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Teacher Education Curriculum Relevance and Community Development Needs in Ethiopia: An Assessment of Alignment, Implementation, and Stakeholder Perspectives

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Article

Keywords: Community development, curriculum relevance, curriculum reform, Ethiopia, teacher education

Posted Date: October 9th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10598258/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Education plays a vital role in sustainable development by preparing individuals who can respond effectively to social, economic, and community challenges. However, questions remain about whether teacher education curricula in Ethiopia adequately reflect the realities and development needs of local communities. This study examined the relevance of teacher education curricula to community development needs in selected Ethiopian Teacher Education Colleges. Specifically, it explored how community priorities are represented in curriculum content, identified gaps between curriculum expectations and local realities, examined stakeholder perspectives, and assessed the practical application of curriculum knowledge in educational and community settings. The study employed a pragmatic research paradigm and a mixed-methods approach using a descriptive survey design. Data were collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. A total of 255 participants, including 219 student teachers, 29 instructors, and 7 curriculum experts, were selected from a population of 700 using Yamane's sampling formula and appropriate sampling techniques. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The findings showed that teacher education curricula moderately addressed community development needs. Although curriculum frameworks emphasized competency-based learning, contextualization, and community engagement, significant gaps remained in integrating indigenous knowledge, providing practical community-based learning opportunities, and connecting theoretical learning with real-life community challenges. The study concludes that teacher education curricula have the potential to contribute to community development but require stronger implementation mechanisms, expanded experiential learning opportunities, and deeper integration of local knowledge systems. Strengthening curriculum responsiveness will help prepare teachers who are not only competent classroom practitioners but also active contributors to sustainable community transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as one of the most influential forces for achieving sustainable development, reducing poverty, promoting social mobility, and fostering economic transformation. Beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, education contributes to the development of human capabilities, enhances productivity, encourages democratic participation, and improves overall quality of life. The global adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) further strengthened the commitment of nations to provide inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. In today's rapidly changing world, educational systems are expected not only to prepare individuals for employment but also to equip them with the competencies needed to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges within their communities (UNESCO, 2023).

Within this broader educational agenda, teacher education holds a particularly significant position because the preparation of teachers directly influences the quality of learning at all levels of education. The effectiveness of schools largely depends on the knowledge, skills, values, and professional abilities

developed during teacher preparation. Therefore, teacher education programs are expected to cultivate pedagogical competence, critical thinking, ethical awareness, creativity, and problem-solving skills among future teachers. Contemporary research emphasizes that teacher preparation should extend beyond the simple transmission of subject knowledge and focus on developing educators who can respond effectively to diverse learners, technological changes, and evolving community needs (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Globally, teacher education institutions are increasingly shifting toward competency-based approaches that strengthen the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical application. These approaches highlight the importance of experiential learning, reflective practice, school-community partnerships, and the development of transferable skills. Evidence shows that teacher education programs connected to real-life experiences and community contexts are more effective in preparing graduates who can contribute positively to educational improvement and social development. Consequently, curriculum relevance is now viewed not only in terms of academic content but also in relation to how effectively programs respond to societal needs and prepare graduates for contemporary challenges (OECD, 2024).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for relevant and responsive teacher education has become increasingly important due to challenges such as rapid population growth, youth unemployment, social inequalities, cultural diversity, and uneven patterns of economic development. These realities have encouraged governments and educational institutions to reconsider the role of teacher preparation in achieving sustainable development. Across the region, educational reforms have increasingly emphasized competency development, contextualized learning, and stronger engagement between educational institutions and communities. However, questions remain about whether existing teacher education curricula sufficiently reflect local realities and address pressing development priorities (Tikly, 2023).

The issue of curriculum relevance is particularly significant in African educational contexts because many education systems have historically adopted curriculum models influenced by external frameworks that may not fully represent local experiences and aspirations. Scholars argue that when curricula are disconnected from indigenous knowledge, cultural practices, and community priorities, graduates may lack the capacity to effectively address local challenges. Therefore, recent educational reforms increasingly advocate for context-sensitive curricula that integrate local knowledge systems with global competencies while strengthening community engagement and social responsibility (Rizvi, 2024).

Across East Africa, significant efforts have been made to improve the quality, relevance, and effectiveness of teacher education programs. These initiatives aim to strengthen teacher competence, enhance educational outcomes, and increase the contribution of education to national development. Nevertheless, existing evidence indicates that many teacher education programs continue to experience difficulties in bridging the gap between academic preparation and practical community realities.

Concerns remain about whether graduates are adequately prepared to respond to local socio-economic conditions, cultural diversity, and emerging development challenges (Kasozi, 2023).

In Ethiopia, education is considered a fundamental driver of national development, social transformation, and human capital formation. Government policies and reforms have focused on expanding educational access, improving quality, and strengthening the capacity of educational institutions. Within this framework, teacher education institutions play a critical role because they prepare professionals who shape learning outcomes and influence future generations. Recent reforms have emphasized competency-based education, practical training, and quality assurance mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness and relevance of teacher preparation programs (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Despite these reform efforts, questions remain regarding the extent to which teacher education curricula are aligned with the actual development needs of local communities. Previous studies have highlighted challenges related to the integration of practical experiences, community engagement, indigenous knowledge, and context-responsive learning within teacher preparation programs. These concerns are particularly important in Ethiopia's diverse socio-cultural environment, where educational institutions are increasingly expected to contribute not only to classroom learning but also to broader community development and local problem-solving efforts (Gebretsadik et al., 2023).

