



Translating theory into practice: Making meaning of learner centered education frameworks for classroom-based practitioners



Heather Lattimer

School of Leadership and Education Sciences, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 October 2014

Received in revised form 1 September 2015

Accepted 29 September 2015

Keywords:

International education

Development

Educational policy

Curriculum

Teacher education

ABSTRACT

This study provides a rich descriptive analysis of two mathematics lessons in secondary school classrooms in Kenya in order to identify the discrete instructional practices that distinguish learner-centered educational environments. The two classrooms serve similar populations of students and bear many structural similarities, but there are subtle differences in teaching practice that result in distinct differences in placement on Guthrie's teaching styles continua and Schweisfurth's minimum standards rubric. By providing a rich description of lessons in these classrooms and drilling down into the specific practices that teachers use in these classrooms, the study aims to help build connections between theory and practice and illuminate some possibilities for how LCE reform efforts might be envisioned at the school and classroom level.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

For more than three decades national governments and international donor agencies have worked to improve elementary and secondary education in sub-Saharan Africa by encouraging the adoption of learner-centered pedagogies. These approaches, broadly modeled on Western theories of learning, attempt to move away from the teacher-centered, didactic, "chalk and talk" instructional approaches that focus on rote learning and toward inquiry-oriented, understanding-driven learning. After much work and significant resource investment, evidence indicates the reforms have largely failed and that little has changed in terms of day-to-day instructional practice. A meta-analysis that examined 72 research studies of learner-centered education (LCE) in sub-Saharan Africa concluded, "the history of the implementation of LCE in different contexts is riddled with stories of failures grand and small" (Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 425).

Multiple explanations have been offered for the failed adoption of LCE reforms. Limited resources, poor teacher training, and pressure from high-stakes exams have all been identified as significant constraints in reform implementation (Jwan et al., 2010; Vavrus, 2009; Weimer, 2002). Teachers and local school site administrators have been accused of being unable or unwilling to implement reforms and instructional practice. And some have questioned the cultural compatibility of implementing individualistic LCE-style

reforms within communities that prioritize more collectivist norms (Alexander, 2000; Guthrie, 2011).

However, others have noted that the reforms themselves are problematic. LCE has never been particularly well defined. It has been associated with a wide range of terms and an understanding of what is, and is not, LCE has been "vacuous," if not "mischievous" (Kliebard, 1995). National policy makers and representatives from NGOs are able to make sweeping pronouncements about LCE reforms which sound promising but offer very little in the way of specific guidance for implementation in schools and classrooms. In her comprehensive review of international research on LCE reforms, Schweisfurth concludes that we must question "whether it is LCE implementation that is the problem, or the conceptualization of LCE which sets the bar out of meaningful and appropriately contextualized reach of teachers in developing countries" (2013b, p. 72).

In the past few years, some researchers and theorists have worked to craft more meaningful LCE frameworks. Guthrie's continuum of teaching styles (2011) and Schweisfurth's minimum standards rubric (2013b) are examples of two approaches that have worked to both more clearly define LCE and recognize that instruction does not typically fit into an "either-or" paradigm of teacher- vs. learner-centered (Beck, 1997), but is often more nuanced in its approach with teachers choosing approaches and techniques that are responsive to the context specific demands of their students and communities.

These frameworks have significantly contributed to advancing the conversation around LCE reforms. They provide policy makers,

E-mail address: hlattimer@sandiego.edu.

researchers, and practitioners with a conceptual foundation from which they can work together to develop a common understanding of their educational goals. However, there remains a need to help classroom teachers and local administrators translate theory into practice. If the framework says, for example that in a *formalistic* classroom the student role is “passive, although some overt interaction,” but in a *flexible* classroom the students take a “more active role within constraints defined by teacher” (Guthrie, 2011, p. 207), many practitioners would benefit from seeing examples of what this looks like in terms of student–teacher interaction, how it might vary across grade levels, content areas, and cultural contexts, and what are the practical steps that could be taken to implement these models in their classrooms.

The present study is an effort to contribute to the practical application of LCE frameworks by focusing in on two secondary school mathematics classrooms in Kenya. Through rich description and analysis of lessons in these classrooms the study identifies specific teaching moves made by the instructors that differentiate the learning experiences in these two classrooms that, initially, appear to be very similar in terms of curricular structure, student population, and learning objectives. Three specific pedagogical differences between the classrooms are highlighted – (1) teacher questioning, (2) student participation, and (3) assessment practices. The choices and moves that the teachers in the study made around these three elements contributed to creating significantly different learning environments across the two classrooms. It is hoped that by identifying the practical differences between these two classrooms and the impact of these differences on the learning environment, the study will contribute to growing our theoretical understanding of what LCE is and isn't, and, perhaps more importantly, support teachers in reflecting on their own practice and considering whether and how they might adopt or adapt instructional strategies to strengthen student learning in their classrooms.

