Implementing Learner-Centred Approaches to Instruction in Primary Schools in Malawi

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Abstract

In an effort to improve the quality of primary education in Malawi, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology reformed primary school and primary teacher education curricula in 2008 from teacher-centred to learner-centred. Since then, primary school teachers are being trained to be facilitators of the learning process other than master-providers of knowledge. Subsequently, it is expected that learners become active agents in the learning process other than passive listeners. Given challenges such as inadequate teaching and learning materials, large class sizes and inadequate learning facilities, this study was conducted to find out how primary school teachers implement learner-centred approaches in Kasungu District in Malawi. The study employed the progressivism learning theory propounded by John Dewey as the theoretical framework. Using qualitative methods, data were collected by interviewing 12 teachers (6 male and 6 female), classroom observations and document analysis. The study revealed that due to challenges mentioned, primary school teachers fail to plan for learner-centred approaches at lesson planning level, fail to stimulate learners' interest during classroom instruction and fail to engage in critical thinking and problem solving activities with their learners in class. The paper provides opportunity for the Malawi Government to understand the challenges faced by primary school teachers in implementing learner-centred approaches.

Keywords: teacher-centred, learner-centred, primary school teachers, teacher education, progressivism learning theory

1. Introduction

Malawi is situated in Southern Africa and bordered by Tanzania to the northeast, Zambia to the northwest and Mozambique to the southwest and southeast. Following democratic elections in 1994, the government introduced free primary education that saw a dramatic increase in the number of children attending primary school. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is responsible for the primary, secondary and teacher education sectors.

Malawi follows the 8-4-4 system where primary school lasts for 8 years, secondary school for 4 years and university education for 4 years. Generally children start primary schooling at the age of 5 and finalise at the age of 13. Standards 1-7 have three terms. Standard 8 has only 2 teaching terms as the third term is devoted to final examinations in which learners sit for the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examinations (PSLCE) to enable them enter secondary.

According to the World Bank (2010) Malawi's population at 13 million captured in 2008, grows at 2.4 percent every year and has 82 percent of its population living in rural areas with poor conditions. Further, the Bank posits that most primary schools are in poor conditions and produce poor pass rates. The primary school sector faces numerous challenges such as large class sizes, inadequate teaching and learning materials and inadequate learning facilities (World Bank, 2010).

In an effort to improve the quality of primary education in Malawi, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology reformed primary school and primary teacher education curricula in 2008 from teacher-centred to learner-centred through the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) (Mizrahi, Padilla & Susuwele-Banda, 2010). While the restructuring of the curriculum makes sense, it is its implementation that is problematic given the challenges noted. According to Mizrahi et al., (2010) learner-centred approaches to instruction have generated world-wide interest especially after the Dakar conference on Education For All (EFA) in the year 2000.

Given the challenges faced by the sector in Malawi, this paper reports on a study that sought to engage or interrogate how primary school teachers implement learner-centred approaches to instruction.

The paper has five sections. The first section conceptualises learner-centred approaches. The second section briefly explains the progressivism learning theory, which forms the theoretical framework. The third section briefly outlines the research methodology. The fourth section presents data analysis and discusses the results. Lastly the conclusion is presented.

2. Conceptualising Learner-Centred Approaches

Learner-centred approaches are pedagogical practices that “move the focus from the teacher and instruction to the student and learning” (Schuh, 2004:835). In this way, learner-centred approaches focus on the role of the student as an active participant in the process of the teaching and learning. Spencer and Jordan (1999:318) argue:

The pedagogic shift from the traditional teacher-centred approach, in which the emphasis is on teachers and what they teach, to a student-centred approach, in which the emphasis is on students and what they learn, requires a fundamental change in the role of the educator from that of a didactic teacher to that of a facilitator of learning.

Accordingly, Ayele, Schippers and Ramos (2007) contend that learner-centred approaches require active participation of both teachers and learners.