Southern Ethiopia, particularly the Gammo Zone, provides an important context for examining curriculum relevance because of its rich cultural diversity, unique socio-economic conditions, and specific development priorities. Teacher education institutions operating in such settings are expected to prepare graduates who understand community realities and possess the capacity to contribute to educational improvement and social transformation. Therefore, assessing how effectively teacher education curricula respond to local community needs is essential for enhancing educational quality and strengthening the role of education in development processes (Tadesse & Melese, 2021).

The importance of this study is rooted in the growing understanding that curriculum relevance determines the extent to which education produces meaningful outcomes for individuals and society. Examining the alignment between teacher education curricula and community development needs can generate valuable evidence for policymakers, curriculum designers, teacher educators, and educational institutions. Such evidence can inform future reforms aimed at improving the responsiveness, quality, and practical contribution of teacher education programs in Ethiopia and strengthening their role in sustainable community development (World Bank, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Despite considerable efforts to strengthen teacher education in Ethiopia, limited empirical evidence exists on the extent to which teacher education curricula are aligned with the actual development needs of local communities. Although national education policies emphasize curriculum relevance, contextualization, and responsiveness, insufficient attention has been given to examining whether these

principles are effectively reflected in curriculum content, teaching and learning experiences, and the competencies developed among graduates. As a result, uncertainty remains regarding the extent to which teacher education programs contribute meaningfully to community development processes and local transformation efforts (UNESCO, 2024).

Previous studies on teacher education in Ethiopia have largely focused on areas such as instructional effectiveness, curriculum implementation challenges, teacher competence, and the outcomes of educational reforms. While these studies have contributed important knowledge about the functioning of teacher education systems, they have paid limited attention to curriculum relevance from the broader perspective of community development. This has created a conceptual gap in understanding how teacher education curricula contribute to social transformation, economic advancement, civic engagement, and community empowerment beyond the traditional role of preparing teachers for classroom instruction (Mekonnen et al., 2022).

A further limitation in the existing literature concerns geographical and institutional coverage. Many studies have been conducted within single institutions or limited regional settings, making it difficult to understand variations in curriculum relevance across different teacher education colleges and socio-cultural contexts. The absence of broader comparative evidence limits knowledge about how institutional characteristics, regional conditions, and community contexts influence the responsiveness of teacher education curricula (Asfaw & Mekonnen, 2023).

In addition, existing research has predominantly examined curriculum organization, content delivery, and instructional practices, while giving less attention to broader community development dimensions. Areas such as social cohesion, civic responsibility, local problem-solving, livelihood improvement, and cultural responsiveness have received limited consideration. Consequently, there is inadequate understanding of whether teacher education curricula adequately prepare graduates to engage with complex community challenges and contribute to sustainable local development beyond their professional classroom responsibilities (Barrett et al., 2022).

Another significant gap relates to the limited involvement of diverse stakeholders in evaluating curriculum relevance. Many previous studies have not sufficiently incorporated the perspectives of key groups such as student teachers, teacher educators, curriculum specialists, educational leaders, and community representatives. Since these stakeholders experience curriculum design, implementation, and outcomes from different perspectives, their collective insights are essential for understanding the strengths, limitations, and practical relevance of teacher education programs (Pashiardis & Brauckmann, 2023).

Furthermore, limited research has explored the extent to which teacher education curricula integrate indigenous knowledge systems, local cultural values, and community-based learning experiences. This issue is particularly important in Ethiopia, where diverse communities possess rich cultural traditions, indigenous practices, and locally developed knowledge systems. Understanding how these elements are

incorporated into teacher preparation remains essential for developing curricula that are culturally responsive and connected to community priorities (Assefa et al., 2021).

Theoretical limitations are also evident in existing studies. Much of the available literature approaches curriculum implementation from administrative or pedagogical perspectives, with limited attention to broader theoretical explanations linking education, social transformation, and community development. Therefore, further research is needed to examine curriculum relevance using perspectives that recognize education as a means of empowering communities, addressing social challenges, and promoting sustainable development (Cochran-Smith et al., 2023).

Therefore, this study aimed to address these empirical, contextual, methodological, and theoretical gaps by examining the alignment between teacher education curricula and community development needs in selected Teacher Education Colleges in Ethiopia. By incorporating the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and examining different institutional contexts, the study sought to generate evidence that could support curriculum improvement, enhance community responsiveness, and strengthen the contribution of teacher education to sustainable development. Accordingly, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How community development needs are reflected in the design of teacher education curricula in Ethiopia?
2. What content areas and practical skills are missing or inadequately represented in the current teacher education curriculum?
3. How do stakeholders perceive the contribution of teacher education curricula to community development?
4. How are teacher education curricula implemented through classroom instruction and community-based training activities?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study was guided by a pragmatic research paradigm, which recognizes that complex educational issues often require flexible approaches and the use of multiple methods to generate meaningful evidence. Based on this philosophical orientation, the study employed a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The quantitative component enabled the researcher to measure patterns, trends, and relationships among variables, while the qualitative component helped explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and deeper explanations related to curriculum relevance and implementation. The integration of both approaches enhanced the validity of findings through triangulation and provided a more complete picture of the issue under investigation.

