ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Stakeholder Preparation for the Implementation of School Improvement Program in Secondary Schools of Amhara Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

One significant barrier to successful School Improvement Program (SIP) implementation is the scope of preparation undertaken prior to implementation. This study aims to investigate the scope of adequate preparation for effective implementation of SIP in secondary schools within Amhara National Regional State (ANRS), Ethiopia. Guided by a pragmatist stance, the study employed an Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods design (QUAN → qual). In the quantitative phase, data were collected from 1,152 teachers, 84 students, and 84 School Improvement Committee (SIC) members using 5-point Likert scale questionnaires. A one-Sample t-test was conducted to determine the overall level or extent of SIP preparation compared to the average expected mean (3.0) and One-Way ANOVA tests to identify stakeholder perception gaps. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with 10 principals and documentary reviews, analyzed through Thematic and Content Analysis to explain the "why" and "how" behind statistical trends. The results showed a considerable effect size (d = -2.51) and statistically significant systemic under preparedness (M = 2.175), much below the average expected mean (3.0) (p<.001). Lack of clarity over SIP goals and strategies, a lack of resources, poor leadership, reluctance to change, and inaccurate or insufficient data are some of the factors impeding preparation. The study concludes that, rather than serving as a strategic basis for SIP implementation, the preparatory phase is viewed as a bureaucratic roadblock. The recommendations center on improving stakeholder communication, giving training top priority, formulating precise plans, and encouraging accountability and openness.

Keywords: Stakeholder Preparation, Effective Implementation, School Improvement Program, Secondary Schools, Amhara National Regional State

1. Introduction

Quality education continues to be one of the key objectives for many nations, and one of the core elements of this goal is the introduction of various school reforms that will promote the quality of education (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). The School Improvement Program (SIP) in Ethiopia is the main tool that is used to improve the quality of education

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and promote self-improvement (MoE, 2010; Gebre, 2018). SIP places the school as the primary change agent and is based on the ideas of decentralized planning, self-evaluation, and shared leadership.

While SIP is now widely used across schools in Ethiopia, there is a great deal of discussion surrounding its effects and sustainability (Teffera & Bekele, 2019). Preparation for the success of a reform initiative must be one of the crucial yet overlooked elements that play an important role in the success of a program like this (Fullan, 2016). Preparation in this context involves having a clear goal, building competence, organizing the necessary resources, and forming strong commitment from all parties involved, including the teachers, learners, school management, and local community.

According to anecdotal reports and preliminary findings, there have been instances in many parts of Ethiopia, such as Amhara, where the implementation of SIP is done hastily or inadequately (Alemu, 2021). This early implementation, caused by insufficient preparation, ultimately destroys any possibility of creating sustainable change through the program. The reason is that the lack of proper orientation, training, and knowledge leads to making the SIP a mere process rather than a transformation (Harris, 2019).

In the current era, the world of education is undergoing dynamic changes as a result of developments in technology, demographics, and globalization (OECD, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2020). This means that secondary schools need to provide quality education to meet the challenges of the modern world. This requirement has heightened the need for School Improvement Programs (SIPs) as strategic interventions intended to boost educational performance, achieve higher academic results, and promote lifelong learning skills. For example, the extensive SIP program implemented in Ethiopia (MOE, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2023) emphasizes quality improvement via multiple dimensions such as leadership, instruction, learning conditions, and community involvement.

Successful implementation of SIP involves three important stages, namely: preparation, implementation, and monitoring/evaluation. The preparation stage is critical since the implementation process depends on whether the program will fit the specific needs of the school, have adequate resources, and receive sufficient stakeholder support (Fullan, 2019; Fullan & Langworthy, 2021; Hattie, 2022; Marzano & Pickering, 2005).

Effective SIP planning involves several elements that are interrelated and necessary for effective change, starting from a diagnostic assessment that involves analyzing data, involving stakeholders, and conducting self-assessment to determine where improvements need to be made based on evidence (Fullan & Langworthy, 2021; Marzano & Pickering, 2005); a vision statement that reflects where the school needs to go next must then be developed based on the outcome of the diagnostic assessment and educational goals (Hattie, 2022).

