

Examining some aspects of alternative basic education programmes in Ethiopia¹

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This study examines some aspects of the quality of Alternative Basic Education (ABE) provision in Ethiopia. Educational indicators of quality were formulated under two general topic areas of ABE programme process and content, and pupil learning outcomes. A qualitative-interpretative research approach and survey design was used to collect data from primary and secondary sources and to provide separate case descriptions of the five regions and two city administrations studied. The study's main findings give clear indication of a broad spread of ABE conceptions and practices in ABE Centres in Ethiopia. The approaches and experiences of the five participating regions reveal factors that have an impact on quality ABE delivery, as well as measures that can improve quality if supported with an appropriate institutional environment.

Keywords: alternative basic education, access, capacity, quality basic education, primary education

Introduction

There is recognition among national governments in the developing countries of Africa that fundamental changes are needed in educational policies in order to meet key Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This recognition was first enshrined in the Framework for Action of the 1990 Jomtein World Conference (UNESCO, 1990) on Education for All (EFA), which placed emphasis on local capacity building and strengthening of partnerships in the planning and implementation of education. Ten years later, following the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), gaining access to quality education has inevitably become the principal issue in education for almost all countries, developed and developing (UNESCO, 2007a, 2007b & 2007c).

This paper examines some aspects of the quality of alternative basic education (ABE) provision in Ethiopia. Alternative Basic Education (ABE) is a non-formal alternate delivery mode of education in the country, and therefore, an integral part of the education system. The objective of the programme as stated *inter alia* is “to provide good quality basic education ... through an alternative mode of delivery suited to the socio-economic and cultural realities of the regions” (MoE, 2006:4). Alternative approaches apply to both formal and non-formal learning situations and in time ABE could represent an avenue to harmonise the two in an integrated system of education. To this end, ABE plays a vital role in the government's efforts to achieve Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015.

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In Ethiopia, the ABE programme has been run by the Regional Education Bureaus (REBs) in collaborative partnership with various international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the community. The fact that the programme is being implemented by different organisations and by the regions at *woreda* (district) level, each with its own conception and implementation strategies, does suggest different approaches to quality assurance, in the absence of a national mechanism for doing so. The philosophy underpinning ABE provision appears to be highly region-specific.

In recent times there have been growing concerns about the quality of ABE programme on offer in the various regions of the country (Ethio-Italian Development Cooperation, 2006). It is against this backdrop that a recommendation was made at the 2007 Annual Review Meeting of key stakeholders in the education sector in Ethiopia for a study to be undertaken to examine the quality of ABE in the country.

Context

Ethiopia is a vast and ancient country, situated in the Horn of Africa, and is especially rich in the diversity of its people and cultures. The majority (85%) of the population estimated at over 77 million is rural and only 15% are urban dwellers. The country is divided into nine regional states and two city administration councils, constituted largely on the basis of language and are thus ethnically organised. Ethiopia operates a decentralised education system that gives considerable measure of autonomy to the regions.

Primary education in Ethiopia

Primary education, which is defined as basic education in Grades 1-8, operates in two cycles, of first cycle (Grades 1-4) and second cycle (Grades 5-8). The primary education sector had a systematically increasing enrolment for five years averaging 12.5% since 2002/03 to 2006/07 (MoE, 2007). The gains made in expanding access to basic primary education, however, have not been without cost. There is greater dependence now on untrained teachers, especially at the second cycle, and less favourable teacher to pupil ratios and pupil to section ratios (MoE, 2006c & 2007).

Although achieving Universal Primary Education by 2015 is a major priority for the government, the country's primary education sector is still characterised by low enrolment levels, gender and regional disparities in enrolment rates, unsatisfactory achievement levels of students, low internal efficiency and high drop out rates in primary schools (MoE, 2006a; Negash, 2006; MoE, 2006b; Piper & Shibeshi, 2007). In 2004, the Alternative Basic Education (ABE) programme was introduced as an educational strategy designed to improve access and promote quality education for over-aged out-of-school children (7-14 years).