A descriptive survey research design was used within the mixed-methods framework because it was suitable for examining existing conditions, practices, and perceptions related to teacher education curricula and their contribution to community development. The design allowed the researcher to describe and analyze the current situation as it naturally occurred without manipulating the study variables.

Target Population

The target population of the study consisted of key stakeholders directly involved in teacher education programs in Ethiopia. These included student teachers, teacher educators (instructors), and curriculum experts from Teacher Education Colleges. According to the Ministry of Education, Ethiopia has 38 Teacher Education Colleges responsible for preparing teachers for primary and secondary education levels. These institutions serve as important centers for developing the professional knowledge, skills, and competencies required by future teachers.

Student teachers were included in the study because they are the primary recipients of teacher education curricula and can provide valuable perspectives regarding the relevance, adequacy, and effectiveness of their learning experiences. Instructors were selected because they are directly responsible for curriculum implementation and possess practical knowledge about teaching practices, curriculum delivery, and challenges encountered during implementation. Curriculum experts were also included due to their involvement in curriculum design, revision, evaluation, and quality assurance processes. Collectively, these groups provided important insights into curriculum development, implementation, and its responsiveness to community development needs.

Data Sources and Types

The study used both primary and secondary sources of data to obtain comprehensive information. Primary data were collected from student teachers, instructors, and curriculum experts through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These sources provided firsthand information regarding curriculum relevance, implementation practices, and perceptions of its contribution to community development.

Secondary data were gathered through the review of relevant documents, including teacher education curriculum frameworks, policy documents, course modules, institutional reports, and other related materials. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were obtained from structured questionnaire responses and were used to identify measurable patterns and trends, while qualitative data were generated from interviews and document analysis to provide deeper explanations and contextual understanding of the findings.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size Determination

From the existing Teacher Education Colleges in Ethiopia, three colleges were selected using purposive sampling. The selection was based on several considerations, including accessibility, geographical representation, institutional experience in teacher education delivery, and relevance to the objectives of the study. The selected colleges were considered appropriate settings for examining the relationship between teacher education curricula and community development needs because they represent diverse institutional and regional contexts.

Accordingly, the study was conducted at Arba Minch College of Teacher Education, Hawassa College of Teacher Education, and Dilla College of Teacher Education. These institutions were selected because of their active involvement in teacher preparation programs and their potential to provide diverse perspectives on curriculum design, implementation, and outcomes. Including multiple institutions enhanced the credibility of the study by allowing comparison of experiences across different educational and regional settings.

Within the selected colleges, stratified random sampling was employed to select student teachers. This technique ensured adequate representation of students from different departments, academic levels, and program areas. On the other hand, instructors and curriculum experts were selected through purposive sampling because of their specialized knowledge, professional responsibilities, and direct involvement in curriculum implementation, evaluation, and improvement processes.

This combination of sampling strategies enabled the study to capture both broad student perspectives and detailed professional insights, thereby strengthening the overall understanding of teacher education curriculum relevance and its contribution to community development. The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error: n = $\frac{N}{1+N\ (e)^2}$,

Where: n = sample size, N = total estimated population.

Table 1
Sample Distribution

Category	Population (N)	Sample Size (n)
Student Teachers	600	219
Instructors	80	29
Curriculum Experts	20	7
Total	**700**	**255**

From the total population of 700 individuals, a sample size of 255 respondents was determined for the study. To ensure fair representation of each category of participants, the sample was proportionally distributed among the identified strata using proportional allocation techniques. Based on Table 1 above, the sample consisted of 219 student teachers, 29 instructors, and 7 curriculum experts, resulting in a total of 255 participants. This sampling approach helped maintain appropriate representation of each stakeholder group and enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the study findings.

Data Collection Tools

To obtain comprehensive and reliable information, the study employed multiple data collection instruments. The use of different tools was intended to ensure triangulation and strengthen the validity of the findings. The instruments included structured questionnaires administered to student teachers and instructors, semi-structured interviews conducted with instructors and curriculum experts, and a document analysis checklist used to examine relevant curriculum materials and institutional documents.

The questionnaires included mainly closed-ended items, particularly Likert-scale statements, along with a few open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide additional explanations and personal experiences. The interviews were designed to generate deeper qualitative insights into curriculum relevance, implementation practices, challenges, and opportunities for improvement.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted through an integrated process involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The combination of questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis enabled the researcher to examine the research problem from multiple perspectives and enhanced the credibility, validity, and reliability of the findings through methodological triangulation.