As an addition to the aforementioned first step, stakeholder participation and ownership become inevitable because they require full participation of all stakeholders, from teachers to students to parents, and the community at large (Fullan, 2001, 2019). Finally, the concept of structural readiness is essential in ensuring implementation success and requires that there is sufficient availability of necessary resources, such as money, staff, and equipment (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), good leadership, and proper management to facilitate implementation (Leithwood & Louis, 2002), as well as professional development of educators so as to equip them with necessary skills for implementation (Lieberman & Pointer, 2000).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The School Improvement Program (SIP) is an important part of Ethiopia's education policy that aims to improve the quality of education by allowing schools to self-diagnose and make changes according to their own circumstances (Ministry of Education, 2007; Tadesse et al., 2024). In spite of the importance of the SIP and the efforts made by the country to decentralize and emphasize quality control, research clearly shows that the benefits of the SIP have not been fully utilized in secondary schools, especially those in the Amhara region (Merawi et al., 2021). The primary issue lies in the lack of clear preparation of stakeholders to ensure its successful implementation.

Several empirical research works prove that the general level of the implementation of SIP in different areas of Ethiopia, including the Amhara region, is relatively poor to moderately low and does not correspond to the anticipated level (Alemu, 2021; Tadesse et al., 2024). The most important aspect here is the link between low implementation and poor academic performance of learners and bad results on regional exams (Tadesse et al., 2024). One major reason why the status of the policy remains low all through is the discovery that the preparation carried out to implement SIP was largely inadequate since stakeholders such as teachers and principals were not properly prepared before implementation took place (Jemal, 2013; Lemessa, 2016).

Stakeholders have indicated that there is a lack of perception about awareness towards SIP objectives and the restructured frameworks (Addisu, 2022; Jemal, 2013; Tadesse et al., 2024). There is an observation of inadequate and ongoing training to enhance capacity building among teachers and school administrators in developing strategies that are crucial to implementing the key elements of SIP, like teaching and learning and instructional leadership (Addisu, 2022; Tadesse et al., 2024). SIP is effective depending on the "perceived effectiveness" and commitment to the program by the stakeholders such as teachers, schools' administrators, parents, and community members, which determines the degree of its continuity (Robinson et al., 2009; Yishak & Triegaardt, 2022). Nevertheless, there have been several documented instances of lack of collaboration, good

relations, and a sense of ownership among the stakeholders that prevented the successful execution of the strategy (Addisu, 2022; Jemal, 2013).

Literature from around the world dealing with educational reforms has emphasized that for any educational reform to be considered effective; there is a need to have a process where everyone is included in the decision-making process. It must involve everyone in their preparation and readiness to make sure there is legitimacy, openness, and ownership in the policies (Fullan & Langworthy, 2021; UNESCO, 2015). The early stages of involvement and preparedness are crucial in determining the power relationships, teamwork, and feedback systems that influence the efficacy of policies (Fullan & Langworthy, 2021).

Since most of the existing local research tends to emphasize the problem of implementation (for example, the scarcity of resources and competency of the leaders implementing them), there is a gap in the empirical literature with respect to the systematic exploration of the prerequisite for the implementation of the project, the scope of preparedness among the stakeholders, which includes awareness, training, resource mobilization, and cooperation. If we do not understand what stage we are at in terms of preparedness, it will be hard to address the root cause of the problem.

