

Policy Brief



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Capacity Building
in Africa

Fundamentals of Teacher Education Development:

July 2016

(No. 4) Ensuring Quality by Attending to Inquiry: Learner-Centered Pedagogy in sub-Saharan Africa

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Summary

Teachers play a significant role in helping their students develop knowledge and skills necessary for the 21st century. Teacher's qualifications, experience, knowledge of subject areas, and pedagogical skills influence students learning in a substantial way. Recent reforms aim to enable teachers to move away from rote learning to methods that encourage inquiry and engagement with learning on the part of the students. Learner-centered pedagogy (LCP) places the student at the center of the teaching and learning process. This means the teacher should serve as a guide or facilitator throughout this process. Although this book was written in 2011, learner-centered pedagogy is still an important and relevant teaching strategy worth serious consideration.

What the Research Shows

There are three broad categories of benefits for adopting LCP:

1) Cognitive and psychological: LCP is related to cognitive and meta-cognitive ability, motivational and affective characteristics, development and social qualities, and individual difference. Students in LCP contexts can better develop higher-order thinking and critical thinking skills, which allow them to analyze, evaluate, and create knowledge. Additionally, when the relationship between a teacher and his or her students is based on empathy, mutual understanding, and the promotion of critical thinking, teaching is more effective.

2) Political: In addition to the content they teach, the way teachers teach can have an impact on students' political socialization and engagement in democratic processes. Opportunities to speak and express oneself in the classroom can help develop students' civic engagement.

3) Economic: As countries diversify their economics and look to become more competitive in the global economy, schools become a place

that can equip youth with the necessary skills to succeed in these markets. Rote memorization is no longer an effective way to prepare students for life after schooling. LCP helps students gain practical knowledge and problem-solving skills. It helps students "learn how to learn," giving them the necessary skills to construct knowledge for themselves throughout their lives.

Teaching is complex and the realities for teachers in different settings will vary. This means that LCP may be interpreted in a number of ways, though that does not mean "anything goes." Additionally, whenever LCP is being used does not mean that high quality teaching is taking place. LCP often takes the form of group work, which may not always be the best way to teach. There are other factors which also contribute to quality teaching: a safe learning environment, teachers who demonstrate care for their students, reinforcement of content across subject areas, consistency in goals and expectations throughout the school, etc. LCP is only one aspect of a quality education. Teacher must learn to balance LCP with other strategies that promote learning.

Challenges

There are three broad categories of challenges, which impact the quality of LCP in sub-Saharan Africa: 1) teacher educators' limited use of LCP, 2) teachers' philosophical concerns about LCP, and 3) teachers' pragmatic concerns about LCP.

Initial teacher education: Many teachers teach the way they were taught, which may not be the best strategy. Many initial teacher education programs focus on "transmission of knowledge" and focus on content knowledge, rather than using a constructivist and practical approach. There is limited hands-on learning occurring. Teachers need improved pre-service and in-service programs in which teacher educator engage in the use of LCP.

Teacher's Philosophical Concerns: Teachers have been seen primarily as the bearer and sharer of knowledge. The idea that teachers and students can co-construct knowledge is not widely recognized. Therefore, because LCP is a constructivist view of knowledge, it does not fit this traditional model. It requires a shift in mindset to accept and effectively use LCP in one's classroom.

Teacher's Practical Concerns: In some cases, supervision of teachers is not taking place to a significant extent. Sometimes when school heads are supervising teachers, it does not mean they are prepared to serve as mentors for teachers' developing use of LCP.

Additionally, classroom management often comes up in the discussion about using LCP. If students are not quietly sitting at their seats, even if they are engaging in authentic learning, the teacher may fear being seen as unqualified by his or her superiors. LCP is also difficult to implement in a disciplined way in overcrowded classroom, which is often the reality in African schools.

Because LCP is focused on critical thinking and dialogue, it can raise some issues regarding medium of instruction (MoI). In order for LCP to be effective, teachers and students must have a good working knowledge of the language being used in teaching and learning.

Another challenge to using LCP is the national examinations. These exams are based on behaviorist assumptions of knowledge, meaning that students need to memorize particular subject matter content; there is a clear set of correct and incorrect responses, which must be known. If teachers do not prepare students for these exams, they may be criticized, especially if students perform poorly. LCP often allows more fluidity of individual ideas, which are not tested on exams.

Conclusion

The implementation of LCP is complex and requires careful planning across different sectors in the education system. The coordination of reforms in the examination system, the development of curricula, and the pre-service and in-service levels is essential to the success of any policy aimed to get teachers using LCP

in classrooms. It is crucial for policymakers to consider the potential for LCP to help students become more engaged, critical thinkers.

Recommendations

In order to encourage an effective use of LCP in classrooms, the following strategies should be considered:

- 1) **Professional development opportunities** for teacher educators
- 2) **Professional development workshops and learning communities** for faculty/tutors
- 3) **Professional outreach to local schools** and assistance from school in **developing locally-relevant methods for promoting LCP**
- 4) **Revise the pre-service curriculum** and redesign content and educational foundation courses so that pedagogical content knowledge is not separate from content knowledge
- 5) **Align national assessment with LCP**, using more authentic assessment measures

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