Questionnaire

Structured questionnaires were administered to selected student teachers and instructors to collect quantitative data regarding their perceptions of curriculum relevance, implementation practices, community engagement activities, and the extent to which teacher education curricula address local development needs. The questionnaire primarily consisted of Likert-scale items designed to measure participants' level of agreement on different aspects of curriculum responsiveness. A small number of open-ended questions were included to provide participants with opportunities to express additional views, recommendations, and experiences related to curriculum effectiveness and community responsiveness.

Before the actual data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of respondents who were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the pilot test was to evaluate the clarity, consistency, and appropriateness of the items. Feedback obtained from the pilot study and comments from experts were used to revise and improve the instrument before its final administration.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected instructors, curriculum experts, academic leaders, and other relevant educational stakeholders to obtain detailed qualitative information. The interviews focused on issues related to curriculum design, implementation processes, existing strengths,

challenges, and possible strategies for improving the alignment between teacher education curricula and community development needs.

An interview guide containing key themes and open-ended questions was prepared to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing participants the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and provide additional insights. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations convenient for participants. With the permission of participants, interviews were audio-recorded and supported by field notes to ensure accurate representation and analysis of the collected information.

Document Analysis Checklist

Document analysis was conducted to examine curriculum-related materials and institutional documents relevant to teacher education programs. Documents reviewed included curriculum frameworks, course syllabi, program specifications, policy documents, strategic plans, practicum guidelines, quality assurance reports, and curriculum review documents.

A structured document analysis checklist was developed to assess how curriculum objectives, content, learning outcomes, teaching approaches, assessment strategies, and community development components were incorporated into teacher education programs. The document review provided additional contextual understanding and helped verify information obtained from questionnaires and interviews. It also enabled the researcher to identify areas of alignment and gaps between intended curriculum objectives and actual implementation practices.

Hence, the data collection process began after obtaining official approval and permission from relevant authorities and participating institutions. Questionnaires were then distributed to selected respondents and collected after completion. Following questionnaire administration, interviews were conducted to explore issues requiring deeper understanding. At the same time, relevant curriculum documents were collected and analyzed using the document analysis checklist. The combination of different sources of evidence strengthened the trustworthiness and comprehensiveness of the study findings.

Methods of Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores. These statistical methods were used to summarize participants' responses and present patterns related to curriculum relevance, implementation, and community responsiveness in a clear and interpretable manner.

Qualitative data obtained from interviews and document analysis were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved organizing the collected information, coding participants' responses, identifying recurring patterns, and developing themes related to the objectives of the study. Finally, quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the alignment between teacher education curricula and community development needs.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Curriculum Relevance to Community Development in Ethiopian Teacher Education

The extent to which teacher education curricula respond to local community development needs in Ethiopia can be viewed as a multidimensional concept of curriculum–community alignment. This concept refers to the degree of consistency between the goals and content of the curriculum, the way it is implemented in teaching and learning practices and the actual socio-economic and cultural realities of the communities that graduates are expected to serve.

Curriculum relevance is not simply determined by whether community-related issues appear in course materials. Rather, it concerns the extent to which teacher education programs prepare future teachers with the knowledge, skills, and values required to respond effectively to local challenges. A relevant curriculum should develop context-sensitive competencies such as the ability to adapt teaching practices to local conditions, solve community-based problems, promote civic responsibility, and incorporate local experiences and knowledge into educational processes. Therefore, curriculum relevance should be assessed not only at the level of curriculum design but also by examining how effectively its intended goals are transformed into practical competencies and meaningful contributions to community development.

The alignment between teacher education curricula and community needs can be examined through three interconnected dimensions: curriculum intentions, implementation practices, and outcomes. Curriculum intentions include educational objectives, subject content, and curriculum structure; implementation involves teaching approaches, practicum experiences, and assessment practices; while outcomes reflect graduates' preparedness to engage with communities and contribute to local development initiatives. When these dimensions are strongly connected, teacher education programs are better positioned to bridge the gap between academic preparation and real-world community challenges, ultimately improving educational quality and supporting sustainable community development.

As presented in Table 2, the overall mean score of 3.16 indicates that teacher education curricula address local community development needs at a moderate level. This finding suggests that while community-oriented elements are incorporated into teacher education programs, their integration and practical application remain insufficient to achieve a fully responsive curriculum. In other words, the curriculum recognizes the importance of community engagement, but stronger efforts are needed to ensure that learning experiences are directly connected to local development priorities.

Among the assessed dimensions, the highest mean score was recorded for promotion of community engagement and social responsibility (M = 3.38). This indicates that respondents moderately agreed that teacher education curricula encourage future teachers to develop awareness of their social roles and

responsibilities within their communities. Similarly, preparation for local problem-solving (M = 3.27) and reflection of community issues in curriculum content (M = 3.21) received moderate ratings, suggesting that the curriculum provides some opportunities for connecting teacher preparation with local realities. However, lower mean scores were observed for integration of indigenous knowledge (M = 2.95) and provision of community-based learning opportunities (M = 3.05). These results indicate limited incorporation of indigenous knowledge and insufficient exposure to community-based learning experiences may reduce graduates' ability to fully understand and respond to the cultural, social, and developmental realities of the communities they serve.