The key issue concerning SIP implementation in the Amhara region is the possible gap between the intention behind the policy and its actual implementation, which may arise due to poor preparations (Dabesa & Cheramlak, 2019). While the implementation of SIP itself is required, how well the stakeholders, such as the SIC, teachers, and pupils, are prepared for this in secondary schools in the region is not known empirically. This could mean that the foundation principle of SIP is automatically rendered invalid, resulting in resource wastage, disappointment among stakeholders, and eventually, poor-quality education (Dereso, 2025 & Mengistu et al., 2022). In light of this problem, the present study aimed to explore the extent of stakeholder preparedness as a prelude to effective implementation of SIP in secondary schools in Amhara region. To accomplish this goal, the following key questions guided the study:

1. To what extent do secondary schools in the Amhara Region adequately prepared for SIP implementation?
2. Why is the current level of SIP preparation perceived as inadequate?
3. What factors contribute to the perceived ineffectiveness of SIP self-assessments?
4. How does a weak collaborative planning culture limit a school's ability to prioritize its needs?

2. Methods

The research was conducted under the pragmatism philosophy paradigm. Pragmatism philosophy was chosen because of its capacity to go beyond the constructivist and positivist dichotomy in research, concentrating on "what works" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The framework enabled an approach that incorporated both objective measurement of SIP preparation and the subjective experiences of education administrators in the Amhara region. By giving priority to the problem under investigation than the method itself, the study addressed the intricacies of school improvement, which is not only an operational task but also a social phenomenon (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021).

The use of Mixed Methods Research (MMR), that is, an Explanatory Sequential design (QUAN → qual) was conducted. The quantitative aspect gave an idea of how SIPs are prepared in the region as a whole, whereas the qualitative phase followed up on the statistics and gave meaning to them by looking at why and how these gaps occurred (Yishak & Triegaardt, 2024). The use of such an approach enabled the researchers to select participants in a meaningful way based on their results obtained from the survey, thus increasing the internal validity of the research.

In order to have a regionally representative sample, the study utilized a four-stage multi-stage cluster probability sampling along with purposive sampling. The three zones and three city administrations sampled through simple random sampling were West Gondar, Central Gondar, Awi, Gondar, Bahir Dar, and Dessie, respectively, followed by the random selection of nine woredas and nine sub-cities. The third step included the selection of 42 secondary schools on the basis of stratified random sampling in order to consider the dynamics of urban/rural areas and center/periphery regions. In the last stage, 1,152 teachers were selected on the basis of systematic random sampling, with the number of respondents calculated according to the Cochran (1977) formula, considering that the cluster effect size was equal to 3, while 84 students and 84 SIC members were selected using simple random sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify 10 school principals as the key informants in order to obtain insightful information on administration, thus increasing the number of respondents to 1,330. Triangulation of data was conducted using these primary sources of information as well as secondary sources such as SIP manuals and strategic planning documents.

Data were gathered using a mixed methodology of an 83-item 5-point Likert scale survey that was modified from the Self Improvement Plan of the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (2012), semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes with school administrators, and documentation analysis of SIP plans and self-assessments. The instrument used to assess the level of SIP readiness underwent double scrutiny for rigour; content validity was determined by expert review and piloting, while reliability was demonstrated through Cronbach's Alpha values that exceeded 0.729. "Trustworthiness" in qualitative research

was ensured through member checks, audit trails, and triangulation of data (Creswell, 2018).

The data collection strategy used an explanatory approach as well, with Phase I being a quantitative study that aimed to find out the key gaps and statistical anomalies through a survey. This was succeeded by Phase II, a nested approach that focused on conducting qualitative interviews and document reviews in order to provide explanation for the "decoupling" phenomenon between official rhetoric and classroom realities. Finally, both sources of information were brought together in the synthesis phase for an overall evaluation of the situation of the SIP in the Amhara region. This involved a dual process that started with the collection of quantitative data to establish general statistical trends, followed by a qualitative process to investigate the reasons for these trends (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In Phase 1, teachers, learners, and SIC members' responses were subjected to analysis using SPSS v26.0 through measures such as means, standard deviation, and One Sample T-test on the status of the SIP preparation compared to the average expected mean (3.0). One Way Analysis of Variance Test was additionally applied to determine gaps in perceptions amongst stakeholders. The second phase involved thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and documentary analyses using the six-step method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022), generating a core theme known as Systemic Unreadiness. Integrating the two phases during interpretation enabled the qualitative narratives to offer a "thick description" of the local causes, thus corroborating the findings from the statistical data to ensure full comprehension of the schools' operations in the Amhara Region (Bazeley, 2018; Miles et al., 2020).

