African Educational Research Journal
Vol. 3(3), pp. 161-169, July 2015
ISSN: 2354-2160
Full Length Research Paper

Learner centred methods for whom? Lessons from Botswana Junior Secondary Schools

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Accepted 6 July, 2015

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on pedagogical practices in developing contexts. The argument is that in large mixed ability classes, learner centred pedagogy is not only faced with a myriad of challenges, but fails to cater for the range of learners. The paper provides a review of constructivist approaches and proposes pedagogical flexibility based on context and type of learner. The study used multiple methods to examine the implementation of learner centred pedagogies in Junior Secondary Schools (JSSs) in Botswana. Findings showed that to maximise learning in mixed ability classes, teachers need to employ an array of instructional strategies.

Keywords: Pedagogical flexibility, development, educational policy, learner diversity.

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INTRODUCTION

Global educational reforms have called for a shift from traditional didactic approaches to progressive pedagogies. The 2006 UNESCO report states that high quality education requires well trained teachers who are capable of using learner centred methods. Consequently, the demand for quality education has led to the proliferation of constructivist approaches and Leaner Centred Education (LCE) has been promulgated in many developing countries.

Constructivist approaches emanate from strong global political forces in developed contexts (Sahlberg, 2007). The promulgation of such policies elsewhere is intended to emulate 'best educational practices'. Marope (1994) observes that while such policies are driven by international agenda, sometimes, donor agencies influence the direction of educational planning especially in developing contexts. For instance, as Sahlberg argues, poor performance in International Standardised Tests is often used to justify the adoption of global educational reform policies in developing contexts. Many education systems in developing countries for instance in Africa lack adequate funding and capacity to roll out such reforms. Consequently, in many developing countries, learner centred pedagogies remain in policy. Yet, some findings seem to show that what works' elsewhere does not have to be emulated in other contexts. For instance, Sahlberg's report on 'school policies that enhance students' achievement in Finland' states that the Finnish education system which has remained averse to global educational reforms is one of the high performing systems.

Generally, developing countries often adopt externally determined educational reforms even when they may not work in their contexts or lack the capacity to implement them. For instance, in a review of 72 articles on the implementation of LCE in developing contexts, Scheisfurth (2011:425), concludes that such accounts are "riddled with stories of failure, grand and small". Put simply, there are very few success stories on the implementation of LCE in developing contexts, which

begs the question, “what next in this pedagogical impasse?”

This paper examines the implementation of learner centred methods in Botswana with reference to their suitability to learners across the achievement continuum. It is argued that learner centred pedagogies have not only failed due to cultural and material constraints as previous discourse has shown, but more fundamentally, it may not be effective in large mixed classes. The next section discusses educational developments in Botswana, followed by a review of constructivist approaches. Lastly the discussion explores an alternative to the teacher centred and learner centred methods dichotomy.

Background

Botswana like other developing countries adopted the Jomtien Declaration and later the 2000 Dakar framework and their associated requirements. The Government has demonstrated commitment to honour such international pledges through educational expansion to increase access. In Botswana, basic education consists of 7 years of primary followed by 3 years of Junior Secondary School (JSS). The country has almost achieved universal access to the 10 year basic education programme and currently, transition from Primary school to JSS stands at 96.5% (Republic of Botswana, 2009/10-2015/16).

Apart from increasing access, the government has taken measures to enhance the quality of basic education. At the curriculum level, the JSS curriculum has been diversified to prepare students for the world of work. At classroom level, the Republic of Botswana 1994 Revised National Policy on Education (RNPE) recommended learner centred methods.

Notwithstanding, a good legislative framework does not always translate into classroom practice due to several challenges. For instance in Botswana, Form 3 marks the final year of Junior Certificate (JC) programme which is followed by a high-stakes Junior Certificate Examination (JCE). In such circumstances, pressure to complete the syllabus and prepare students for examinations can stifle innovation as instructional strategies perceived to be time consuming are neglected. More fundamentally, teachers can fail to assist learners acquire broader knowledge, let alone meet individual learner needs.

