Analysis of a Public School's Practices and Values through the Lens of Equitable Quality Education for All: A Case for Juxtaposing Schools and SDGs

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Abstract

This study examined the hidden curriculum of a primary school embedded in assessment practices and students' performance. Critical education theorists' arguments on education, social and cultural reproduction, and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital are used to inform the study. Using participative observer case study methodology, the study employed interview, observation, and document analysis to collect data. The participants (four students, two teachers and the principal) of the study were selected using purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected from these participants. The results of the study revealed that school assessment techniques and students' achievement implicitly and explicitly communicate and institutionalize social stratification in the school which in turn considerably influences students' access to school resources, school leadership positions, and school communities' expectations on students. Students, teachers, and the school leadership, wittingly or unwittingly, are active actors in the implicit and explicit socialization process which reinforces values and practices that contradict equitable quality education for all. The findings suggest that policy and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for equitable quality education should heed to actual school and classroom practices, and not merely be assessed based on data that are disaggregated along gender, rural and urban, or other social groupings. Unless global declarations are clearly operationalized and efforts are made to strengthen a continuum between global and national goals and school and classroom practices, utter dependence on statistical data on gender, location, and other indicators equity does not address ingrained challenges and opportunities for equitable quality education.

Introduction

Researchers in the field of curriculum studies suggest that students learn diverse values, practices, and interrelationships more from the deliberations, activities, interactions, academic works, rewards and punishment, hierarchy of power and logistics of educational contexts than the formal curriculum itself (Dickerson, 2007). This process of implicit and explicit learning and socialization has been conceptualized as 'the hidden curriculum'. According to Giroux (1979), the hidden curriculum is defined as the unstated beliefs, values, and norms that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure and meaning embedded in the process and structure of

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the school and classroom life. The hidden curriculum of schooling is manifested through the various approaches to teaching, the selection and organization of curricular contents, the pedagogical and evaluation techniques, and the social interactions both in and out of the classroom (Giroux, 1983). The kind of reward and punishment, the organizational structure of the curriculum, the physical characteristics of the school, classroom and school power relations, and the physical school and classroom environment are also important manifestations of the hidden curriculum (Giroux, 1983). These characteristics constitute some of the dominant components of the school's hidden or implicit curriculum. Although these features are seldom publicly announced, they are intuitively recognized by parents, students, and teachers - because they are salient and pervasive features of schooling, what they teach may be among the most important lessons a child learns (Eisner, 1979).

Implicit messages and associated values and practices communicated to students in schooling have been a subject of thorough analysis and questioning, albeit in limited studies. According to critical theorists (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1994, 1995), teachers and schools do not always support student emancipation and development. There is a tremendous amount of power held by teachers and schools because of their ability to categorize children into various categories which coincidentally also reflect the school's and teachers' middle-class values (Apple, 2004).

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of symbolic violence also may help explain how institutions promote social inequality. Symbolic violence, also known as soft violence, functions largely within various forms of discrimination, which are often accepted as legitimate without question by the victim(s). It imposes meanings as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force. Symbolic violence can be more dangerous than physical violence because it is covertly installed within social structures and works to maintain the hierarchy of the classes. The overt nature of symbolic violence contributes to the reproduction and maintenance of social hierarchies because those hierarchies are unquestioningly regarded by the dominant and dominated classes as natural and legitimate.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) maintain that the possession of capital, primarily passed down from parent to child in the home, enables more affluent students to profit from the education system that recognizes, legitimizes, and rewards the socio economic, cultural and linguistic capital of the dominant class. Unfortunately, for members of non-dominant groups, possession of limited or the "wrong kind" of cultural capital may restrict access to opportunities and positions taken for granted by dominant groups, perpetuating inequalities.

Thus, educators must consider that socio economic, cultural, and linguistic capital may enable certain students to succeed while simultaneously causing others to fail. As influential agents in institutions that advantage some and disadvantage others, teachers must become aware of their role in perpetuating inequalities for students with limited socio economic, cultural and linguistic capital, both in and out of school. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital (cultural resources) is an asset of equal value to that of economic capital (material goods and resources) and social capital (social connections, networks and practices) in that it can be converted and utilized to acquire additional kinds of assets (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986,

2011). In education, the implicit curriculum dictates and inculcates the norms of conduct, cultural values, and beliefs that exist within the dominant school groups (Arive, 2008).

Most countries in the world stipulate in their education policy statements that their education system responds to the needs of diverse learners. Following the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030) and specifically its fourth goal[2], countries have been working to improve the quality of primary education. The monitoring indicators for SDG 4 relate to how education systems (1) respond to gender equality; (2) improve the education of rural and marginalized students; (3) address the requirements of students with special educational needs; and (4) improve student performance in national learning assessments (United Nations, 2015).

To fully understand how education systems, schools in particular, promote the above indicators and ideas and how teachers, school leaders, and students absorb and process them, both the formal and hidden curricula need to be explored. Unless school values and practices are examined and uncovered in different educational contexts, they are most often accepted by students and teachers as parts of the normal school life and code of conduct. Some scholars also see the hidden curriculum as perpetrating the passive role of the students and hence causes them to be passive (Apple, 2004; Dickerson, 2007; Giroux, 1983). Without meticulous efforts to examine, reflect, and act to transform the socioeconomic forces that shape their destiny, marginalized students repeat the vicious cycle of violence and poverty that exists in their surroundings, thus committing the self-fulfilling prophesy of academic failure (Dickerson, 2007).

It is argued that global and national macro-level indicators on equitable quality education can be met when local actors and institutions cultivate schooling values and practices that promote equitable quality education. Research in educational change and reform indicates schools and classrooms are actual sites to assess the institutionalization of new ideas and practices (Jessica, 2012; Fullan, 2007). Macro global and national level targets and goals should effectively and coherently devolve into corresponding local interventions and practices if they are to impact the real lives and practices of teachers, district education, school leaders, students, and parents. The lack of proper devolution and tracking of teaching/learning, assessment practices, and school culture that enhance equitable quality education, will result in sustainable development goals which are not meaningfully realized or implemented.