Following discourses about universal primary education, learner-centred approaches have become popular in sub-Saharan Africa and have received support from the donor community (Schweisfurth, 2011; Sriprakash, 2010). While learner-centred approaches are seriously encouraged by its proponents, Schweisfurth (2011) warns that implementing the approaches has mostly failed. For example, a study on the implementation of learner-centred approaches in Namibia showed non-implementation of the strategies citing challenges of teacher professional capacity, limited resources, cultural factors and learner background (O'Sullivan, 2004). Reporting on a study conducted among in-service teachers in South Africa, Brodie, Lelliot and Davis, (2002) posit that the challenge with the implementation of learner-centred approaches is that teachers tend to understand reform and implementation differently. Mtika and Gates (2010) researching on learner-centred approaches in Malawi conclude that appropriation and application of learner-centred education is problematic.

Sablonnière, Taylor and Sadykova (2009:628) posit that in Western societies, teachers and students have experienced both teacher-centred and learner-centred approaches from public debates and classroom experiences. This may not be the case with African learners who are exposed to a different cultural environment. It is evident in literature however; that once well implemented, learner-centred approaches promote participatory learning that is beneficial to learners (Vavrus, Thomas & Bartlett, 2011).

Malawi has spelt out its commitment to learner-centred approaches in its national education policy documents such as the Policy and Investment Framework (Malawi Government, 2000). Learner-centred approaches are also encouraged by several donor related initiatives such as the Malawi Education Support Activity (2003-2006) and the Malawi Teacher Training Activity (MTTA) (2004-2008) (Mizrachi et al., 2010).

Learner-centred approaches in Malawi are perceived as pertinent in that they could improve teachers' creativity in using locally available resources and improve classroom deliberations among learners. Developing deliberative skills seem to be key to promoting democratic citizenship in learners (Enslin, Pendlebury, & Tjiattas, 2001). As Dewey (1985) and (Ginsburg 2010) note, democracy gets practiced by learners in the classroom when they learn to share ideas, respect each others' views and develop ways of sustaining and elaborating their arguments.

Vavrus et al., (2011) contend that the success of learner-centred approaches in sub-Saharan Africa shall require changes in curriculum and a realignment of policy among concerned bodies within the countries.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the progressivism learning theory as propounded by the American Philosopher and Educator, John Dewey (1859-1952). The progressivism learning theory is broadly summarised from Dewey's seminal papers and books. Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004) argue that a theoretical framework positions research in the discipline in which one is working. Dewey's progressivism learning theory is embedded in experiential learning (Dewey, 1985) that develops within a social milieu. Dewey (1929:291) posits:

The only true education comes with the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling, and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs.

In his understanding, the educational enterprise is both a psychological and a sociological one and, as such, an educator ought to understand the learner's background in order to initiate him/her into the social milieu (Dewey, 1929). Learning should therefore seek for learners' participation as the role of the teacher to the learner is chiefly in the sociological dimension. Dewey thus conceives learning as the interplay between the learner and the social factors in which the learner finds oneself (Berding, 1997).

Dewey (1985) posits that to facilitate learning, the forms of skills to be acquired and the subject matter to be learnt must generate interest in learners while at the same time giving attention to learners specific capabilities, needs, and preferences. This is because learners come to school with their interests and it is the job of the teacher to use these interests to organise activities towards valuable results (Westbrook, 1999). As such, the progressivism learning theory emphasises on the importance of learners' background experience as a prerequisite to learning (Berding, 1997). Dewey (1929:292) further mentions:

...the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to his own powers for social ends.

For Dewey then, experience is not just mere experience, it is 'learning'. He thus makes an explicit connection of experience or learning to reflection (Berding, 1997). Since for Dewey experience is the prerequisite to learning, experiential activities that promote critical thinking and problem solving are vital in educating the learner. Westbrook (1999) contends that for Dewey, children are active beings who learn by confronting the problematic situations that arise in the course of their activities. In this regard, learners must be provided with problem solving activities for learning to take place. Similarly, Labaree (2005) holds that activities make learners interact with one another and in this way they develop social qualities of community, cooperation, justice, democratic equality and tolerance for different points of view. Such qualities are necessary in preparing children to operate in a democratic society.