Table 2
Extent of Curriculum Relevance to Community Development Needs

No	Curriculum Relevance Indicators	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
1	Curriculum content reflects local community issues and challenges	3.21	0.84	Moderate
2	Integration of indigenous knowledge and local experiences	2.95	0.91	Moderate
3	Promotion of community engagement and social responsibility	3.38	0.78	Moderate
4	Provision of community-based learning opportunities	3.05	0.86	Moderate
5	Preparation of trainees for local problem-solving	3.27	0.82	Moderate
6	Linkage between practicum and community development activities	3.11	0.88	Moderate
7	Support for innovation in addressing local challenges	3.18	0.80	Moderate
Overall Mean		**3.16**	**0.84**	**Moderate Extent**

Source: Questionnaire Survey (2026)

The findings from the semi-structured interviews further reinforced the results obtained from the quantitative data. Most instructors and curriculum experts acknowledged that, although teacher education curriculum documents emphasize community relevance and responsiveness, these principles are not always effectively translated into classroom practice. Participants explained that student teachers often have limited opportunities to participate in meaningful and continuous community-based learning activities, fieldwork, and service-learning experiences. As a result, many learning experiences remain primarily theoretical rather than providing practical opportunities for trainees to understand and address real community challenges.

Participants also identified several factors that affect the effective implementation of community-oriented curriculum components. These included limited teaching and learning resources, large class sizes, inadequate institutional support, and insufficient mechanisms for facilitating community engagement activities. According to respondents, these challenges reduce the capacity of teacher education institutions to provide practical learning experiences that connect academic knowledge with the realities of local communities.

The document analysis findings showed a similar pattern. The review of teacher education curriculum frameworks, course syllabi, and related policy documents indicated that community engagement, problem-solving, contextual learning, and competency development are recognized as important components of teacher preparation. For example, the Teacher Education Curriculum Framework of Ethiopia (MoE, 2023) emphasizes the need to prepare teachers who can understand and respond to community needs through competency-based and context-responsive learning approaches. This demonstrates that community-oriented teacher preparation is clearly acknowledged at the policy and curriculum design levels.

Similarly, the reviewed course syllabi included provisions for practical and experiential learning activities, such as school practicum, field experiences, and community-related activities, which are consistent with national curriculum expectations (MoE, 2023). However, the analysis revealed that these intended curriculum components are not consistently reflected in actual teaching practices. In many cases, classroom instruction continues to focus mainly on theoretical knowledge, with limited opportunities for student teachers to apply their learning in authentic community settings.

The analysis of assessment practices also revealed a gap between curriculum expectations and implementation. Although competency-based education emphasizes the demonstration of practical skills, problem-solving abilities, and community engagement competencies, assessment practices within teacher education programs remain largely focused on theoretical understanding and examination performance. The curriculum and assessment guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2023) indicate a continued reliance on conventional evaluation approaches, suggesting that competency-based and community-oriented assessment practices have not yet been fully integrated.

Therefore, the findings highlight a gap between curriculum intentions and actual implementation practices. While policy documents and curriculum frameworks demonstrate a strong commitment to preparing socially responsive teachers, the translation of these commitments into classroom activities, practical experiences, and assessment systems remains limited. Strengthening community-based learning opportunities, improving institutional support, and adopting more practice-oriented assessment approaches are therefore essential steps toward achieving a more responsive and development-oriented teacher education system in Ethiopia.

Curriculum–Competency Mismatch and the Gap between Curriculum Intentions and Community Expectations

The difference between what teacher education curricula provide and what communities expect from future teachers can be understood as a curriculum–competency mismatch. This mismatch occurs when the knowledge, skills, and values emphasized in formal curriculum documents do not fully correspond with the practical abilities and social responsibilities required in real community settings. In other words, while the curriculum may outline relevant goals and competencies, challenges remain in translating these intentions into the professional capabilities needed for context-responsive teaching and community engagement.

The document analysis showed that the teacher education curriculum is organized around several important components, including relevant subject content, pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, practicum experiences, and opportunities for community-based learning. These components demonstrate a clear commitment to preparing teachers who possess both academic knowledge and the practical capacity to contribute to classroom improvement and community development.

This curriculum structure is consistent with international perspectives on effective teacher preparation. The UNESCO Teacher Policy Guidelines (2021) emphasize that quality teacher education should integrate subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, practical teaching experiences, and community engagement to develop professionally competent and socially responsible teachers. Similarly, the OECD (2020) highlights the importance of competency-based and learner-centered approaches that enable teachers to apply knowledge in real-world contexts rather than simply transmit information. The DigCompEdu Framework (European Commission, 2017) and the Incheon Declaration for SDG 4 (UNESCO, 2015) also stress the importance of experiential learning, reflective practice, and socially connected teacher preparation.

Despite this strong alignment at the policy and curriculum design levels, the findings indicate that significant implementation challenges remain. Important competencies, including sustained community engagement, context-based problem-solving, experiential teaching practices, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, have not been sufficiently developed in practice. This suggests that although these competencies are recognized within curriculum documents, they are not consistently transformed into meaningful learning experiences for teacher trainees.