3. Results

Demographic analysis showed the sample to be heavily skewed towards males (73.8%) rather than females (26.2%). The bulk of the respondents were aged between 31 to 40 years (65.4%). Education-wise, the level of education of this sample was quite high since most had a BA/BSc/B.Ed (82.3%) and only a few had an MA degree (9.5%), confirming that most practitioners and committee members meet the requisite professional standards. Additionally, there was a high level of career stability among the participants, as 65.5% claimed 11 to 15 years of experience while 24.7% claimed 16 to 20 years, suggesting that the results are based on the experiences of highly knowledgeable workers in the secondary education system of the Amhara region.

3.1. Results of Quantitative Data Analysis

For school improvement initiatives to be successful there is need for a joint effort that involves a series of stages with the first stage being the crucial phase of preparation. As stated by the Ministry of Education's School Improvement Plan (2007), for an initiative to be implemented effectively, all stakeholders must be aware of the program's objectives and adequately prepared for planning. A five-point Likert scale, ranging from very low to very high, was used by teachers, students, and SIP committee members to gauge their level of basic readiness.

Table 1:

One- sample t-test Statistical Summary on the Status of SIP Preparation

Variable	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	Df	p-value	Cohen's d
Preparation	**1104**	**2.17**	**0.32**	**-83.55**	**1103**	**< .001**	**-2.51**

The mean score of 2.17 is much lower compared to the test value of 3.0. Based on a standard Likert Scale, this means that the results lie between "Disagree" and "Strongly Disagree". This shows that most stakeholder's think that their school is not ready for SIP. The t-statistic (t = -83.55) is also very high and negative. It is evident that the sample mean is far from the anticipated mid-point (Test Value = 3.0) by a considerable number of standard errors. The negative sign shows the direction; the level of preparation is lower than the standard requirement. As $p < .05$ (or $p < .001$), the null hypothesis is rejected because there is a significant difference between the actual and expected levels of preparation. Effect size is (Cohen's d = -2.515). In scholarly studies, any value of Cohen's d greater than 0.8 is regarded as "large." In this case, any score above 2.51 would be very large. Hence, it can be concluded that the absence of preparatory work is not merely accidental but a real systemic problem.

According to the output of the one-sample t-test, the readiness of Amhara Region secondary schools for the School Improvement Program is significantly less than the expected midpoint (Test Value = 3.0). This conclusion can be drawn based on the mean rating of the respondents, which is M = 2.17, SD = 0.32. It suggests that there is a significant difference between the observed mean rating and the test value, $t(1103) = -83.56$, $p < .001$. In addition, the value of the effect size computed using Cohen's d came out to be -2.51, suggesting very high practical importance. This clearly shows that the schools have poor preparation concerning the various aspects of SIP. The lower and upper bound of the confidence interval for the mean difference [-0.84, -0.80] is an additional

proof that the true mean of the population concerning preparation is always significantly lower than the desired level.

Whereas the policy (SIP) is theoretically sound, the preparation work has not been done for the Amhara Region. The mean score of 2.17 indicates that both the teachers and the committees have been called upon to execute a program that they have not been prepared for. Initiating an involved program with a very poor level of preparation (mean = 2.17) means that the "Practices" will also suffer from the same problem. The enormous effect size (d = 2.51) supports strongly recommending that the "Preparation" stage be stopped or redone before expecting better student outcomes.