To interrogate how primary school teachers in Malawi implement learner-centred approaches to instruction, this paper utilises three tenets of the progressivism learning theory broadly understood from Dewey's writings: first, a need for learners' participation in the learning process, second, a need for the stimulation of learners' interest and curiosity to learn and third, a need for the promotion of critical thinking and problem solving in learning (Dewey, 1929; 1985).

Learners' participation can be achieved by involving them in different activities such as group work, collaborative and cooperative learning projects, think-pair-share, debates and discussions. Teachers thus ought to prepare and plan lessons that involve learners in different activities to improve their participation in the learning process. In this way, teachers could stimulate learners' interest and curiosity to learn and provide them with opportunities to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Dewey's progressivism learning theory is deemed appropriate in this paper as it links well with the demands of the learner-centred approaches.

4. Research Methodology

This paper reports on a qualitative study. The definition of qualitative research is contested as it connotes a complex family of terms such as foundationalism, post-structuralism and others (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Similarly, Punch (2005) describes qualitative research as representing a huge variety.

The advantage of a qualitative approach is that it provides a forum for participants to express their diverse beliefs and views (Myers, 1997). In this study, a qualitative approach, enabled participants to express in their own words how they experience learner-centred teaching approaches in their primary schools given the challenges of the sector already noted.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003:13) suggest that "qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the research and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry emphasising the value-laden nature of inquiry". In this way, qualitative research is interested in socially constructed meaning that people bring to the researcher as opposed to discovering the real world, out there (Creswell, 2002; Patton, 2002). Thus, the realities expressed by participants in the study represent their socially constructed meaning of their experiences in learner-centred learning approaches in primary schools in Malawi.

Qualitative researchers, in their meaning construction, employ particular methods of data collection such as in-depth-semi-structured interviews and analysis of policy documents (Bryman, 2008; Punch, 2005). Similarly, in this paper appropriate qualitative methods of data collection were employed so as to be in line with the demands of qualitative

research.

4.1 *Research questions*

The study was guided by the following three research questions that flow from the three tenets of the progressivism learning theory as utilised in this paper:

- How do primary school teachers prepare and plan classroom lesson activities that promote learners' participation in learning?
- How do primary school teachers stimulate learners' interest in the lesson and arouse their curiosity to learn in their organisation and implementation of classroom activities?
- How do primary school teachers involve learners in critical thinking and problem solving during instructional delivery?

4.2 *Sampling techniques and sample*

A purposive sampling approach was employed to select schools and teachers to participate in the study. A total of twelve primary school teachers participated in the research. Following Patton's (2002) argument that purposive sampling helps the researcher to choose cases that are in line with issues under study, the technique allowed researchers to target schools that experience the challenges noted and the primary school teachers who are expected by the government to implement learner-centred approaches in their teaching.

Since qualitative studies tend to favour in-depth studies with fewer participants (Bryman, 2008), the study focused on four primary schools in Kasungu district, which are faced with the problems such as large class sizes and inadequate teaching and learning resources. Three primary school teachers selected purposively were drawn per school making the total number of twelve participants. In order to have a balanced understanding of the problem at hand, the researchers purposively selected six male and six female teachers as research participants.

4.3 *Research ethics*

Creswell (2002) proposes that in research, participants ought to have the right to participate or withdraw voluntarily at any time of the research phase. Before signing the consent forms, participants were made aware that they were free to participate in the research or withdraw at any time if they wished to. Further, in adhering to Creswell's suggestion, researchers sought participants' consent before interviews and lesson observations.

Permission to conduct this study was sought from Mzuzu University, the District Education Manager (DEM) of the Central Division and the head teachers of respective primary schools.

When conducting research, participants need to be protected (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). While there are different ways to ensure protection of research participants, in this study the most appropriate way was by using by using pseudo names for schools as well as participants such that schools and participants could not be identified.

4.4 *Data collection*

Data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom lesson observations and document analysis. The process of data collection lasted for six weeks.