This study explores how a school's assessment practice and students' performance affect access to the school's resources, influence students and teachers' expectations. It also examines the roles different school actors played in the construction of school values and practices that favor high-achieving students while putting the remaining students at a disadvantage.

Problem Statement

One day, one of the researchers' little sister, who was a primary school student in a private school, came to home with a very discouraging interpretation of a teacher's reaction to a question-and-answer session. The teacher asked a question and invited the students to respond.

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[2] *"Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".*

The little girl raised her hand before the others. However, she was not given the opportunity to answer the question because the teacher gave the chance to another student. The student answered the question correctly and he was praised by the teacher and got a token reward.

The girl was truly angry for she had not received a prize even though she knew the answer. She came home and refused to play, to eat dinner, and to do her homework. Her family asked her to explain what had happened, but she refused to speak a word. Finally, she started to cry and began to yell loudly, repeatedly saying "It was *Ding Ding*". This expression was unheard of, and the family asked her to explain. She explained that "*Ding Ding*" is a kind of chewing gum little girls and boys used to chew in the school. It has a funny sticker under its cover that the students used to put on their hand or face.

What the family came to understand is that the teacher provided the chewing gum to the student who answered the question, that she had only one piece to give out, and that she had never given this reward to any other child. The little girl insisted that she had been frequently answering the teacher's questions, but the teacher never rewarded her with the chewing gum. She decided that she would never reply to her teacher's questions again, and 'that boy was the teacher's only genius'.

This event illustrates that critical anecdotal incidents have unintended, unplanned, and unconscious outcomes (Apple, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux 1978). Students learn a great deal from the unspoken, day-to-day activities and routine school practices that are often taken for granted. Without anyone saying anything explicitly, boys and girls learn lessons about their place in society, about how knowledge is transmitted, and about what things are worth striving for (Apple, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux 1978). This absorption of messages, beliefs and values is conducted implicitly through the hidden curriculum.

The above anecdote and the current emphasis on differentiating/categorizing students into different achievement levels in Ethiopian public schools and practices are the driving factors for conducting research on the implicit beliefs and values imbedded in the assessment mechanisms of one primary school in Addis Ababa. Differentiation/categorizing of students in the classroom needs to be researched as it is one of the ways in which implicit beliefs and values are embedded in the assessment of students' abilities. While the purpose of differentiation/categorization is to design instructional practices that meet the diverse needs of learners, it may have unintended impacts when categorizations are used to favor a certain group and exclude others from accessing limited resources. These contexts hinder the achievement of equitable quality education.

Ethiopia has more than twenty million students in primary schools (20,046,375; 10,654,351 female) (Ministry of Education, 2019). The gap between male and female net enrollment rate has decreased over the past eight years, having close to 8.3 percentage points in 2019. Nationally, pupil-section ratio is at 53 for grades 1-8 while the standard set for pupil-teacher Ratio is 50 at primary and 40 at secondary level (Ministry of Education, 2019). The education system is characterized by high dropout and repetition rates. Dropout rates at grades 1 and 8 were 22% and 16%, respectively, in the 2019 academic calendar (Ministry of Education, 2019). Repetition is highest at Grade 8 (7%), where students are required to pass the grade 8

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regional examinations to successfully complete primary education. Students' performance in National Learning Assessment (NLA) also shows the poor quality of learning in schools. The National Learning Assessment result carried out in 2019 shows more than 70% of the sampled students did not score the minimum competence threshold (50%) in almost all subjects at grades 4 and 8 (NEAEA, 2020). In fact, in grades 4 and 8, only one in five students (21%) and one in ten students (11%) scored an average of above 50%, respectively. These findings suggest that most of the students did not meet the minimum learning outcomes expected in these grade levels. This indicates that meeting expected learning outcomes is a luxury for many students in Ethiopian primary schools.

Fig. 1

Percentage of Grades 4 and 8 Students who Scored above 50% in 2019 NLA
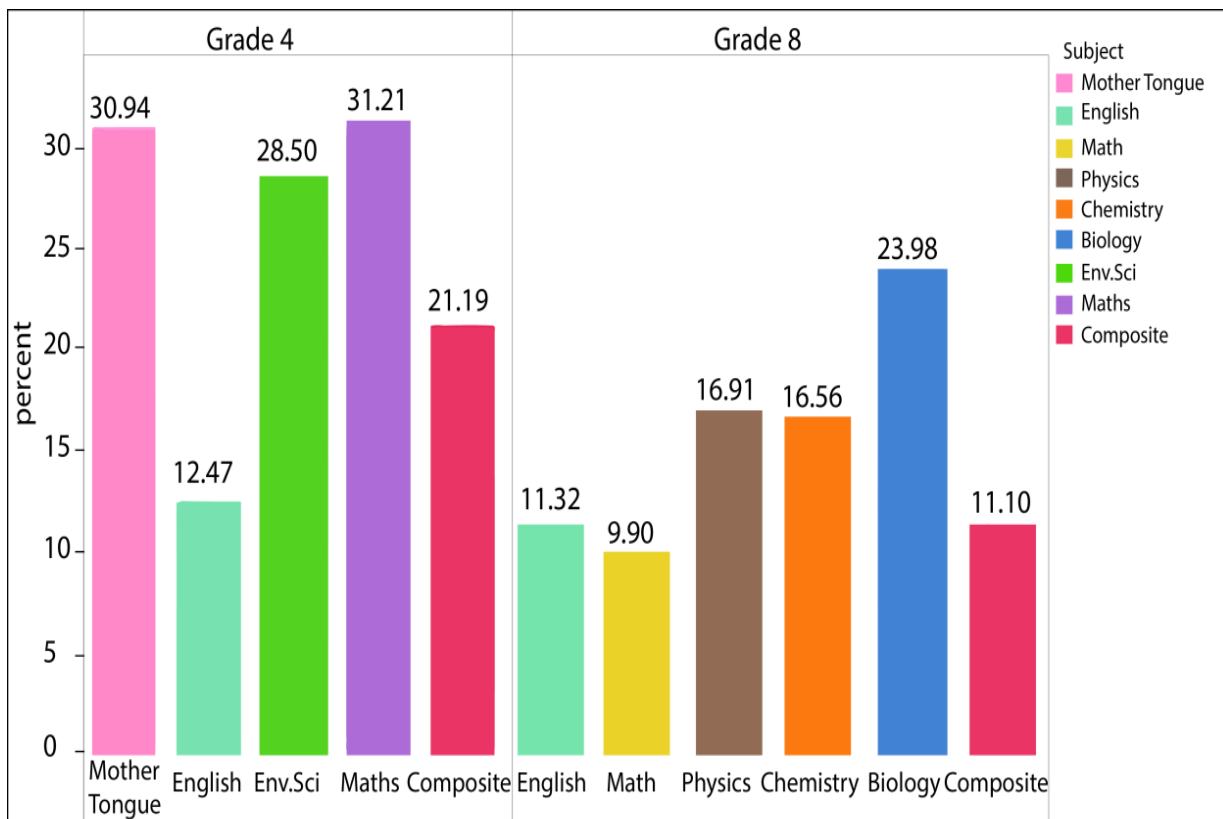
Source. National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency (2020).