2. Literature review

2.1. Defining learner centered education

The concept of moving toward more student-centered pedagogies through Learner Centered Education has, for several decades, been “one of the most prevalent education notions in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa” (Mtika and Gates, 2010). Drawing on the work of Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky, LCE practices are characterized as instructional approaches that engage the student in the active construction of knowledge (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008; Hardman et al., 2008). An exact definition of LCE is not easy to pinpoint because it has been associated with a wide variety of related, though not exactly synonymous terms, including progressive education, problem based learning, inquiry driven education, constructivism, and child-centered learning (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

In some ways, defining LCE is perhaps easiest by explaining what it is not; LCE is not driven by a rigid content-based curriculum and it is not teacher-dominated (Alexander, 2008; Schweisfurth, 2013b). Some of the most common features of LCE practices as articulated in national policies across the continent include attention to the student as an active learner; learning through problem posing and inquiry; locally-relevant curricula; formative assessments that are diversified to respond to student needs; and teacher reflection to improve practice (Dembélé and Miaro-II, 2003; UNICEF, 2009). For purposes of this article, we will rely on the definition of LCE provided by Michele Schweisfurth in her article, *Learner-centered education in international perspective*, LCE is a “pedagogical approach, which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content

and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners' needs, capacities and interests,” (2013a, p. 20).

2.2. Learner centered educational reforms in sub-Saharan Africa

LCE approaches have been a core feature of both national and international education policy discussions in sub-Saharan Africa for more than two decades. Since the late-1980s international organizations and donor agencies have embraced LCE as part of a larger package of educational, economic, and political development reforms. Within nations in sub-Saharan Africa, LCE adoption was driven by three justificatory narratives: (1) Cognition – Students will learn more effectively if actively engaged in the learning process; (2) Emancipation – LCE frees people from oppressive forms of control, encouraging student voice and independent thinking; and (3) Preparation – LCE prepares students with the interpersonal, analytic, and problem solving skills increasingly needed in the present and future economy (Schweisfurth, 2013b).

Curricular reforms that promoted inquiry-driven instruction and prioritized critical thinking were seen as a way to boost the economy and contribute to the expansion of democracy (Vavrus et al., 2011). The 1990 adoption of Education for All (EFA) by a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, and development agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank, further strengthened the move toward LCE. Among the conditions for educational quality spelled out in EFA's Dakar Framework, “active learning techniques” and “a relevant curriculum” are highlighted (UNESCO, 2000, p. 17, para. 44). By the mid-1990s LCE had become “part of a discursive repertoire of international rights and quality education. . . broadly shared amongst multilateral and donor agencies” (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008, p.198).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, governments across sub-Saharan Africa adopted policies and reforms that included LCE approaches. In part this movement, responded to pressures from international organizations and donor agency priorities. However, as Chisholm et al. (1998) report in their needs assessment study, this external pressure was met with little internal resistance in most nations. Improved education was widely seen as a common goal that was responsive to popular demands (see, for example, policy statements from ANC, 1994; Namibian Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). Further, the student-centered approach that prioritized local relevance and critical thinking was seen as fitting within a larger narrative of resistance to colonialism, a narrative that still bore resonance in countries that had gained independence only decades earlier (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008). Among the reforms that prioritized LCE approaches through curriculum adoptions and new teacher training models were Ghana's Free Compulsory and Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) adopted in 1995, Mali's 1999 general education reform and decentralization process, South Africa's 2004 Outcomes Based Education reform, and Mozambique's 2004 curriculum adoption (Vavrus et al., 2011).

However, despite the wide-spread acceptance of the concept of LCE among donor agencies and national governments across sub-Saharan Africa, evidence indicates that little changed in educational practice. In their UNESCO report on learner-centered pedagogies in sub-Saharan Africa, Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett report that although there are strong “examples of curricular and organizational change, it appears that policy has changed more than practice when it comes to teachers actually utilizing learner-centered pedagogy” (2011, p. 36). Numerous other studies similarly report that teacher-centered methodologies continue to be the dominant form of instruction in schools throughout the continent (see, for example, Moloi et al., 2008; O'Sullivan, 2004; Vavrus, 2009). A comprehensive research study by Vrije University

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/356008>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/356008>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)