Table 2:

One way ANOVA for the Status of Preparation to implement SIP

Total Preparation

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.556	2	.278	2.591	.075
Within Groups	118.144	1101	.107		
Total	118.700	1103			

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was done to see whether the level of preparation among the school respondents differed. Surprisingly, the findings show that there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the teachers, the students, and the members of the SIP committee, F (2, 1101) = 2.591, p = .075. Indeed, the statistic Eta squared (eta 2 =.005) proves that the assertion is valid. The respondent categories did not significantly affect the preparedness scores, as depicted in the statistic Eta squared (eta 2 =.005).

Table 3:

Combined one way ANOVA and sample t- test summary for SIP preparation

Variable	Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	One-Sample t-test (Test Value=3.0)	One-Way ANOVA
Preparation	Teachers	950	2.166	0.353	t = -83.56	F(2, 1101) = 2.59
	Students	78	2.231	0.000	df = 1103	p = .075
	SIPCom.	76	2.231	0.000	p < .001	(Not Significant)
	Total	1104	2.175	0.328	(Highly Significant)	(Uniform Low Scores

The relation between the results of the t-test and ANOVA reveals a very important finding; it is not an assumption but the reality of the situation. In almost all studies conducted on the subject, SIC tends to score more than teachers; nevertheless, in the current study, even SIP participants, who are actually the designers of the program, scored less than the cutoff mean of 2.23. Such perfect agreement among the three sets of participants proves that the problem of insufficient availability of resources, training, and planning is obvious to the administrators, the implementers, and the recipients themselves. While there is no significant difference in ANOVA test results ($p > .05$), there is a huge practical difference compared to the target. Therefore, the issue is not one of conflict among the participants; the issue is the absence of capacity among all parties involved.

3.2. Results of Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was used as the method for the qualitative research, which was intended to understand the 'why' and 'how' of the quantitative data collected. The major themes developed include 'Systemic Unreadiness,' which focuses on preparation and context. Systemic unreadiness is the main theme that is described by the lack of correspondence between the mandates from the Ministry of Education and school capabilities in the Amhara region. Systemic unreadiness involves three important sub-themes: bureaucratic delays, when guidelines and budgets are delivered too late to allow for adherence to the academic year schedule; cultural reluctance, as older employees see the adoption of standardized reforms as something imposed on them rather than based on their experience and knowledge; and policy-practice disconnect, when strict standards

imposed on schools do not take into consideration the specificities of the region, such as language issues, poverty, and the recent conflict. This creates a condition when schools have to start complicated changes immediately, without the necessary time or employees' support.

Systemic unreadiness at the principal 1's school from Bahir Dar City is exemplified by the following quote regarding bureaucratic challenges:

> The major problem we encounter is that the SIP timetable is not aligned with our actual academic schedule. More often than not, the directive for implementing SIP in its first year is only made available to us mid-way through the school year, specifically during the middle of the first semester. Due to this bureaucratic delay, there is little time to properly plan for our activities and the process appears to be rushed and half-hearted.

The systemic unreadiness at the principal 2's school, a secondary school in Gondar City, is described as follows, based on cultural challenges faced:

> There is a strong cultural resistance in my school, especially in older teachers with 20 or 30 years of teaching experience who perceive SIP as a fleeting 'fad' coming out of the Ministry of Education and not something more fundamental. The veterans believe that their long years of teaching should not be subjected to a new, complex system about which they were not even consulted.

The third principal is from one of the secondary schools in Dessie City, who cites the systemic unreadiness of his school with respect to the policy-practice mismatch as follows:

> There is an enormous policy-practice mismatch because the manuals, simplified guidelines, and translated guides are yet to be sent to us by the regional office. We are required to adopt 'modern' SIP modules according to the international standards, but we have nothing in our hands to educate our staff about these standards. It seems like an office policy drafted in an air-conditioned room in Addis Ababa, which is irrelevant to the crowded classrooms of a recovering zone.

Principle 4, from one of the secondary schools in the Central Gondar Zone, argues that there is systemic unreadiness in his school in relation to the policy-practice gap as follows:

> The gap is purely financial and time-related. On the one hand, the policy pushes us to be innovative and modern. However, on the other hand, the actual budget of the block grant comes in late by four to five months and,

> when it does come; it can barely pay our electricity and water bill costs. In essence, we start planning to excel in August, yet, by November; we are merely struggling to open the gates of the school because we do not have any cash flow at all.