The above Ethiopian context shows that the majority of school students do not meet expected learning competencies. The goal of quality equitable education can be met only when there are sustained and conscious efforts to address the low-learning outcomes in schools. School community members should be aware of this and cultivate a school culture could nurture most students to succeed in achieving learning outcomes provided they are meaningfully supported.

As already stated, the present study sets out to examine the hidden curriculum of a primary school embedded in assessment practices and students' performance. For this, purpose,

the following guide research questions were formulated. These were: (1) What are the implicit beliefs and values embedded in school assessment techniques and students' performance in the primary school? (2) How does the hidden curriculum serve the interest of the 'better achieving students' in the school? (3) What roles do students, teachers, and school leaders play in fostering or fighting against the instalment of values and practices that deter equitable quality education in the school? (4) How do teachers and school leaders manage scare resources to meet the needs of diverse learners?

Hidden Curriculum and its Operations

Educational practice in schools is not a value-free experience (Apple, 1980; Giroux, 1978; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1986, 2011). Values are taught explicitly through curriculum, but also implicitly through the rules, regulations, procedures, and ways of relating to the school and classroom. The democratic teacher teaches democracy; the kind teacher, kindness (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1980; Giroux, 1978). Teachers communicate beliefs and values that contribute to the reproduction of existing social stratifications and dominant hierarchies. Explicitly, they transmit cognitive skills such as reading, writing, and computations. Less obviously, schools pursue non-cognitive objectives - norms, values, and behavior patterns necessary for socialization of children to adulthood. Even though both the school and family play significant roles in the socialization of children for future life, the role of school can be considered by far more formal, specific, and structured (LeCompte, 1978).

However, some argue that schooling does not always offer equal opportunity for all students. Equity of opportunity for different groups has been violated through the creation of unjust and unequal access to knowledge and skills that provide access to reward and power (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1980; Giroux, 1978). Similarly, Korth (2002) states that the hidden curriculum carries social injustice and inequality in such a way that there is gender inequality embedded in it and there is also power inequality and inequity of power distribution among students and teachers.

Since the hidden curriculum tacitly advocates beliefs and values supportive of the status quo, teachers are expected to reward students who conform to such beliefs and values, independent of their respective academic and cognitive potential. Students also learn how to be passive recipients in the face of authority. In the long run, they learn how to accept and live with their own powerlessness (Giroux, 1978; Bourdieu, 1990; Darder, 2011). Similarly, Astley (2004) and Thornburg (2009) argue, like other critical theorists, the hidden curriculum is a tool of social control used by schools to silence the voices of students and make them consumers and passive recipients of teachers' knowledge and labels. Consequently, students are made to conform, to not question, and not to participate as they struggle to live with the expectations of others being communicated through family socialization, educational processes, and work experience - both in the school compound and in society more generally.

As stated earlier, educational research needs to examine teachers and school practices if they promote equitable quality education - for education must deal with diverse interests and power dynamics that may affect the provision of equal access to school resources. This is even

so when educational resources are very much limited in developing country contexts such as Ethiopia. Hidden curriculum as a 'set of implicit messages relating to knowledge, values, norms of behavior and attitudes that learners experience in and through educational processes' (Skelton, 1997, p. 188) has to be a critical subject of study in a world which aspires for equitable quality education. Teachers' knowledge of hidden curricula enables them to engage in critical reflection on their teaching and their department policies (Pitts, 2003).

In line with this, Jennings (2008) draws on qualitative data collected at an American urban primary school to explore 1) what educators teach students about motivation and effort through high-stakes testing; 2) how students interpret and internalize these messages; and 3) how student hierarchies develop as a result of internalizing these messages. Jennings (2008) found that teachers attributed boys' failure to poor behavior and attitudes, while arguing that girls simply needed more self-esteem to pass the test. Most boys accepted their teachers' diagnosis of the problem. However, the boys who felt that they were already 'doing their best' and 'working hard' began to doubt that educational success is a function of merit and effort. She concluded that students learn about much more than the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) through their experiences with high stakes testing.

