficulties of students	Limited understanding and appreciation on the influences of students' family background in their learning and behaviors in school	Tracking 10 students' lives, observed to have unruly behaviors, in school & outside the school; Arranging meeting with their parents; Guidance and Counselling sessions for the 10 students;
3	Supporting minority students	Teachers communicating in the dominant Tigrinya in class in trying to make up for the poor proficiency in English but overlooking the understanding level of students coming from other minority languages	Use of 'English only' as a medium of instruction in respective class; Lobbying for establishing English lab in the school; Dispersing students coming from minority languages into various sections.

4	End of basic education national examination repeaters	Concentration of identified (n=150) 8th grade students who have failed in national exam for 2-3 times (and hence repeating 8th grade) in separate sections apart from regular students.	Dispersing the identified students to 'regular' classrooms; Counselling sessions on overcoming exam anxieties; Engaging identified groups of students in peer learning and motivating them take active role in class and school level presentations; Promoting active learning strategies by motivating peer teachers
5	School based teacher training	Newly assigned teachers with no background of teacher education and low motivation and attitude towards the teaching profession.	Organizing three workshops by inviting guest facilitators on 'time management and planning', 'teaching methodology', and 'psychological training' in boosting the morale of, mainly incoming, teachers.

The focus of one of the PAR that was not submitted by the end of the project was on exam cheating cases in the secondary school which was experienced to be developing as a norm among many students. Accordingly, practitioners were engaged in highlighting the issue in school meetings and initiated orientation programs during exam periods in the school.

Perspectives on improving school work from PAR participants

This section analyzes practitioners' views captured in three themes for improving school work in these challenging contexts. The themes were generated based on close reading of participants' interview transcripts, longer term and frequent observations and engagements with practitioners in the schools and the actions initiated by practitioners in addressing identified problems.

Focus on learners' needs

The underlying common idea in the interview discussions was that teachers and SLs need to be highly sensitive to learners' realities, break out of routine 'teaching' in addressing diverse learning needs and renew commitments to learners through unbiased and positive attitudes towards learners. Furthermore, teacher perspectives showed the centrality of the learner in the TLP as the following extracts reveal.

> I am really impressed with English fluency of some of our students…It is not right to blame our students as weak and not motivated… the issue is about teachers' initiatives and willingness to know more about their students. (Naty)

> Before experiencing this action research, I simply entered, taught and left the classroom and did not consider needs of some students… because majority of the students were Tigrinya I usually used Tigrinya overlooking some of my students from Nara and Kunama medium schools. With our action research, I have developed awareness that I should not take my students as one group and need to pay particular attention to students of Nara and Kunama by introducing student grouping. (Nuru)

Despite this, the preoccupation of many teachers in the schools is on academic subjects and examinations as Hatim elaborated: "Teachers rush to complete portions in the syllabus… there is also pressure of national examinations and teachers are compelled to cover portions".

Hatim's remarks point to the fact that some teachers overlook or ignore learners' background issues as they tend to focus on content coverage irrespective of students' learning. Examination system also reinforce this as the school's sole means of accountability seems to boil down to how many students pass in the national exams obliging students and teachers to focus on content memorization overlooking learners' needs and deeper domains of learning (Schweisfurth, 2015, p. 262; Vavrus, 2009, p. 308).Hence, discussants stressed that "a teacher should not only teach the academic subjects prescribed in textbooks, a teacher has to know that learners need psychosocial guidance which is equally important"(Alay).

In addition, teachers are advised to allocate ample time attending to students' concerns and issues: "Many students need special attention as they tend to have low self-esteem and are easily vulnerable to negative influences, hence teacher's close follow up and guidance for students could mean everything" (Alay).

Involvement of parents in students' learning and the schools was generally viewed as very weak. Interestingly, a discussant shared a view that parents could be implicit in negatively influencing students' interest in schooling by encouraging them to look for ways of supporting their families instead of "wasting" their time in schooling (Paulos). A study in rural South-Western China discusses parental implicit consent for students' school dropouts in response to "economic and social dilemmas" of communities in challenging contexts (Wu, 2012 as cited in Harber, 2014, p. 31). Such realities call for focused school initiated collaborative guidance in mobilizing parents' involvement. Crucial roles of teachers and SLs could be getting closer to parents, understanding their challenges, supporting parents in becoming models to their children in learning and ultimately involving parents as resource in the TLP.

Collaborative commitments

Participants recognized that collaboration among teachers could result in constructive changes in the TLP and overall school practices. At the same time, participants acklewledge the *lack* of professional collaboration among teachers and SLs. However, "teachers, working collaboratively, will acquire, use, and continue to develop shared knowledge on behalf of students" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 303). Participants shared the PAR project has enabled them to understand diverse issues and needs of students and school's collaborative responsibilities and capabilities in addressing them. As one of them, Fitsum, stated:

> We have realized various socio-economic challenges of our students… the ethnic diversities of our students are paralleled with their socio-economic difficulties… some of the challenges that lead to undesired results could have been easily resolved by the school.