The perspectives of instructors and curriculum experts further confirmed this gap. Participants explained that many graduates demonstrate relatively strong theoretical understanding but have limited practical skills related to community engagement, local problem-solving, and applying knowledge in real-life educational contexts. This indicates a disconnect between the intended outcomes of teacher education curricula and the actual competencies developed through the learning process.

This situation can be better understood through curriculum implementation theory, which distinguishes among the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the attained curriculum. Although the intended curriculum places considerable emphasis on practicum, field experiences, and community-oriented learning, the implemented curriculum often remains focused on completing course content and preparing students for examinations. Consequently, opportunities for developing practical and context-responsive competencies become limited. Institutional challenges, including insufficient practicum duration, weak school–community partnerships, limited field supervision, and assessment systems that emphasize theoretical knowledge, further contribute to this implementation gap.

The findings also reflect a tension between constructivist approaches to learning and traditional transmission-based teaching practices. Constructivist perspectives emphasize that learners develop meaningful understanding through experience, reflection, and interaction with their environment. However, when teacher education relies mainly on lectures and theoretical instruction; opportunities for experiential knowledge construction become restricted. As a result, graduates may possess academic knowledge but remain less prepared to perform effectively in applied teaching and community development roles.

Key informants consistently emphasized that, although teacher education curricula formally promote community engagement and practical learning, implementation remains largely theoretical. One instructor explained that “students are exposed more to classroom-based lectures than to real community situations where they can apply what they learn.” Similarly, focus group participants noted that “practicum experiences are too short and do not fully prepare us for real school and community challenges.” These reflections demonstrate a shared concern that existing experiential and community-based learning opportunities are insufficient to develop the practical competencies expected from future teachers.

Participants further identified limited school–community collaboration, inadequate supervision during field experiences, and examination-focused assessment systems as major barriers to competency development. Overall, the qualitative evidence highlights a persistent gap between curriculum intentions and actual educational experiences. While teacher education programs have established a foundation for preparing socially responsible teachers, stronger efforts are needed to ensure that curriculum implementation provides meaningful opportunities for teacher trainees to engage with communities, apply knowledge in authentic contexts, and develop the problem-solving skills required for sustainable community development.

Stakeholders’ Perceptions of the Contribution of Teacher Education Curricula to Community Development

Stakeholders’ perceptions of how teacher education curricula contribute to community development can be understood as a multidimensional construct informed by evidence from questionnaires, interviews,

focus group discussions, and document analysis. The combined findings indicate that teacher education curricula are perceived to make a moderate contribution to community development. While the curriculum includes elements that promote community responsiveness, its actual contribution is limited by continuing gaps between curriculum intentions and the realities of implementation.

Previous studies support this finding by highlighting similar challenges within teacher preparation programs in Ethiopia. Gemechu and Aba-Oli (2024) noted that curriculum implementation is often affected by theory-focused instruction, weak connections between academic preparation and practical training, and limited opportunities for competency development in authentic school environments. Likewise, Kebede and Asgedom (2024) found that teacher education programs continue to face challenges related to less relevant curriculum content, inadequate practicum experiences, and weak integration of community- and workplace-based learning opportunities, which ultimately affect graduates' practical effectiveness.

Findings from interviews with instructors and curriculum experts revealed that stakeholders generally recognize the positive intentions of teacher education curricula in promoting community-oriented education. Participants acknowledged that curriculum documents emphasize important approaches such as participatory learning, contextualized teaching, problem-solving, and social responsibility. However, they also emphasized that these objectives are not sufficiently translated into actual learning experiences. As one instructor explained, "The curriculum promotes community engagement, but trainees rarely experience structured engagement with real community issues during training." This reflects the perception that while the curriculum framework provides a strong conceptual foundation for community responsiveness, its practical implementation remains limited.

The perspectives of student teachers gathered through focus group discussions further confirmed this concern. Participants indicated that their training experiences are still dominated by classroom lectures, theoretical discussions, and examination preparation, with limited opportunities for direct interaction with communities. One commonly expressed view was that "we are taught how to engage with the community, but we are not given enough practical exposure to actually do it." This suggests that experiential and community-based learning opportunities remain insufficient, reducing the extent to which teacher education programs can develop graduates who are prepared to address real community challenges.

The quantitative findings also support the qualitative evidence. Descriptive analysis showed that respondents rated the contribution of teacher education curricula to community development at a moderate level. Although participants recognized the curriculum's contribution to developing awareness of social responsibility and community issues, relatively lower ratings were observed in areas requiring direct application, such as practical engagement, problem-solving, and experiential learning. This indicates that curriculum objectives are only partially translated into observable graduate competencies.

Table 3
Teacher Education Curriculum Contribution to Community Development

Indicators	Level of contribution	Percentage	Interpretation
Curriculum contribution to community development	Moderate	65%	The curriculum is partially effective in linking learning objectives to community outcomes.
Practical engagement of students	Low to Moderate	55%	Student engagement in hands-on community learning is limited.
Applied problem-solving skills	Low to Moderate	52%	Real-world and contextual problem-solving is insufficiently emphasized.
Experiential learning opportunities	Low	45%	Experiential and field-based learning is weakly integrated.
Competency development outcome	Moderate	63%	Curriculum goals are only partly translated into measurable competencies.