Anyon (1980) used classroom observation, interviews with students, teachers, principals and district administrative staff assessment of curriculum and other materials in each classroom and school as a method of studying the hidden curriculum at five elementary schools. Further, she analyzed school work and assessment techniques from working class schools, middle class schools, affluent professional schools and executive elite schools. She concluded that the hidden curriculum of schoolwork is tacit preparation of children for their future career related to the process of production in a particular way. The children in these various school settings were exposed to and acquainted with different symbolic capital in the due course of their schooling. Differing curricular, pedagogical and pupil evaluation practices emphasized different cognitive and behavioral skills in each social setting and thus contributing to the development in the children of certain potential relationships to physical and symbolic capital, to authority, and to the process of work. The process and structure of schooling being manifested through the curricular and assessment practices create inequality among children with different academic performance and achievement level. Children labeled as low achievers are being exposed to symbolic violence manifested through discriminatory and exclusive treatments in such a way that they are denied of equal access to the school scarce resources and leadership roles. The process and structure of schooling favors the social capital of high achiever students which is academic performance.

Methods

Study Context

The current study was conducted at a public primary school in Addis Ababa city administration, Addis Ketema sub-city. The school was established in 2001 and has 1124 students, 96 teachers, 4 principals and 46 administration or support staff. The school runs preprimary, primary (1-6) and lower secondary (7-8) school programs. The majority of its

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students are from a lower socio-economic background. As a result, many children experience severe food insecurity.

Some students live in the slum areas and reside on the street in small houses made of plastic and hard paper. Since the area is located around *Merkato*, the biggest marketplace in Addis Ababa, families lead their lives by engaging in daily labor, owning and running small Xhat/Chat, *Shisha* and alcohol shops. Some of the parents are also engaged in commercial sex work and bed renting. There is no comprehensive support system for the students, either from the community or the concerned government body. A school feeding program exists for those children/students who are in need of the service. According to the school principal, students who come from "X Kebeles" are considered the most deviant students in the school. The school administration suspects and accuses these students as being addicted to Xhat/Chat, *Shisha* and alcohol. They are also identified as students who do not dress properly. Consequently, most students who reside in "X Kebeles" have received warning letters and various reprimands from the school administration. According to the principal, seven teachers also violated the school's rules and received oral and written warnings.

The school has an ICT center, a pedagogical center, guidance and counseling services, a library, laboratory rooms, and 13 co-curricular clubs. Students have leadership roles in these associations and school clubs.

Participants

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants

Student Participants	Name	Grade level	Class Standing	Sex	Age
1	Student "A"	7	2	Female	13
2	Student "B"	8	1	Male	14
3	Student "C"	6	1	Male	12
4	Student "D"	5	28	Male	13

Two high performing grades 7 and 8 students were selected using concept-based sampling. Since the study needs a detailed justifications and understandings of the power dynamics and implicit messages embedded in the assessment techniques, high performing students were selected from the school. The school rewarded these students as the best scorers in the previous academic calendar. The president of the students' council was included in the study for he had an opportunity to participate in the school decision-making processes and inform the study on how the school's practices influence students' learning. By using maximum variation sampling, a "low achieving" student with a poor disciplinary record was included in the study. His record was found in the "blacklist" of the school that incorporates the list of students labeled as "disturbing and low achieving" students. The principal of the school was included in the study.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Teacher and Principal Participants

Name	Education Level	Sex	Age
Teacher "A"	BA	Male	37
Teacher "B"	BA	Female	26
Principal	MA	Male	46

Reputational sampling (based on the principal's recommendation) was used to select the first teacher participant. The principal recommended a Civic and Ethical Education teacher since he is a long-term member of school assessment and exam committee (9 years) and has thorough information about school assessment mechanisms and student behavior. He regularly attends school level meetings and monitors exam preparation and administration in the school, examining exams, approving them for final delivery, duplicates and administers exams. Another Civic and Ethical Education teacher was chosen as a study participant. This teacher is believed to have deeper understanding of ethical values and concepts such as pupil voice, social justice, equality, democracy, equity, and critical thinking was included in the study.

Data Gathering Instruments and Analysis

Observation, interview, and document analysis were used to collect data. Creswell (2003, p. 196) recommends the triangulation of different data sources to build a coherent justification for themes. The study employed interactive (deep interview) and non-interactive (observation and document analysis) data gathering instruments.

The school, classrooms, computer labs, the principal's office, teachers' lounge, playgrounds, and students' rest rooms were observed to collect data about who the users of school resources, space, and time are. One section from each of grades 7 and 8 was observed, and notes were recorded on the beliefs and values embedded in the assessment practices and classroom interaction. Students' interactions outside the classroom were also observed and recorded on field notes and video recordings. The focus of the data collection was the language and terminologies used in their interactions.

Teachers, students, and the school's principal were also interviewed to explore their views on the different school practices and values associated with assessment practices and student achievement. Ten open-ended items were used for the interview. The interviews were individually administered and lasted on average 45 minutes and were conducted in Amharic. The interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken during the interview. Some relevant documents such as examination sheets and records, meeting minutes, and selected students' exercise books were analyzed using pre-established checklists and tabulations.

The interview data were transcribed and translated into English. The translated interview responses were coded into different categories by the researcher who conducted the interview. Words, phrases, and complete interview responses were used in coding the data. Then, similar

categories of responses were synthesized into themes. The themes emerged from the actual responses. The second researcher cross-checked if there was consistency in categorizing the coded responses and their alignment with the emerged themes. Data gathered from documents was interpreted and analyzed together with the interview and observation data. Data obtained from observation, included video-recorded data, were carefully and repeatedly watched, analyzed, and categorized into the themes that emerged from interview responses.

Results

The qualitative findings obtained from the observation, interview and document analysis data have been analyzed in line with the research questions. The coding, categorization and triangulation of data obtained from different sources resulted in the following themes.