ABE activities

Most ABE activities are accomplished in ABE centres (ABECs) that enrol the same age group as formal primary education. The curriculum is a condensed version of the first cycle of the primary school curriculum consisting of mother tongue, English, mathematics and environmental science (Yiman, 2005). With the recent growth of ABE programmes throughout the country (MoE, 2006c & 2008), a number of quality-related issues and questions for policy implementers have arisen. First, to what extent can the quality of the programme be seen to compensate for, or complement the low level of enrolment rate and performance in the primary school sector? Secondly, does this equivalency programme that offers basic primary education and skills outside the formal sector point to ways that would dramatically open up to a wider population many of the underutilised administrative sectors and structures of the Ministries of Education, Health and Labour? These are some of the issues that we seek to address in this study.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to seek information on the reality at ABE centres and community level in terms of quality delivery. The study addressed in a holistic way the following questions: Does this educational strategy lead to the achievement of its goals, i.e. *increased enrolment* and *school level*

improvement and benefits to learners? What staffing capacities, funding, planning exist at the different administrative levels for quality ABE delivery?

Conceptual framework

The conceptions of quality of education are very diverse among different stakeholders (Ndoye 2005; Schubert, 2005). Indeed there have been considerable debate and discussions about educational quality and how it should be measured for improving the quality of basic education in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (Sedel, 2005; Schubert, 2005; Ndoye, 2005; Stephens, 2003). The various definitions, however, tend to highlight the different elements of the basic input-process-output model that commonly underpin educational research and policy analysis (UNESCO, 2002; Sedel, 2005; Schubert, 2005). From that perspective, educational quality may be construed in terms of numerous proxy indicators, among them measures of student learning outcomes as specified by a national curriculum and mediated by quality inputs and processes. In practice, however, it has been argued that because inputs into the teaching and learning process seem to be generally easier to measure than outputs, quality is often gauged by the inputs. Although information so gained is useful, one has to be cautious about drawing conclusions about quality based on that information alone.

Because the improvement of the quality of education must be seen as the result of the strengthening of all components of the curriculum development and implementation process (cf. Schubert, 2005; UNESCO, 2002; Dimmock, 2000), a holistic and integrated approach (cf. Dimmock, 2000; Sebel, 2005; Stephens, 2003) to examining aspects of the quality of ABE provision in Ethiopia was used in this study. This approach focuses on the relationships among the key components of the ABE programme, namely, (i) *the programme process and content* and (ii) *learner outcomes* (Iowa State Department of Education, 1993, UNESCO, 2000; Sedel, 2005) and the identified functions (or performance indicators of programme quality) at particular levels of the two components as follows:

Programme process and content refer to components of the programme that define:

1. At *ABE System Level*, its planning process, its goals and target outcomes, its funding, monitoring and supervision that provide direction, and captures the quantitative and qualitative performance measures of ABE provision.
2. At *ABE Centre level*, the teaching staff profile, staffing functions and professional development; delivery of relevant curriculum and instructional materials for the acquisition of basic skills; ABE centre/school decision-making group and community support.
3. At *Classroom level*, content and quality of curriculum experienced by beneficiaries; a learning environment of certain expectations that produce effective teaching and effective learning.
4. At *Community level*, parents and community in support roles with regard to management of centres and decision-making at school/centre level.

Learner outcomes in the context of the study refer to the impact of the programme on learners, such as successful progression to Grade 5, second cycle of the formal primary education, learning gains and attainment of basic education competency goals.

It was, however, not possible in this study, to evaluate the learning outcomes of the ABE beneficiaries, partly because in the regions sampled the three to four year programme had not been fully completed, and partly because time constraints did not allow for the development, validation and administration of standardised tests.

Methodology

The study was based on planning visits together with a general and region-specific literature review, followed by a month-long field survey conducted in the five selected regions and two city administration councils: Addis Ababa City Administration (Capital city), Dire-Dawa transitional City Administration, Afar Regional State, Amhara Regional State, Oromia Regional State, Somali Regional State, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR).

A qualitative-interpretative research approach and survey design was used to collect data and to provide separate case descriptions of the five regions and two city administrations studied.