As shown by Principal 5 of one of the secondary schools in West Gondar Zone, the problem of systemic unreadiness as related to psychology and post-conflict environment is as follows:

> In this particular zone, the problem of readiness is not only bureaucratic but it is very much psychological in light of our post-conflict environment. I am trying to manage my staff through the trauma and displacement caused during the earlier years, but SIP demands that we meet certain performance measures despite the vacuum in which we operate. People are just not prepared for strategic thinking at this time.

Principal 6, who is from one of the secondary schools of Awi Zone, explains the existence of system readiness through the following example of a huge problem of staff mobility at his school:

> We have a huge problem of staff mobility that makes our efforts useless. We train our whole leadership group in the month of August on the new SIP indicators; however, when September comes around, almost half of them leave for other schools assigned by the Woreda office. It leaves us in the position where we have to start everything all over again.

Principal 7, from one of the secondary schools of Gondar City, explains the existence of systemic unreadiness in his school in regard to a lack of human resources as follows:

> The SIP documentation process is intended for institutions that are fully equipped with secretaries and data input specialists. As the principal of the school, I end up serving as a clerk, data input specialist, and supervisor at once. This makes me incapable of supervising the process and making sure its quality is optimal. Thus, the systemic unreadiness in my institution consists of a lack of human resources to cope with the required workload.

Principal 8, from one of the secondary schools of Awi Zone, highlights the existence of systemic unreadiness in his school in terms of the top-down approach of the SIP as follows:

> As the SIP assessment process employs a top-down strategy, it gives us absolutely no room for adaptation according to our agricultural schedules. At harvest time, we observe a marked decrease in students'

> attendance; however, this aspect is completely ignored in the tools of evaluation developed by the SIP. Our performance is evaluated based on the assumption that the school works under urban conditions and is open all year long.

The Principal of one of the secondary schools of Bahir Dar city describes the systemic readiness of his school with regard to official guidelines of SIP as follows:

> In many cases, the official guidelines issued by the Regional Education Bureau are not flexible and leave no space for implementing SIP through phases that are necessary for the development of our school. It is said that we need to comply with all indicators at once, which is impossible, considering our current teaching staff. However, were the policy to give us the chance to perfect our knowledge of each area successively, we would see some achievements.

The Principal of one of the secondary schools of Dessie city describes the systemic readiness of his school with regard to the true spirit of school improvement as follows:

> From my experience, it seems that the implementation process is seen by the district not as an important step towards improving the educational process but as a kind of race for achieving a set milestone in time. This results in the systematic pressure of submitting quarterly reports on time, so that the data we present turns out to be 'sanitized'.

Systemic Unreadiness based on qualitative data from 10 secondary school principals in the Amhara Region emerges as the main impediment for SIP adoption, with an ongoing inconsistency between central directives and local capabilities. The content analysis of the principal interviews (P1-P10) shows that the bureaucratic nature of guidelines and financial distribution pressures schools to concentrate on adherence to the regulations rather than on learning outcomes. This systemic dysfunction is further aggravated by the high turnover rate among the staff and the insufficient support services, resulting in the loss of institutional knowledge and shifting priorities of the leaders (P6 and P7). In addition, the gap between policies and practices is pronounced since the standardized requirements cannot be adjusted to the local context of post-conflict stress, agricultural seasons, and unavailable translations (P3, P5, P8, and P9). Thus, all these factors culminate into organizational paralysis hindering the program's success even before its initiation.

4. Discussion

This research seeks to evaluate the extent and nature of readiness to implement the School Improvement Program (SIP) among secondary schools in the Amhara region. From the triangulation of the quantitative results of t-test and ANOVA, the qualitative data from principals' interviews, and content analysis of school documents, a complete picture of "Systemic Unreadiness" can be drawn. The following section discusses these findings based on the existing literature.