Students' Achievement Considerably Determines Status or Privilege

Student interviews indicated that there is a social stratification of students which classifies them into different social groups. According to Student "B", "the school categorizes the students based on their achievement level as high achievers, medium achievers, and low achievers. And hence we are treated differently, based on our academic achievements in the school". Supporting this, the principal said the following: "we have made different categories of classrooms for the top ten, middle achievers, and the low achievers in our school to support the students based on their achievement level. We believe that this categorization enables the teachers to provide differentiated support that commensurate students' performance and ability.".

Students are aware of this grouping and the corresponding differential treatments by teachers and the school. It appears that students' achievement and the resultant grouping is a major criterion to determine their status in the school. In line with this, student "C" reported the following.

> … there are different categories for the students with different academic achievements. The high achievers, usually labeled as the *Top Ten*, have their distinguished classes and the others, such as the medium achievers and the low achievers, have their own classes. The school perceives us differently and we have different entitlements as a result.

The principal also explained the issue at hand as follows:
> If the low achievers attend their learning together with the *Top Ten*, they may feel hopeless and withdraw themselves from learning. This is an initiative to build the morale of our students and we have no problem with it. It is a successful strategy…..

The data obtained through school observations also revealed that students are grouped based on their achievement level during tutorial programs.

Achievement Determines Access to Different Student Leadership Positions or Power

Assignment to different positions is also influenced by students' achievement. High achieving students are mostly assigned as student council members, class monitors, school club leaders, student police members, and leaders of the flag ceremony. On the other hand, in most cases, medium and low achieving students are marginally considered for the above positions. In this regard, student 'D' had the following to say: "…we don't think deeply to elect our representatives in the students' council. What we do is to nominate a student who ranked from 1 up to 3 in the class…". The same position was reflected by student 'C' by forwarding the following opinion: "… Mostly I don't know who our representative in the students' council is. What I can be sure is that s/he is among the three high achiever students in the class…"

There is an unofficial and unstated norm that student council representatives should be from among high achieving students. This expectation also appears to be deeply ingrained among students themselves. Reiterating the above views, Student 'B' explained:

> Most of the time, the unit leader comes to the class and tells us to nominate a good and clever student who can represent us in the students' council. We know very well that the good and clever students are those who ranked from 1 up to 3. Therefore, we elect these students as our representatives.

The principal of the school confirmed the school's practice of selecting better performing students. He described the situation as follows:

> Most of the students and we [school staff] know who should be elected as members of the students' council, monitors, and heads of different clubs. No low-achieving student who is hopeless of his/her learning was ever elected as a member of students' council in our school

School document analysis and student observations too validated the school's deeply held belief that low-achieving students should be denied the right to be elected as leaders of clubs, monitors and members of students' council. The president of the students' council, the head of the anti-HIV club, the head of the Civic and Ethical Education club, the leaders of the flag ceremony, and school monitors are all within the top three students of their classes.

Document analysis of the school's extracurricular clubs, students' council, monitors, flag ceremony leaders, PTSA (Parent, Teacher, and Student Association) members, teachers' evaluation committee members, and ethics ambassadors also indicate that low-achieving students are not fairly represented across various student leadership positions. A document analysis was made on the list of students who were members of students' council, students' police, monitors, heads of different clubs, and leaders of the flag programs. The analysis shows that 60% of student police, 70% of class monitors, 100% of students' council, and 45.8% of club leaders are those students who are ranked between 1st and 3rd in their respective classrooms. In addition, it was also understood that 70% of flag ceremony leaders, 100% of PTSA members, 60% of high-achieving students association (*'Yegobez Temariwoch Hibret',* an association composed of students who are ranked from 1st to 5th from 10 sections), 70% of class monitors association (*'Yealekoch Hibret'*), 100% of the ethics ambassadors (*'Yeinemigbar Mekonenoch')*, and 100% of teacher assessment committee were students who ranked from 1st to 3rd.

Student leadership positions are also significantly male dominated. It was found that 65% of class monitors, 75% of student police, 70% of student council, 75% of club leaders, 65% of flag ceremony leaders, 67% of PTSA members, 72% of high achiever students association (*'Yegobez Temariwoch Hibret'),*65% of class monitors association, 70% of ethics ambassadors and 70% of teacher assessment committee were male students.

In fact, these "high achieving" students are represented in multiple school leadership structures. For example, 100% of the class monitors are also members of the class monitors association (*'Ye Alekoch Hibret'*) and leaders of the flag ceremony. Similarly, there was also high intersection between those who are members of *'Yegobez Aleka',* members of PTSA, ethics ambassador *'Yesinemigbar Mekonnen'*, club leader, students' council, and class monitor. Most of the leadership and extracurricular positions in the school have been vested in the hands of few high achieving students. The school implicitly, at times wittingly, excludes most of the students by favoring few high achiever students.

Table 3

Hegemony of School Leadership and Extracurricular Position by Male High Achieving Students

Student leadership and extracurricular positions	No. of students whose rank is 1 to 3	% of students whose rank is 1 to 3	No. of students whose rank is 4 to 10	% of students whose rank is 4 to 10	No. of students whose rank is below 10	No. % of students below 10	% of male students
Class monitors	14	70	4	20	2	10	65
Student police	18	60	8	26.6	4	13.3	75
Student Council	10	100	0	0	0		70
Club leaders	11	45.8	7	29.1	6	25	75
Flag ceremony leaders	14	70	4	20	2	10	65
PTSA members	3	100	0	0	0	0	66.66
High achiever students Association	30	60	20	40	0	0	72
Class Monitors Association	14	70	4	20	2	10	65
Ethics ambassadors	10	100	0	0	0	0	70
Teacher assessment committee	10	100	0	0	0	0	70

School leadership and extracurricular positions are predominantly dominated by male high achieving students. 75% of the student police and school clubs are the male high achieving students. Besides, 70% of students counsel, ethics ambassador and teacher assessment committee are the male high achieving students. In addition to this, more than 65% of class monitors, flag ceremony leaders and members of class monitors association are also the male high achieving students.