Research instruments were developed for the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from both primary and secondary sources at the federal, regional, *woreda*, ABE centre and community levels. The main sources of data were key stakeholders and key informants in the education sector at various levels of government and at community level. They were visited, observed or interviewed individually and/or as focus groups. Semi-structured interview guides ensured adequate consistency in coverage, but also allowed for the necessary flexibility required in in-depth interviews with individuals and groups.

Main findings

In the following section, an attempt is made to draw together the main findings from the sampled case regions, of some quality-related issues on ABE programme delivery in Ethiopia.

Overview of issues

On ABE definition, access and capacity issues

One clear finding which emerges is the lack of a coherent and clear educational philosophical basis for alternative basic education in the country. The question of what is best or what works best to help under-served, out-of-school children achieve basic education competencies has not been central in ABE programme provision. Rather, other considerations with political overtones such as increasing pupil enrolment at all costs seem to be uppermost in the minds of key stakeholders.

The education sector, for instance, is yet to implement specific sectoral goals and objectives for ABE programme quality assurance as spelt out in the ABE implementation strategy document (MoE, 2006a). The experience of the regions particularly the so-called “emerging regions” of Afar and Somali suggests that without this focus on the development of norms and standards for quality management and supervision, ABE centre-level improvements will be long in coming, and the centres will remain much worse off.

In the different *woredas* (district level education authority) of the emerging regions of Afar, Somali and in certain areas of Oromia, there is basically no distinction made regarding the conceptions of Alternative Basic Education, Non-Formal education (NFE), Extension Programme and Adult functional literacy programme. As long as such definition problems exist, the Education Management Information System (EMIS) database for those regions is unlikely to capture adequate, disaggregated and reliable ABE data for targeted interventions and long term realistic planning. The current situation calls for a common or shared understanding of the meaning of ABE among the regions.

Despite a considerable increase in primary enrolment in the past couple of years, the number of children and adults out of school continues to be high because of rural and urban poverty. The latest enrolment figures of 582,766 in 7498 ABE centres (refer to Tables 1 and 2) nationwide show that a sizeable portion of primary school age children are still experiencing difficulty with enrolling for formal and non-formal primary level basic education.

Table 1: ABE student enrolment by gender per region (MOE, 2006/2007)

All Ethiopia	
Location	ALL
Sector	ABE Programs
Ownership	ALL
Year	2006/07
Program	Alternative B E

REGION	1		2		3		Undefined		Total		TOTAL
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Amhara	74313	63050	19559	18206	25754	25133			1196262	106389	226015
Addis Ababa	4011	10315	1019	2607	620	1269	230	571	5880	14762	20642
Afar	3981	1839	1219	649	415	263	56	10	5671	2761	8432
Benishangul-Gumuz	6683	4905	3819	2984	959	684			11461	8573	20034
Gambella	3726	1408	240	150	174	95			4140	1653	5793
Oromiya	80051	65589	13646	10681	3798	2791	358	225	97853	79286	177139
SNNP	55124	48988	6028	4967	1448	1155			62600	55110	117710
Tigray	2555	1627	320	225	364	279	957	674	4196	2805	7001
Total	230444	197721	45850	40469	33532	31669	1601	1480	311427	271339	582766

Table 2: ABE centres by student enrolment and number of facilitators per region

All Ethiopia						
Location	ALL					
Sector	ABE Programs					
Ownership	ALL					
Year	2006/07					
REGION	ABE Centres NB Cent	Male Enrol	Fem Enrol	M Teacher	F Teacher	Pupil/Teacher Ratio
Amhara	2263	120036	106700	3693	2523	1 : 37
Addis Ababa	243	15066	33405	494	903	1 : 38
Afar	113	5671	2761	214	9	1 : 39
Benishangul-Gumuz	212	11862	8796	448	61	1 : 41
Gambella	18	4505	1947	189	155	1 : 19
Oromiya	3028	143822	101604	11358	3280	1 : 17
SNNP	1478	65199	58315	1767	344	1 : 46
Tigray	143	5965	3672	174	108	1 : 37
Total	7498	372126	317200	18337	8383	1 : 26

As shown in Table 2, ABE centres have in recent years flourished especially in Amhara, Oromiya and SNNP Regions. Communities have witnessed rapid increases in enrolment and acceptability of ABE programme-particularly in nomadic areas where no other form of schooling is available. Tables 1 and 2 also show that ABE programmes are succeeding in bridging the gender gap and increasing the enrolment of girls, which could be viewed as an aspect of quality provision.