Source: Questionnaire Survey (2026)

As presented in Table 3, the overall contribution of teacher education curricula to community development was rated at a moderate level, approximately 63%–65%. This finding suggests that the curriculum has made progress in promoting community-oriented competencies; however, a considerable gap remains between intended curriculum outcomes and actual educational experiences. Specifically, practical engagement (55%), applied problem-solving (52%), and experiential learning (45%) received comparatively lower ratings. These results indicate that student teachers have limited opportunities to participate in authentic community-based activities where they can apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations.

Document analysis revealed that teacher education curriculum frameworks in Ethiopia formally recognize important components such as community-based learning, practicum experiences, competency development, and contextualized pedagogy. These elements are consistent with current global directions in teacher education reform, which increasingly emphasize experiential learning, practical competence, and stronger connections between teacher preparation and real-world contexts. However, the analysis also showed that implementation guidelines provide limited operational details regarding how these components should be effectively integrated into classroom practices, field experiences, and assessment systems.

This challenge has also been highlighted in recent studies. Tafese and Kopp (2024) found that Ethiopian higher education institutions continue to experience gaps between curriculum design and actual implementation, particularly in connecting theoretical knowledge with practical application and developing applied competencies among graduates. Similarly, Gebretsadik et al. (2023) noted that

teacher education reforms in Ethiopia face systemic challenges that affect effective curriculum implementation and reduce the responsiveness of teacher preparation programs to community needs. These findings suggest that the major limitation is not necessarily the absence of community-oriented goals within the curriculum, but rather the institutional, structural, and implementation barriers that prevent these goals from being fully realized.

The perspectives of stakeholders further support the existence of a theory–practice gap in teacher education. Participants generally acknowledged that curriculum documents provide a strong foundation for promoting community engagement, problem-solving, and competency development. However, they also emphasized that these intentions are only partially reflected in actual teaching practices and learning experiences. This indicates a difference between what the curriculum intends to achieve, what is implemented in educational settings, and what competencies are ultimately developed among graduates.

These findings are consistent with curriculum implementation theory, which distinguishes among the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the attained curriculum. In this study, the intended curriculum demonstrates a clear commitment to preparing socially responsive teachers through community engagement and competency-based approaches. However, the implemented curriculum appears to place greater emphasis on theoretical content coverage and examination requirements, resulting in only partial achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Recent global research further illustrates that curriculum innovation alone is insufficient unless supported by effective implementation mechanisms. Studies on technology-enhanced teacher education, including virtual reality (VR)-based learning approaches, show that even innovative curriculum models face challenges related to limited resources, inadequate practical exposure, and insufficient opportunities for authentic teaching practice. Integrating immersive technologies such as virtual reality into teacher preparation programs has been suggested as one possible approach for strengthening experiential learning. VR-based environments can provide student teachers with opportunities to practice classroom management, instructional decision-making, and teaching strategies in realistic but controlled settings. Such approaches can also support reflective practice by providing immediate feedback and repeated opportunities for improvement, particularly where access to high-quality mentoring and supervision is limited.

Likewise, researches on artificial intelligence-integrated curriculum highlights that educational reforms cannot achieve meaningful outcomes without adequate pedagogical support, teacher preparation, and classroom-level implementation strategies. Although AI-based initiatives may introduce valuable digital competencies, their effectiveness depends on educators' ability to transform these competencies into practical teaching methods, assessment approaches, and learner-centered activities. Without sufficient implementation support, curriculum reforms may remain largely theoretical, creating a gap between policy expectations and classroom realities.

Implementation of Teacher Education Curricula through Classroom Instruction and Community-Based Training

The findings from document analysis and interviews indicate that curriculum implementation in classroom settings is influenced by both formal curriculum structures and the realities of teaching practice. Although policy documents emphasize learner-centered approaches, competency-based education, and active learning strategies, actual classroom delivery remains largely shaped by instructor-centered methods. Instructors and student teachers reported that factors such as large class sizes, limited instructional resources, and time constraints often make it difficult to consistently apply interactive and participatory teaching approaches.

Focus group discussion participants explained that methods such as group discussions, presentations, and collaborative activities are sometimes used; however, these approaches are not regularly practiced across all courses. As a result, classroom instruction continues to rely heavily on lectures and content coverage. This finding is consistent with recent Ethiopian studies, which indicate that institutional conditions, availability of teaching resources, and variations in instructors' pedagogical capacity significantly influence the implementation of active learning approaches. Therefore, curriculum implementation is shaped not only by policy expectations but also by the broader educational environment in which teaching and learning take place.

Community-based training, particularly practicum, teaching practice, and school attachment programs, emerged as one of the most important components for developing experiential learning and professional competence among student teachers. Most focus group participants acknowledged that school-based experiences helped them improve confidence, lesson delivery skills, classroom management abilities, and understanding of actual teaching environments. Similarly, interviews with supervisors and mentor teachers confirmed that practicum experiences provide valuable opportunities for student teachers to connect theoretical knowledge with practical classroom realities.