Achievement Determines Access to Limited Material and Human Resources

Student interviews indicated that the school's scarce human and material resources are mostly utilized by high achiever students. In interviews, students of both high achieving and low achieving appeared to have been accepting this culture. They genuinely believe high achieving

students should get exclusive access to these resources. For instance, student 'A' described the topic under discussion as follows:

> We all know there is a scarcity of reference books in our school. However, most of the time students who ranked 1-3 in each section receive reference books from the library, with exclusive access. I believe this is logical because these students use books wisely and do not throw books as though they are mattresses, like most low achievers do.

Reflecting a similar view, teacher 'A' replied the following.

> The school has a scarcity of educational inputs like books and computers. Hence, high achiever students should not worry about this scarcity. Providing exclusive access to the reference books for the higher achiever students is logical … and we let them use the computer laboratory three days a week because we believe they will take the necessary care for scarce resources

Besides, the observation data obtained from the computer laboratory revealed that access was only provided to high achiever students who were ranked 1-10. These *Top Ten* students were classified into three hierarchically made groups. These groups could develop their computer skills and knowledge three days a week for two hours each day. No other student could use these computers in the school.

Table 4

Students' Access to Computer Labs

Day	No. of students ranked in the top three	No. of students ranked 4th – 10th	No. of students ranked below 10	No. of male students	% of male student
1	5	5	0	7	70
2	5	4	0	6	66.6
3	5	5	0	5	50
4	5	5	0	6	60
5	4	5	0	6	66.6
6	4	4	0	8	100
7	6	4	0	8	80
8	5	4	0	7	77.7
9	5	4	0	6	66.6
10	5	4	0	8	88.8

Table 4 presents the data obtained through document analysis of students who use the computer laboratory and their school achievement records. The data revealed the school's inclination to favor high achiever students. The list of students who have been using the computer laboratory was matched with their academic achievement. Analysis of the list of students who used the computer lab for 10 consecutive days in the academic year revealed that the school's computer laboratory served only the *Top Ten* students. Additionally, male students were provided priority access to the computer lab despite the fact that the computers were provided by an NGO with the aim to support school clubs and promote leadership and life skills. Since most of the club leaders are high-achievers and the leadership of the clubs itself is virtually controlled by these students, they have unlimited access to these scarce resources. In this way, the school tacitly promotes the unequal access to the scarce resources and inequality among students based on their achievement.

Such favoritism for high achieving students also informs the distribution of reference books. In Ethiopia, schools allocate textbooks for students prepared centrally by the federal and regional governments. Although the student-textbook ratio is desired to be 1 to 1, distribution and utilization problems mean that this is rarely the case. According to Student 'B':

> … Most of us do not use books properly. We simply received books from the school at the beginning of the academic year and yet return them in the end of the semester without using them. Hence, I believe that providing one book for one high achiever student is the correct measure….

In the same manner, student 'C' said the following.

> … Some low achiever students deliberately hide books from the high achievers when they are in the same group. Therefore, to prevent this from happening, I believe providing exclusive access to the reference books to the high achiever students is a wise measure…

Student 'D', however, opposes the unfair distribution of learning resources among students. In this regard, he had the following to say:

> …the school is not fair in distributing reference books. They [school leaders] are not right in giving high achievers exclusive right to use the computer laboratory. High achievers got one book for one student. High achievers got the exclusive right to use the computer laboratory….

Observations also revealed that students are divided into three major categories. The first category is named as "special class" which encompasses those students who ranked from 1-10 from each section. These students are also divided into three groups. The first group is made up of first-ranked students – this group has a 1:10 classroom-student ratio during examinations. The second group includes the students who ranked second – this group has a 1:10 classroom-student ratio during examinations. The third group includes those who ranked from third to tenth in each section - this group has a 1:35 classroom-student ratio during examinations. The second category

of students, which includes those who are ranked eleventh and beyond, have a 1:45 classroom-student ratio during examinations: 1:3 bench to students ratio, and 1:45 teacher-students ratio.

This structure of teacher support during examinations indicates the prevalence of great disparity among students of various categories in the utilization of resources. Hence, there is clear discrimination in terms of low achievers' access to material and human resources in the school.

Observations also indicated that most high achievers attend tutorial and school support packages more than low achievers because most low achieving students' parents could not afford the tutorial tuition fees. In line with this, teacher "C" reported the following.

> … most of the time, low achiever students are from low socio-economic status families (even by the school community's standard). Due to this, they cannot afford the money for after-class tutorial and academic supports. I observed that some teachers provide other supports for their tutees which are not legal in the school. You know, there are teachers who usually do exams and homework for their tutees…

Discrimination also underlies students' access to the most privileged skill and knowledge in the school. Supporting this, student 'A' had the following idea: "… I believe that low achiever students should not imagine that they will be able to learn a skill that is only reserved for special students…". The principal also believes students should be categorized in different groups based on their school achievement, and that different knowledge and skills should be delivered to students based on their school achievements. The following verbatim, taken from the principal, epitomizes this.

> …I appreciate the idea that students should be categorized into different groups and should be provided with different levels of knowledge and skills. It is difficult to imagine low achiever students could competently learn to use a computer. To perform this, we included this task in teachers' performance-based appraisals….

Quite similarly, teacher 'A' reflected the following position.

> We never let low achiever students to go to the computer laboratory. If we do that, they will disturb the high achievers. It is enough for them attending the tutorial program aimed at helping to develop their skills of English writing and reading. To your surprise, they are not interested to attend these tutorials. Only 5-10 students usually come

However, in contrast to the above idea, student 'C' believed "that there was no discrimination of students in terms of access to knowledge and skills". For this student, all students "learn from the same book and nothing else was done to provide different knowledge to different students in their school...".