Community mobilisation and location of ABE centres close to the surrounding homesteads have contributed to increased girls' enrolment. Also, a flexible timetable, the relatively short duration of classes of about 30-35 minutes and the introduction of shift system at each ABE centre have helped to

accommodate and encourage more girls to enter the programme nationwide. The downside is that the time on task may be too short to ensure quality teaching and learning.

Despite the high degree of timetable flexibility, there are challenges regarding student retention and dropout rates at the ABE centres. In the emerging regions of Afar, Somali and Oromia continuous mobility of the pastoralist communities in search of drinking water and grazing land, lack of sanitary facilities at the ABE centres and the demand for child labour make the regular attendance of children difficult. In addition, the location of ABE centres in remote rural areas makes it virtually impossible to attract and retain trained primary teachers or ABE facilitators.

Communities in many of the pastoral and remote areas visited now insist on a rapid conversion of their ABE centres into formal primary schools for better funding. The significance of this community pressure is that there is often no clear policy of allocating teachers and indeed other resources according to real needs of ABE centres.

Administrative efficiency is a stated goal in the National Alternative Basic Education Strategy document (MoE, 2006a) for ABE quality delivery. Decentralization has introduced a system of intermediary bodies namely, the *woredas* (district level) and *kebeles* (zonal), but this middle layer is weak in the sense that it lacks discretionary powers and the resources to deliver quality ABE.

A clear finding to emerge from the regions is the extent to which the regional education bureaus (REBs) have failed the ABE centres at *woreda* (district) level under their authority. In discussions with education officials and key informants especially at *woreda* level — the level closest to the ABE centres — it was made clear that very limited attention has been paid to strengthening capacities at that level for resolving ABE centre-level problems.

In the “emerging” regions in particular the level of staffing at the education, finance, supervisory and monitoring units of the Regional Education Bureaus (REB), is in most cases woefully inadequate. Thus, in the face of limited human capacity and resource constraints, the current multi-layered administrative arrangement is putting a lot of pressure on quality provision (effective and efficient monitoring and supervision) of ABE at the ABE centres.

Partnerships for ABE delivery

Despite the many ABE programmes supported and financed by different agencies, ABE delivery among the different service providers is largely uncoordinated, with each organisation operating on its own on the basis of its educational philosophical conviction and preference. Several regional education authorities interviewed are faced with equity issues because of the uneven distribution of resources and funds at the ABE centres. This has led to highly differentiated ABE centre-level schooling within and across regions at *woreda* level.

Finance and management issues at ABECs

The financing of education is an important component of quality. The ABE-programme in Ethiopia is severely under-funded. The programme has received scant attention in the planning and budgeting process at regional level. Virtually all the *woredas* sampled reported that they do not have special budgets set aside for ABE despite the fact that officials are regularly requested to draw up a budget for ABE implementation. Everywhere, ABE programme is generally perceived as a cheap, stop gap alternative to formal primary level basic education and perhaps for this reason hardly receives any funds from the *woreda* budget. In most cases, this financial gap is filled by the NGOs, but not in the pastoralist region of for example, Afar and Somali regions where the involvement of NGOs and the coordination between them and the government is still rather minimal. In those regions, ABE classes are few and are held either in makeshift huts of poor quality structures or under shades of trees in non-conducive learning environment. The teachers are usually volunteers with poor educational background, and who have recently completed a crash training programme.

ABE delivery at classroom level

Overall, ABE Centre infrastructure in the regions visited is in a very poor state of disrepair, and in many cases in deplorable conditions. The ABE centres located in rural areas exhibited a palpable climate of neglect. They lacked water supply and separate toilet facilities for boys and girls. The lack of personnel and inaccessibility of the ABE centres is the root causes for the infrequent supervisory visits.