First of all, the quantitative analysis provided a clear starting point for the research. The results of one-sample t-test ($M = 2.175$, $p < .001$, $d = -2.51$) clearly show that schools operate at a significantly lower level compared to the national benchmark for readiness. Moreover, the huge effect size shows that the problem cannot be considered an occasional oversight but a systemic failure. More importantly, the results of One-Way ANOVA ($p = .075$) show that there is no statistically significant difference in perceptions of teachers, students, and members of SIP committees. Thus, this total agreement demonstrates that the problem under consideration is a real situation and not just subjective complaints of school members. This idea coincides with what has been discussed before by Shiferaw and Berhanu (2018).

One of the major reasons why schools are unprepared is related to time discrepancies between policy and practice. Principals 1, 4, and 10 pointed out that SIP guidelines and block grants typically arrive mid-first semester. The qualitative data was supported by results from the documentary content analysis in which 70% of all school action plans were completed only between October and November.

This issue violates the main tenets of school improvement emphasized by Fullan (2015) and Hopkins (2013) and states that preparation for effective practice is essential. With later arrival of guidelines, the preparation process turns into a "race against time" (principal 10) rather than a quest for achieving quality. In line with Merawi et al. (2021), the current findings confirm the existence of a considerable gap between policy and implementation of SIP in the Amhara region due to unrealistic expectations in the national framework.

The qualitative analysis indicated an obvious "policy-practice mismatch". Specifically, principals 3, 5, and 8 noted problems with strict, "all-or-nothing" national guidelines that disregard particularities of the Amhara region. One of them concerns the inability of SIP assessment methods to accommodate absenteeism of students caused by harvest cycles (principal 8) and mental problems resulting from recent psychological toll of post-conflict trauma (Principal 5).

Indeed, the documentary analysis was consistent with this view, revealing that SIP manuals are simply photocopies of documents from the national level without any indications of local adaptation or translation, thereby undermining the "psychological and practical commitment" needed for successful implementation. It suggests that the top-down approach has not taken into account the need for distributed leadership and shared vision (Harris & Jones, 2024), thereby giving rise to the unrealistic expectation highlighted by principal 9 to "meet all indicators at once despite inadequate staffing."

In its literature analysis, the importance of stakeholder mobilization in promoting ownership is emphasized (Shanko & Kabtyimer, 2024). However, qualitative findings revealed the alienating nature of such a project. Principal 2 mentioned that there was "cultural resistance" on the part of veterans in the school system since they saw the whole thing as a new fad that devalued their professional expertise and experience.

Resistance was also fueled by high staff turnover (principal 6) and lack of clerical assistance (principal 7), which made it impossible to form "Professional Learning Communities." In other words, instead of moving towards the "deep commitment" discussed by Bush and Sargsyan (2020), teachers and school administrators seemed to work only for survival purposes.

Furthermore, the aspect of preparation must also consider the "resource-based view" (Greenwald et al., 2023) of education. The literature review indicated that allocation of resources was required to provide the input for SIP but the data reveals that there is no preparedness regarding finances whatsoever. According to Principle 4, block grants may arrive as late as five months after the need and be insufficient to cover the basic utility costs.

Financial unpreparedness, thus, acts like a major constraint to the SIP even before it gets started. As pointed out by the World Bank (2024), poor financial skills among other reasons explain why the few financial resources available are not focused on meeting the instructional priorities of schools that have been identified in the School Report Card (SRC). This further supports the "collective lack of capacity" within the system, as initially observed from the quantitative t-test.

In conclusion, the preparation towards SIP implementation in secondary schools of Amhara region can only be described as "Isomorphic Mimicry". Schools in the region tend to adopt the physical formality of preparation without having the functional readiness to meet any improvement goal. The overwhelming agreement on the state of under preparedness identified in the quantitative stage can be attributed to the qualitative findings such as bureaucratic inefficiency, cultural barriers, and disjuncture between policy and practice, all of which are physically represented by delayed and non-localized documentation in the schools.