Participants shared two essential perspectives in building collaborative practices in the schools. The first is school level awareness and practice of *knowing* and *guiding* students. The second is building both internal and external *relationships*. These are relayed by the following extracts:

> If all the teachers in our school have taken initiatives in approaching and guiding the students, we could have significantly impacted upon the lives of many students. (Kibrom)

> Given the challenging living conditions and low motivation of teachers we needed to individually and informally approach our teachers in empathizing with their challenges and creating relationships... approaching teachers in this way is quite different compared to judging by their outward behavior. (Fitsum)

> Colleges of Education, as per my observation, does not have any relationship with the regions… the colleges need to have branches in all the regions as they could provide effective guidance for teachers coming from other fields. (Paulos)

Building *relationships* internally and externally, i.e., among and with learners, parents and communities, among teachers and school leadership, and externally with stakeholders as colleges of education, constitutes effective TLP. Emerging notions recognize multiple influences that impact learning, i.e., from individual factors to national and global forces, which Tikly (2015) termed as laminated learning system. Such notions probe us to rethink the extent and quality of our relationships with those multiple levels.

Teacher professionalism

Learner centered pedagogy as a transformative approach in TLP has been part of the education policy since 2003 in Eritrea. However, the MoE (2011) survey showed that the approach has faced serious implementation challenges. Equally engaging and challenging is the home language or mother tongue education policy in elementary school level. One of our study schools, being the largest middle schools in the sub-region, is challenged with students coming from at least three different mother tongue elementary schools in managing a transition from MT medium to English medium of instruction in all subjects. Underlining this challenge, a discussant shared a view:

> The policy could prescribe certain practices [as student centered teaching or English medium of instruction] but on the ground it is the teacher who knows practical issues and determines modalities for implementation… if teachers are committed to the profession they will naturally adapt fitting methods that suit the situation and realities of learners…The Ministry of Education could only prescribe rigid rules when they do not even have the supervisory capacity to monitor it. (Alexandro)

This perspective sheds light on how teachers working in such contexts are challenged with the actual practice of facilitating learning and the central role of teachers in translating prescriptive policy to practices that are engaging and meaningful to learners. Another discussant, Paulos, related the implementation of LCP with artistic abilities of a teacher and shared how engagements in the so-called co/extra-curricular activities with

students created constructive relationships and grounds for communicative approaches of teaching.

Discussion and conclusion

The longer term impact and indeed sustainability of the actions initiated for school improvement could be questioned as the PAR project was initiated and facilitated by the authors with the support of the regional education office. Though mainstreaming action research as part of school practice remains a challenge worldwide (James and Augustin, 2018), the possibilities for mutual learning among college and school communities (Worku, 2017) are immense. Practitioners' views show that action, participatory and improvement oriented research allows the identification and *maturing* of school challenges, developing grounded knowledge for improvement and working to ensure equitable learning (Sagor, 1992). Schools have significant agency to improve learning contexts. Participants' recognition of the need for collaborative commitments from teachers, SLs and school communities is an indication of the promise such collaboration holds in actualizing the schools' internal potential for change.

Practitioners' views, sensitized by their PAR experiences, have critical implications for improving their school works in these challenging contexts. Closer knowledge of learners generated by teachers and SLs was identified as a critical issue. Knowledge of learners in relation to facilitating effective TLP could be understood in two interrelated aspects. First, the beliefs teachers have about their learners. Given the complex and challenging nature of TLP in the study schools a discussant shared that teachers need to have a drive to understand the 'mindsets' of students in introducing fitting teaching methods. Hence, teachers need to be highly conscious and reflective on their assumptions or beliefs about their students which directly affects their teaching practices (Akyeampong 2017, p. 325). Second, creating and sustaining relationships among learners, teachers, parents/guardians and communities in mobilizing resources in the aim of engaging learners in the TLP by collaboratively addressing contextual and structural obstacles to learning is needed.

Discussants raised a grounded issue as to what extent the school system need to focus on routine coverage of academic content and examination in the backdrop of the difficult realities of learners and the learning environment. Berhane (2014), focusing on the Eritrean context, is even more wary on the extent of the preparedness of the school system to center needs of the learners by adapting contextually relevant teaching and leadership practices. Yet, committing teachers and SLs to continuously act and reflect (Shirley, 1994, p.35) could be a meaningful and sustainable bottom-up change in the interest of learners and learning. The main issue seems to be how teachers and SLs go about navigating through their practice in centering needs of learners and at the same time making sense of it. If teachers are given space to *intentionally* act and reflect on their practice, it is likely that they come up with innovative and contextually relevant approaches that tend to be meaningful to learners. Views of participants and the PAR

process reported here have partly shown what some teachers and SLs are ready to do in the interest of learners and learning despite challenging circumstances.

The school improvement issues matured during the processes of PAR as discussed in this paper provided the schools with some potential professional grounds for embarking on more informed and focused actions for further improvements. However, after the conclusion of the PAR project, any follow-up study or mutual learning exercises were not done, formally, due to lack of funding. We have learned, through communications with the regional education office, that teachers in the secondary school (other than those who participated in the project) have initiated a project of 'mobile labs' in natural science subjects as part of the regional effort in improving the quality of education through experiential learning (Mohammed Ali Ibrahim, head of regional education office, personal communication, 22/ 07/ 2017). On the other hand, inspired by the PAR experiences, the authors initiated and led the first 'school outreach workshop' at the College of Education in November 2017, where education officials from the six regions of the country came to discuss their concerns with the staff of the College of Education. Although the restructuring of higher education, including the College of Education, introduced in 2018, has created uncertainty about its continuity, the 'school outreach workshop', together with the ongoing initiatives in one of the study schools, could be considered, at least partly, as spinoffs of the PAR project and its experiences.

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