4.4.1 *In-depth semi-structured interviews*

Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) define interviews as the careful asking of relevant questions. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used to collect data because feelings, thoughts and intentions cannot be observed. The researchers interviewed each participant once before the classroom instruction delivery. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour and were tape-recorded. While the research could have benefitted from interviews after classroom instruction delivery, there was time constraint for such an exercise.

Following the mentioned tenets of the progressivism learning theory, participants were interviewed on how they prepare and plan their lessons to ensure learners' participation in learning, how they organise and implement classroom practices to stimulate learners' interest and arouse their curiosity to learn and how they involve learners in critical thinking and problem solving in the learning process.

Usage of in-depth, semi-structured interview method presupposes that a dialogue can emerge between the researcher and the interviewee (Bailey, 2007). According to Flick (2006), the dialogue is facilitated by a subjective theory, which views interviewees as having a broad knowledge about the research question. As such, to investigate how participant employed learner-centred approaches in primary schools in Malawi, the researchers presupposed that participants had broad knowledge about the primary sector.

A list of guiding questions was developed in order to facilitate the dialogue required by using the in-depth semi-structured interview method. To enhance the dialogue, prior to interviews participants were given a list of themes that the interview was going to cover. This was important to participants as it helped them to anticipate what the interview was to be like and prepared them to engage with the questions critically.

4.4.2 Observations

Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) contend that for researchers, observation entails that the researchers observe subjects as they go about their daily activities and record what they do. Similarly, in this study, researchers observed the instructional delivery by the selected teachers and recorded the observed data using a classroom observation checklist. Each teacher was observed twice.

Employing tenets of the progressivism learning theory, the researchers observed how teachers ensured learners' participation in learning in their implementation of classroom practices, how they organised and implemented classroom practices that stimulate learners' interest and aroused their curiosity to learn and how they involved learners in critical thinking and problem solving in the learning process.

4.4.3 Documents analysis

In this study document analysis entailed analysing lesson plans prepared by the selected research participants before and after the instruction. Checking the lesson plans was necessary in order to see if teachers implemented classroom activities as planned in the lesson plans and whether they managed to follow on the tenets of the progressivism learning theory utilised in this paper. Researchers also read several government educational policies such as the Policy and Investment Framework and Malawi Growth and Development Strategy that generally provided context to the primary sector.

4.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness means the rigour that produces the relevance of research (Krefting, 1991). In this paper, to ensure trustworthiness of the data, the researchers used multiple sources of data collection or triangulation i.e. interviews, observations and document analysis. Further, after transcribing the data, researchers verified information with participants to make sure that what the participants said was correctly captured. More so, data analysis was carefully done using the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis within the lenses of the progressivism theoretical framework.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

To organise the data, researchers utilised some tenets of the Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative data analysis (Punch, 2005). The first stage was to reduce data by transcribing interviews and grouping information from classroom observations. Later the data were coded to assist in coming up with themes. The themes allowed researchers to identify patterns, which mostly revealed non-implementation of the learner-centred approaches. Lastly, the researchers drew and verified conclusions emerging from the themes.

5.1 Discussion of results

Data were analysed using the lenses of the progressivism learning theory. The focus was on teachers' practices during preparation, planning and implementation of learner-centred approaches to instruction. Results show challenges of achieving the dictates of the progressivism learning theory. Results are discussed under the following five themes: 1) preparing for learners' participation in the process of learning; 2) overcrowded classroom environment; 3) challenges of connecting lessons to students' everyday life 4) challenges of stimulating learners' interests and curiosity to learn; 5)

challenges of employing practices that promote critical thinking and problem solving skills in learners. The themes are discussed in turn:

5.1.1 *Preparing for learners' participation in the process of learning*

As noted, following the progressivism learning theory, learners' participation in the learning process is paramount. Participants were asked to share how they prepare for meaningful learners participation given the challenge of large number of learners and the challenge of inadequate teaching and learning resources. James who had 78 learners in his class had this to say:

I consider using group work and I plan seven to ten groups with an average of twelve learners per group. This however becomes a challenge when it comes to supervising learners as there are many groups with many learners. Class management becomes a challenge because learners make a lot of noise.