5. Conclusion

Thus, from the findings above, the researcher can conclude that the preparation process for SIP implementation among the secondary schools in the Amhara Region is marked by isomorphic mimicry. As schools manage to create the appearance of being ready through signed action plans and lists of committee members, there lacks the ability to actually follow the procedures outlined in the prepared document. The statistically evident consensus of the ineffectiveness in preparation among all respondent groups, along with the time delays and contradictions between policy and practices, indicate the lack of strategic importance in the preparation process for schools, rendering it merely an administrative one. Therefore, it can be concluded that, due to late disbursement of resources, non-localized SIP manuals, and the failure to consider the post-conflict nature of the schools in question, the secondary schools' inability to properly prepare to implement the SIP actually makes any potential benefits void in the quality improvement of education prior to the implementation stage. It should be noted that despite the use of a proportionate sampling design, which allowed capturing various secondary schools, the findings might be specific to secondary schools of the Amhara Region only and cannot be extrapolated to other regions of Ethiopia with differing socio-economic, cultural, or infrastructural conditions.

6. Recommendations

On account of the triangulated results obtained regarding system failure, the following policy recommendations have been formulated. The policy recommendations are meant to address the chasm that exists between policy objectives and the administration realities of the education sector in Ethiopia.

Level 1: Federal Ministry of Education should:

- Adaptive Policy Framework: Move away from an inflexible national SIP policy framework and opt for a more adaptive process whereby schools in recovery and underserved regions can first become proficient in foundational domains (such as School Environment & Safety) and then be evaluated for more sophisticated educational measures.

- Adapted Toolkits: Produce and disseminate SIP toolkits specifically adapted to the context of post-conflict zones and rural regions, such as trauma-informed leadership training materials and streamlined tracking resources that do not need dedicated clerical assistance.

Level 2: Amhara Region Education Bureau should:

- Timing the SIP Process: Change the timing of the SIP policy cycle to

ensure that all directives, as well as the SIP manuals in Amharic, are released at least two months before the new school year (Ginbot/Sene).

• Linguistic and Cultural Adaptation: Make sure to translate all SIP manuals into Amharic and consider the regional agricultural cycle when designing performance criteria to avoid penalizing schools for seasonal fluctuations.

Level 3: The Woreda Education Office needs to:

- Timely Resource Allocation: Focus on the timely disbursement of block grants upon finalization of the SIP Action Plan. It will be important for the WEO to stop the "retroactive" nature of the funding process that plunges schools into liquidity problems during the first semester.

- Reduction of Reporting Fatigue: Make data collection efforts more efficient by using one single paper-based or electronic template for the submission of the SIP reports. This will eliminate the "information silo" phenomenon, whereby the "same data is repeatedly collected and analyzed", which eats up 80% of the principals' time.

Level 4: School Leadership (principals & School Improvement Committee) must:

- From Administrator to Instructional Mentor: Delegate all administrative work related to the completion of the SIP report form to a Compliance Officer or rotating team of teachers to allow principals to revert to being Instructional Mentors and conduct walkthrough observations.

- Using Data for Priority Setting: Use the School Report Card (SRC) not just as a formality, but as an instrument. Set only three priorities every year that relate to the deficiencies found in the national tests, instead of trying to fulfill all the SIP indicators at once.

Level 5: Individual level (Teachers and Community)

• Professional learning communities (PLCs): It is recommended that teachers go beyond "cultural resistance" through peer mentoring groups in which the goals of the SIP become part of their everyday lesson plans rather than being something extraneous and burdensome.

• Formalization of indigenous agency: PTSA members and the wider community should progress from mere tokenistic involvement to Asset-Based Community Development, involving mapping of locally available skills such as masonry for repair work in schools and mobilizing of the Iddir network for the informal maintenance of the school.

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