However, both participant accounts and supporting evidence revealed several challenges that limit the effectiveness of field-based training. These challenges include inadequate mentoring, weak supervision mechanisms, limited feedback opportunities, and insufficient coordination between teacher education institutions and partner schools. Such limitations reduce the ability of practicum experiences to fully develop important professional competencies, including reflective teaching, adaptive instruction, classroom problem-solving, and context-responsive decision-making.

The findings suggest a structural gap in the way teacher education curriculum implementation connects theoretical preparation with practical experiences. Although curriculum reforms emphasize competency-based education, integrated school engagement, and community responsiveness, evidence from interviews and focus group discussions indicates that these goals have not yet been fully achieved. Weak partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools, limited professional development opportunities for teacher educators, and inconsistent practicum arrangements contribute

to this disconnect. Consequently, student teachers often graduate with adequate theoretical knowledge but only moderate levels of practical competence needed for complex teaching environments.

Thus, the implementation of teacher education curricula in Ethiopia can be described as functionally active but structurally fragmented. While existing approaches contribute positively to knowledge development and professional awareness, their effectiveness is weaker in developing experiential, problem-solving, and community-oriented competencies. The findings therefore highlight the need for stronger integration between classroom instruction and field-based learning experiences to ensure that teacher preparation becomes more practical, coherent, and transformative.

To improve the effectiveness of community-based training, teacher education institutions and partner schools should establish stronger and more systematic mentorship and supervision arrangements. Clear roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms should be developed for teacher educators, supervisors, and mentor teachers involved in practicum programs. In addition, regular capacity-building activities should be provided to strengthen mentors' skills in coaching, classroom observation, and constructive feedback.

A standardized feedback and assessment system, supported by clear evaluation criteria and continuous monitoring mechanisms, should also be introduced to help student teachers reflect on their performance and improve their professional practice. Strengthening collaboration between teacher education institutions and partner schools through formal agreements, joint planning activities, and shared evaluation processes can further enhance the quality of field experiences. Finally, integrating reflective practice, adaptive teaching strategies, and problem-solving activities into practicum programs would enable student teachers to develop the competencies required to respond effectively to diverse classroom and community contexts.

Conclusion

The study concludes that community development needs are only partially reflected in the design of teacher education curricula in Ethiopia. Although national policies and curriculum frameworks demonstrate a clear commitment to community engagement, competency-based education, and context-responsive pedagogy, these priorities have not been fully transformed into well-structured and consistently implemented curriculum practices. Consequently, the level of alignment between teacher education curricula and local community development needs remains moderate, revealing a gap between policy intentions and actual curriculum implementation.

The study further concludes that teacher education curricula still have limitations in developing some of the essential knowledge, skills, and competencies required for effective community-responsive teaching. Areas such as applied problem-solving, experiential learning, indigenous knowledge integration, and sustained community engagement receive insufficient attention in practice. Stakeholders recognize that the curriculum provides a foundation for promoting community development; however, its actual contribution is reduced by implementation challenges, limited practicum opportunities, inadequate

community-based learning experiences, and continued reliance on theory-oriented instruction. These factors have resulted in only partial achievement of the intended outcomes of preparing teachers who can actively respond to community needs and contribute to local development.

Recommendations

Teacher education institutions should strengthen the integration of community development priorities by ensuring that curriculum content is closely connected with practical and community-oriented learning outcomes. This requires greater emphasis on developing measurable competencies, including applied problem-solving, experiential learning, reflective practice, and the ability to respond effectively to local contexts. Student teachers should be provided with more structured and meaningful opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real community settings through guided field activities, community-based projects, and practical learning experiences.

Furthermore, instructors, practicum coordinators, and school mentors should enhance curriculum implementation by improving both classroom teaching practices and field-based training experiences. This can be achieved through expanding practicum opportunities, strengthening supervision and mentorship systems, and promoting stronger collaboration between teacher education institutions, schools, and local communities. Providing continuous professional development for instructors and mentors can also improve their capacity to support student teachers through effective coaching, feedback, and reflective learning. These improvements will help bridge the gap between theoretical preparation and practical application, enabling teacher trainees to develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions required not only for effective classroom teaching but also for meaningful engagement in community development initiatives.

Declarations

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Dilla University. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles and institutional requirements governing research involving human participants.

Consent to Participate

All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate Declarations

Human participants were involved in this study, and therefore appropriate ethical approval and informed consent procedures were followed. All participants provided informed consent before data collection, and the confidentiality and privacy of participants were protected throughout the research process.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific financial support, grant, or funding from public, commercial, or non-profit organizations.

Author Contribution

The author was responsible for the conceptualization and development of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and preparation and writing of the manuscript. The author also reviewed and revised the manuscript critically and approved the final version for submission.

Data Availability

he author was responsible for collecting the primary data, conducting and interpreting the data analysis, and ensuring that all stages of the research were carried out in accordance with established ethical principles and procedures. The author also contributed to the preparation and writing of the manuscript.

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