Chrissy whose class had 150 learners mentioned:

I normally do not plan to use group work although it is very useful because it becomes difficult to supervise learners performing activities in groups ...

Ernest whose class had 90 learners shared these remarks:

I do not usually prepare and plan written assessments because if I do, I end up having a lot of work to mark... The challenge means that at planning levels, primary school teachers already have problems on how to implement their instruction. While most teachers do not bother to plan for learner-centred methods, those who do already have negative perceptions of how to implement the approaches as James alludes to above. Further, as Ernest avers, the other important aspect that suffers is assessment, which is very important in participatory classroom practices. Assessment can be oral or written, within the lesson, at the end of the lesson, topic or unit (Morgan, Dunn, Parry & O'Reilly, 2004). According to participants, it becomes a challenge to successfully conduct meaningful assessments.

As expected, meaningful class preparation was also affected by inadequate learning resources. Michael expressed:

Learning in primary school needs learners to have concrete things or real things. If one wants to teach about tapeworms, there must be tapeworms in the lesson. A learner who has learnt using improvised material does not adequately learn as the other one who learnt with a real thing.

Jane posited:

Even though they talk of improvisation, not all resources can be improvised and even improvisation sometimes needs other resources to be bought.

Lack of adequate teaching and learning resources posed a challenge to teachers during preparation and planning of lessons. Participants explained that use of locally available resources as the government encourages, does not adequately solve the problem of lack of adequate teaching and learning resources. They complained that some locally available resources such as sisal, bamboo and some fruits are only found in particular locations and environments. The scarcity of local resources makes it difficult to teach subjects like Expressive Arts and others. The major challenge when teaching and learning resources are not available and cannot be improvised is that teachers revert to planning to use teacher-centred approaches. Angella explained:

...when it happens that the material is not there and it cannot be improvised, I use lecture method.

Lecturing however, is deemed to be teacher-centred, encourages rote memorisation (learning for reproduction) and does not prepare learners on how to solve complex problems in real life. In using progressivism learning theory lecture method is seen to disadvantage the learner as learners become passive listeners who do not adequately participate in the learning process (Phillips, 2005).

Jane who taught standard 8 further explained that she is sometimes compelled to use lecture method because learner-centred methods consume a lot of time. She said that there is a lot of work to cover from the syllabus and this

prompts her to opt for the lecture method. This agrees with the study by Mizrahi et al., (2010) which found out that teachers' perception on learner-centred methods is that they take more time during lesson delivery and require more planning time than teacher-centred methods.

The major challenge is for standard 8, which as noted is the final primary examination grade for students to enter secondary school. At standard 8 primary schools run only two terms before students can sit for examinations. The shortened learning time exerts pressure on both teachers and learners as the teachers teach to cover the whole syllabus hence resort to teacher-centred methods.

At planning level thus, the study noted that inadequate resources and large classes seriously affect teachers' preparation and planning for learner-centred classroom practices. The poor planning limits teachers' selection of learner-centred teaching and learning techniques to employ in their lessons and deprives learners of a chance to benefit from the desired learner-centred approaches generally.

5.1.2 Overcrowded classroom environment

While the previous section looked at the preparation stage, this theme draws on the classroom instruction delivery phase and reports on data collected through observation. Overcrowded classrooms made it difficult for teachers to come up with good seating arrangement. For example, in a standard 2 classroom at one school there were 150 learners seated on a bare ground in an open place and under trees. At another school in a standard 5 class there were 120 learners in the same situation.

The seating arrangement did not permit all learners to interact with their teachers and among themselves. Interaction among learners, which could have taken place in collaborative and cooperative activities like in group work failed to take place. The situation clearly militated against proper use of group work and other appropriate learner-centred approaches that promote interaction.

What's more, the poor seating arrangement heavily affected girls' participation in the lessons. Girls were affected because, in Malawi primary schools, there is a tendency for students to stand up when answering questions from teachers and then sit after giving an answer. Since girls wear skirts, for the sake of decency they found it difficult and uncomfortable to stand up, answer questions and then sit down again on the floor. It would have been easier if they were seated on chairs.