The non-availability of sanitary facilities was definitely more disadvantageous to girls than boys, and contributed to girls' increasingly low retention rate in the centres as they progress through the grade levels.

In many of the ABE classrooms visited, not all the essentials for teaching are in place. These include chalkboards that are in a state of disuse, lack of chalks and dusters, inadequate numbers of chairs and desks and the absence of wall charts and decorations in most of the classrooms. There were shortages of textbooks. Overall the textbook-pupil ratio was estimated at about 1:4. The inadequate supply of textbooks and teachers' guides was particularly evident in the more cognitively demanding subjects of English language, environmental science and mathematics than in mother tongue language textbooks. In some classrooms in the rural areas of Afar, Somali SNNPR, there were no cement floors, just bare ground on which the students sit crowded in groups on small benches, most times covered in dust in rooms that are poorly lit and not well ventilated. Retention and learning are indeed hampered when pupils attend schools in dilapidated or overcrowded classrooms that are inadequately supplied (Watkins, 2000). Children's knowing and learning are not processes that can be divorced from the nature of the contexts within which learning takes place (Bauman, 1973; Lewin, 1946; Vygotsky, 1934/86; Greeno, 1998; Barab & Plucker, 2002; Sadler, 2009). The contribution to quality education made by an attractive physical learning environment cannot be overestimated.

ABE curriculum: relevance and quality

There is some ambivalence with different stakeholders about the ABE curriculum with regard to its relevance to beneficiaries for the world of work and progression in the educational ladder. For progression to the second cycle of formal primary schooling, *woreda* level government officials see ABE as adequate. But for other key stakeholders such as parents, community members, it is seen as not sufficiently localised to be helpful in the world of work. Others involved in ABE programme provision such as the NGO supervisors were less inclined to express their opinion about the relevance of the curriculum. They preferred to talk about issues of implementation, namely that the content and appropriateness of the curriculum are in synch with the national primary education curriculum, so that beneficiaries can easily transit from the non-formal to the formal sector. Beyond that, it was difficult to envision how the curriculum contributes to skills development necessary for daily life and in particular in the world of work in the various communities.

The completion rate to Grade 5 is usually associated with educational achievement in sub-Saharan Africa and even more strongly with learning outcomes in lower secondary school (UNESCO, 2003; EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2003/4). No recent ABE-related data on student survival rate up to primary Grade 5 was available.

ABE centres and community involvement

We observed strong involvement of the community in the implementation of ABE programmes. Parents and community are contributing substantially to the cost of basic education, and in almost all the communities there is a sense of ownership of the ABE centres. Parents play vital roles in their children's education by providing financial and non-financial support. These include paying of fees or levies, providing school uniform to their wards, maintaining discipline at the centres, ensuring the retention of learners in ABE centres, and undertaking voluntary work in ABECs/School.

Involvement of parents in community-based associations including parents' teachers' associations (PTAs) at *woreda* level, offered them a limited form of participation in the running of the ABECs. The involvement is more of community support for ABE centres, through physical maintenance, than of

community participation in decision-making. Despite the level of support given by parents to ABECs, there does not appear to be a willingness yet to involve parents in more decision-making that have an impact on quality provision.

ABE facilitator/teacher issues

The two indicators most frequently used to measure the overall quality of the teaching personnel in primary schools are (i) the percentage of primary school teachers who have the required academic qualifications and (ii) the percentage trained to teach according to established standards (Schubert, 2005). The quantity, quality and distribution of ABE facilitators are critical factors for reaching ABE goals as regards completion of basic primary education for all children (MoE, 2006a; UNESCO, 2004). The total number of ABE facilitators available for the academic year 2006/2007 was 26,720 (18,737 male; 8383 female) in all the regions with the exception of Somali, where no data was available.