Labeling and Categorizing Language: Manifesting and Deepening the Hidden Curriculum

It appears school community members label students into different social categories. Different labeling terminologies were used to describe and categorize the different groups of students. According to student "D",

> The *Top Ten* students are really doing very great in their academic issues. However, the *Seven Up'* are careless about their education and hence they cut class regularly… They cut all the seven periods of the day after being marked as 'present' on daily attendance.

On the same topic, teacher B said, "It seems I am working only to the *Qelemewa* (The Intelligent). I mean those students in the special class and yet most of the students are *Sholaki (The class cutter)* and become *Qarammi* (The scavenger) during exam sessions".

In the school under investigation, *Seven Up* students are perceived to be indifferent about their learning and achievement as they usually cut all the seven periods of a school day. They are perceived to lack the interest, motivation, ability, and skill to go through their daily school activities. Teachers appear to have an exceptionally low expectation and provide almost no support for the 'seven up' students. The school community perceives these students as problem makers and are categorized as risky groups to interact with. They do not have regular access to the scarce resources of the school including the computer lab and library. They are labelled as exam cheaters.

Sholaki students, on the other hand, are students who cut class after break time. They are also in a close control, auspices, and suspicion by the school community during their school day and yet the discrimination is not as tight as the 'seven up'. Teachers also seem they have low expectation to these students. They get much less school support during classroom instruction and exam weeks. They have no access to the computer lab and the library. The labeling and bullying of these students by the school community may have forced them to accept and act as per that categorization.

Coming to the *Qarammi,* they are students perceived by the school community as exam hijackers and cheaters. They are supposed to be low achieving students who believe in 'their cheating skill rather than academic effort. These students amplify the Amharic proverb 'ከአንድ አመት ጥናት የአንድ ቀን የአይን ጥራት' i.e., "an exam day eyesight quality is better than a full year academic effort". They use this as a strategy of survival in their school life. The school community has low expectation and provides very low school supports to these students. They are also under a tight and strict auspice in their school life by the school community including teachers, leaders, 'high achiever students' and sometimes with the surrounding community. They got no ample access to the scarce opportunities of the school being labeled as thieves, cheaters, and opportunist and unresponsive.

Finally*, Qelemewa* are higher achiever students perceived to have poor communication and social skills. They lack the social skill to access information and scarce materials and resources of the school. 'Low achievers' perceive the *Qelemewa* as they are not moody since they do not collaborate in exam cheating. The high achievers perceive them as they are not

socially capable to establish and engage in peer group interactions. Therefore, both the 'low achievers' and the 'high achievers' bully these students. To avoid these confrontations, they distance themselves from accessing resource places like recreation fields, library and computer lab.

Tutorial and Makeup Support to Low-achieving and Other Selected Students

Given the findings of the study dwell much on what is being done to meet the needs of better performing students in the school, an attempt was made to capture student support system for low-achievers. Tutorial and makeup classes are the techniques used to support students who need additional academic support. In the school, students are categorized into different groups for academic support packages. The beneficiaries of the tutorial and makeup program are students who scored below 50% (categorized and labelled as 'low achiever' students), all grade 8th students (116) and all students with special educational needs. The tutorial and makeup programs are conducted every school day from 7:30 AM – 8:30 AM and on Saturdays. There are no documents to verify the number of students labeled as low achievers and those who benefited from the tutorial and makeup programs except the number of grade 8 students.

Students' parents, based on mutual agreement with the school leadership, pay monthly 100 Birr to incentivize teachers who provide tutorial and make up support to the students. The school principal reported that student attendance in tutorial classes is good though there are not documentations to verify the extent of students' participation in the programs. On the other hand, a teacher who has many years of experience in offering tutorial and make up classes stated that

> …. student tutorial classes are based on selected difficult contents from student textbooks. However, both students and teachers' participation on the tutorial and makeup classes are not strong. Some students do not often actively attend these sessions because of family socio-economic problems and other related issues.

Students from lower socio-economic status and especially elder children are expected to support parents in household chores and other paid labor activities. The teacher also underscored that support programs are not as effective as expected due to 'low motivation of teachers to support these students.' Low incentives and students' limited participation in these programs contribute to teachers' low motivation. It appears, however, that teachers inflate students' scores in assessments conducted after tutorial and makeup classes so that they would not be held accountable for low students' achievement. This is an issue that requires further study.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of the study uncover how students' performance in teacher made tests virtually determine access to school resources and how school practices and community members, wittingly or unwittingly, favor academically well-performing students in availing limited scarce resources. Albeit the staggering poor results in early grade reading assessment (Only 19% of grades 2 and 3 are functionally fluent readers in 2021 EGRA, NEAEA, 2022)

and national learning assessment (NEAEA, 2020), top educational ministers and regional education bureau leaders' position and pressure to expand special boarding schools for well-performing students appear to rest on an over simplified thinking that cultivating the 'best minds' matters more for the country's development. This position does not only contradict the sustainable development goal of equitable quality education for all but also begs many questions if it is indeed the best way of cultivating students' potentials. Unless differentiation moves away from utter reliance on students' academic performance in teacher made tests and is broadened to include diverse talents, it is highly likely for the education system to fail to achieve equitable quality education for all and serve expected goal of transforming the Ethiopian society.

There is a toxic assumption that high achievement in teacher-made examinations shows students leadership capacity. High-achieving students have better opportunities to convert their academic capital into different leadership capabilities and social capital. The principal labels and categorizes these low-achieving students as 'careless', 'unmotivated', 'time-wasting', and 'less hopeful' in their academic life. Hence, these students are denied equal opportunities to take part in different school activities and assignments that foster decision making, collaboration and communications skills. The principal of the school also backs such practice and school culture.