5.1.3 Challenges of connecting lessons to students' everyday life

As expected by the progressivism learning theory, a teacher is supposed to connect learning to everyday life and make it relevant to learners such that learners' background experience should be the prerequisite to learning (Westbrook, 1999). To effectively connect learning to experience, teachers require teaching and learning resources and pedagogic skills.

Unfortunately lesson observations in all schools that participated in this study revealed acute shortage of teaching and learning resources. For example, learners used textbooks and other teaching and learning resources in groups of five to ten, which made it difficult for them to participate fully in the learning process.

While considering students' background is important in primary school teaching, this was not always evident among teachers. For example, at one school during standard 8 classroom instruction delivery, a Science and Technology teacher put learners in groups to discuss advantages and disadvantages of food processing without any prior attempt to assist students to understand the concept of food processing. It would have been profitable to students if she had asked learners in advance to bring locally available foods that could be processed or were already processed. Learners in their groups would then be asked to demonstrate how these foods are processed, and, later possibly selected groups could do so to the larger class. It seems then, that although inadequate teaching and learning resources affected teachers' implementation of participatory classroom practices, lack of teachers' creativity, resourcefulness and pedagogic (teaching) knowledge also contributed to the failure.

5.1.4 Challenges of stimulating learners' interests curiosity to learn

Given the problems already mentioned, it was difficult for teachers to stimulate learners' interest and arouse their curiosity to learn as suggested by the progressivism learning theory. For example, overcrowded classrooms were uncontrollable to stimulate learners' curiosity to reading, writing, discussions and demonstrations. More so, the teachers' activities did not connect learning to learners' background knowledge, which according to progressivism theory is the prerequisite to the learning process. Clearly, in some schools learners looked bored, inattentive and uninterested in the lessons.

Further, in most schools teachers showed a lack of management skills as they could not control classroom indiscipline, which affected the learning process.

5.1.5 Challenges of employing practices that promote critical thinking and problem solving skills in learners

The quest for learner-centred approaches to instruction to fostering critical thinking and problem solving skills in learners links well with the progressivism learning theory, which states that teachers should always encourage creative thinking as well as analytic thinking in learners. It is within the classroom setting that teachers must recreate problems which exist in the society and guide learners in the direction of solving them.

Just as the interview data at preparation level revealed, the data from observations also showed that teachers failed to advance activities that foster critical thinking and problem solving skills in learners during classroom instruction. This is because activities such as group works, discussion and think-pair-share were not well monitored by teachers given the challenges cited. Further, observations showed that groups were given tasks that were not challenging to provoke thought in learners. In other words tasks that were given in groups were not as complex as those that learners would likely meet in their real lives. In utilising the think-pair-share strategy, it was observed that teachers did not provide space for learners to think individually first before pairing them with colleagues to share their thoughts. All in all most activities by teachers did not stimulate thought.

6. Conclusion

This paper has utilised the progressivism learning theory to investigate how primary school teachers in Kasungu District of Malawi implement learner-centred approaches to instruction. The paper sought to answer three research questions: first, how primary school teachers prepare and plan lessons to promote learners' participation in learning; second, how primary school teachers stimulate learners' interest and arouse their curiosity to learn and third, how primary school teachers involve learners in critical thinking and problem solving during instructional delivery.

The paper has argued that while teachers see the need for using learner-centred approaches to instruction, they fail to plan for them due to the challenges of inadequate teaching and learning materials, large class sizes, inadequate learning facilities and in some cases, lack of pedagogic knowledge. The paper has shown that at classroom instruction level, teachers fail to effectively involve students to achieve the requirements of learner-centred approaches. Further, the paper has shown that as a consequence, teachers fail to stimulate learners' interest in the lessons and arouse their curiosity to learn. More so, teachers fail to promote critical thinking and problem solving activities given the challenges. The findings agree with findings of most studies on implementing learner-centred approaches in sub-Saharan Africa. This study is crucial to the Malawi Government as it shall assist the government to rethink ways of implementing learner-centred approaches in primary schools.

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