The minimum educational requirement to teach in the ABE centres is completion of Grade 8 in some regions, while Grade 10 in others. In general, initial crash training is offered to recruited facilitators by the *woreda* office, which lasts for 5-10, or 15-21 days depending on the qualification or grade level attained. The ABE teacher training programme covers the areas of teaching methodologies, lesson planning, and continuous assessment based on teacher-training colleges' syllabuses. However, the regional education bureaus raised strong concern about the quality of the initial training of facilitators and the latter's ability to effectively handle all the subjects offered for the ABE programme. In regions like Afar, Somali, where the community is unable to meet the minimum requirement because of low literacy level, facilitators are selected from among people who have completed Grade 4 or above. In other words the recruited facilitators are expected to teach to the level of their qualification. Because of differential and low salary structures and unattractive working conditions, there is high staff turn over at the ABE centres especially among the relatively better trained and/or qualified facilitators.

Learning outcomes

Student learning outcomes are one proxy indicator of education quality. At present no comprehensive national assessment framework for ABE learning gains exists. The five sampled regions are at various stages of completing the first cycle of the 3-4 year ABE programme. For this reason, quantitative performance measures of ABE learning outcomes are unavailable.

Transition to formal system

There was no reliable ABE data available to provide information about, first, the survival rate of transition from ABECs to formal schools, and secondly, the comparability in academic performance between ABE programme beneficiaries and Grade 5 primary school pupils. Only two forms of transition between ABECs and formal schools were reported: (i) the transfer of pupils from ABE centres to nearby primary schools, and (ii) the upgrading of ABECs to formal primary schools.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our conclusion is that the programme would probably be unsustainable with regard to quality in the medium and long-term delivery if there were no improvement in resource provision. Unlike formal primary education, ABE is not perceived as a regular concern of government. For this reason, ABE may not necessarily command attention on a sustainable basis, but on an *ad hoc* basis for a particular campaign, namely that of achieving UPE by 2015. The tendency has always been for such stopgap educational strategies to use mechanisms that have routinely been associated with the non-formal education sector, and are usually devoid of the financial resources necessary to ensure quality delivery. These include low salaries for the teachers, crash training programmes for recruited facilitators, classes scheduled after formal school hours and school buildings commandeered for evening use (World Bank, 1998). Such relatively low-cost budgets are very much evident at these early stages of the ABE programme.

The recommendations that are presented below are related to challenges of policy and implementation, which are, at least partially, within the scope of the Ministry of Education and Regional Education Bureaus to be addressed.

The first recommendation and the core issue for any planned ABE intervention for quality improvement is finding what works best for ABE Centres and student learning. A comprehensive stakeholder analysis should be undertaken, identifying all parties who have a stake in education and determining as to what they stand to gain or lose from scaling up and improving the quality of ABE for out-of-school children.

Given the different resources at the disposal of the regions, planning must be realistic and must take into account the need for capacity, and the building of capacity at each level. Thus different types of contextualised guidelines for the management, supervision and monitoring of the ABE programmes may need to be developed and introduced. Some of these guidelines could be on monitoring and supervision of ABECs, assessment of ABE learning outcomes, recruitment and training of facilitators, financial management of ABE programmes, budgeting skills for *woreda* officials, etc. The ultimate objective of this intervention is to strengthen the capacity of each level to support the ABE centre. This should always be borne in mind.

Strengthening ABE related database and information systems at various levels is crucial as a preliminary step to developing a plan for improving quality ABE. The regional education bureaus should concentrate on producing user friendly disaggregated ABE data and to unequivocally create a demand for this data.

A basic minimum level of physical and material inputs is recommended to be in place for every ABE Centre.

There are equity issues such as factors that influence the enrolment and retention of female learners and facilitators, particularly in the pastoral regions, which will require monitoring, co-ordination and special action. A “one-size-fits-all” approach will fail to adequately address the equity issue, which is related to quality. Instead, different approaches by the federal government are required to ensure equity.

The parent body and the community are an integral part of the ABE Centre’s success. The role that parents play in ensuring that the centre remains a viable institution should not be underestimated. Building the capacity of people at grassroots level to participate in decision-making is equally as important as it is for the government officials of the different tiers (cf. Gaynor, 1995).

Even though Ethiopia has a highly decentralised education system, it seems to run a centralised educational administration model at regional level, and thus some uncertainty exists about the respective roles of different parties in the administrative structure in ABE quality provision. What is now required is a much broader debate, and political will to discuss and address ABE quality delivery with all relevant stakeholders.

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