Students' access to power is highly influenced by the beliefs and values embedded in the achievement level of students and the subsequent labeling and social stratification. According to Barbara Korth (2002) and Darder and Miron (2006), the hidden curriculum caries social injustice and inequality in such a way that there is gender inequality embedded in it and there is also power inequality and inequity of power distribution among the students and teachers that replicate the social construction of students as per the expectations of the macroeconomic reality in society. Students with high achievement levels are at the top of the social strata and get better access to material and human resources and the scarcest and most privileged knowledge in the school. On the other hand, low achievers in the school have been denied access to school power, as well as the scarce human and material resources. Both the high achievers and low achievers have been socialized to live according to their labelling and work hard to thrive or survive within this status quo. They believe that academic achievement matters most in getting to the top of the social strata or to the bottom of the social hierarchy in the school.

Similarly, McLaren (1990, 1993, 1994 &1995) stated that Schools are historical and structural embodiments of ideological forms reproduced through uneven informal alignments that privilege certain groups, and asymmetrical relations of power that sustain such privilege. It contributes to constructing, legitimizing, and reproducing particular ideologies and social inequalities in favor of people in power or dominant social groups. Since people in power usually have the authority to control and determine what is taught and how it is taught in schools and classrooms, students are frequently exposed to the discourses that reflect and naturalize the perspectives, worldviews, and ideologies of these powerful people and social groups. The discourses that students are frequently exposed to at schools not only educate them, but also subjugate and control them, and shape their consciousness. In line with this,

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Anyon (1980), Apple (1980), Giroux (1978) and other scholars in the political economy and the sociology of knowledge have recently argued that public schools make available different types of educational experiences and curriculum knowledge to students in different social classes. In line with this, Gatto (2005) underscored that:

> The lesson of my teaching life is that both the theory and the structure of mass education are fatally flawed; they cannot work to support the democratic logic of our national idea because they are unfaithful to the democratic principle. The democratic principle is still the best idea for a nation, even though we are not living up to it right now. Mass education cannot work to produce a fair society because its daily practice is practice in rigged competition, suppression, and intimidation. The schools we've allowed to develop can't work to teach nonmaterial values, the values which give meaning to everyone's life, rich or poor. (p. 69)

Hence, in order to realize equitable quality education for all, it is imperative that policy makers critically examine the social reproduction role played by schools. In Ethiopia, most able and average parents send their children to private schools where there are small class sizes, better teachers, and more and better-quality school resources. In Addis Ababa, where this study has been conducted, non-government schools account 68 % of primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2019). Public schools in most cases attract those parents and children who cannot afford to pay the tuition fees required to enroll in private schools. While this is one form in which schooling in Ethiopia implicitly perpetuates social inequality, this study clearly demonstrates that student differentiation in a public school is used to favor those students who are performing well in school-based academic assessments. Those students who should have been supported based on their learning gaps are not only disadvantaged from gaining appropriate support from their teachers but are intentionally excluded from accessing limited school resources. Worse yet, these students are kept at bay from taking part in extracurricular school activities.

Unless such undesirable practices are uncovered and school community members are sensitized and make conscious efforts to do away with toxic cultures that favor the few, the goal of achieving equitable quality education remains elusive. It is imperative that global efforts to achieve equitable quality education pay due attention to micro-level educational practices that institutionalize student diversity responsive classroom practices. Monitoring of goal 4 of the SDG at the local and school level needs to pay attention to whether schools are providing equal opportunities for all students in different school activities. School-based assessment is meant to tailor the instruction to the needs of students; not to discriminately allocate limited resources to a select few favored students.

Moreover, this paper showed how language reinforces inequalities and explains different expectations for students. Achievement and students associated behaviors resulted in language that differentiates and categorizes students. Students and teachers repeatedly use labelling language during interviews. The frequency use of these words also shows how deeply ingrained these categorizations are in the school culture. Studies on school culture show that language use

is one major indicator of teachers' assumptions, values, and practices of an institution (Vang, 2006). If social injustice is expanded in schools, schools' accepted mission of serving equitably all members of society will be eroded. In this regard, this study found out that students accepted their identity as ascribed to them and used terms such as *'sholaki', karami, kelemewa, Qezafi, arfage, "sevenup", and "Sholaki.".* Good, as cited in (Greenburg, 2003), argues that teachers praise low achievers less often, criticize them more frequently, allow them fewer opportunities to answer questions, and give them less time to respond.

The above discriminatory and categorical languages are frequently used by both students and teachers. The principal also used the above phrases and words during the interview. The students also act in the school according to their categorized status. They seem to believe that these stratifications, status, and identities are always true and objective. In line with this, Tattum, cited in Thornburg (2009), suggests that adopting the vocabularies of teachers as a new category of pupil is created in our education system. Students accept the defining power of the dominant culture of the school. These stratifications and labeling play a significant deterministic effect in students' lives and aspirations. The categorizations are based on school-based tests which only measure students' (inequitably delivered) academic learning and yet are used to communicate to the school community members that those low-achieving students have no other options for success. Language also plays a structuring effect among students. These labels jeopardize students' desire to improve and exert effort in their learning.

National policy initiatives should carefully consider the relevance of new educational ideas and reforms. Efforts to improve the quality and relevance of education for high-achieving and gifted are at their infancy and students should further be strengthened. However, policy makers' dominant discourse to build special boarding schools for the 'best achieving students' (e.g., the Education Minister interview at national TV, https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/etv) need to be cautiously examined if it really would contribute to the betterment of the public general education system where the majority of students in rural areas and from low-income families attend schooling.

Although global efforts to improve access and quality of education have improved equity of educational access, efforts for equitable quality education need to pay due attention to school culture and classroom practices and values. National level data disaggregated along gender, rural and urban and other social indicators do not suffice to show the real and strong school culture that still favors the interest of selected students. As this study was conducted in a typical school where students come from families with low socio-economic status, the results should be cautiously interpreted. And yet, the case illustrates schooling in impoverished communities of Ethiopia.

Funding

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