The quality of education is at the core of whether students derive value from education and contribute to national development. Motala (2001) suggests that while achieving quality education remains a major challenge, promoting a culture of teaching and learning should be of urgent concern. Consequently, improving classroom practices is considered an entry point in quality improvement strategies. This is particularly important since studies have shown that the quality of instruction determines achievement (UNESCO, 2005; Heck, 2009).

REVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM AND LEARNER CENTRED EDUCATION

Key proponents of constructivism theory are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Levy Vygotsky, and John Dewey. Constructivists conceptualise learning as a process where learners construct knowledge from experience (Richardson, 1997; Phillips, 2000; Sullivan and Glanz, 2006). According to Dewey (1944), an education that meets student’s interests will motivate them to participate in the learning process and seek advice from the teacher where necessary. Consequently, learning becomes cooperation and not an imposition on the learners. Therefore, constructivists are opposed to transmission of knowledge and call for inquiry learning. A teacher guided by constructivist paradigm views learning as construction and teaching as a facilitating process (Fosnot, 1989). The teacher therefore allows learner to be actively involved in the creation of knowledge rather than imposing it on them.

Whereas there is no consensus on what constitutes effective instruction, several studies have shown that constructivist strategies are best suited in attaining optimal learning experiences (UNICEF, 2000; Arathi, 2010). Arathi states that learner centred pedagogy provides: i) flexible sequences of study; ii) negotiated objectives and content; iii) negotiated learning methods; and iv) negotiated methods of assessment. A major advantage of collaborative learning is that it enables students to develop important social skills and achieve higher order cognitive skills (Gregory and Chapman 2002). Sullivan and Glanz (2006) suggest that schools can create environments where students learn how to think independently rather than acquisition of knowledge. Cohen et al. (2006) suggest that quality education is dependent on the teaching and learning process. The authors argue that a major constraint in students’ learning is traditional transmission pedagogies. Therefore, for successful learning to occur, students must take responsibility of their learning (Gregory and Chapman 2002). Whilst the implementation of constructivist strategies is not linear, Biggs and Tang (2009) have suggested ‘constructive alignment’ where the teacher starts by clearly defining the outcome of the teaching and learning. This is expressed as the ‘Intended Learning Outcome (ILO)’ a statement of what the learner is expected to learn and at what standard. Constructive alignment can be a major tool in improving teaching and learning if implemented effectively in education circles. Transmission methods fail to provide students with opportunities to interact and develop social skills such as teamwork, which are vital in the wider society. Clearly, successful implementation of learner centred methods in

JSSs is imperative. However, as Stoll et al. (2001) observe, implementing meaningful learner centred learning is more difficult than didacticism. Thus, despite their merits, constructivist methods are not without their critics which we now turn to.

Criticisms of constructivist approaches

Constructivist pedagogies are faulted particularly for being time consuming and requiring huge teaching-learning resources. In addition, Alexander (2008) cautions against claims that teachers who employ learner centred methods achieve better results. Alexander states that classroom outcomes are multi-factorial and not linear. Other mediating factors include learner's prior knowledge and motivation to participate in learning. More fundamentally, Alexander argues that prescriptive models curtail teachers' ability to cope with unexpected and emerging contexts. In other words, there should be room for flexibility in pedagogy. Perhaps, while teachers are sensitised on best practices, the actual choice should be left to them to ensure ownership and control of the methods. The challenge however is how in centralised educational systems teachers can be given such autonomy. The teacher's choice of instructional strategy can be influenced by their personal philosophy about teaching and learning. For instance, a teacher informed by behaviourism may feel disempowered to let learners take control of their learning. The issue here is that the classroom is the teacher's arena and behind closed doors, teachers may teach the way they want despite calls for pedagogical paradigm shift.

Moreover, some scholars have cautioned against overzealous constructivist methods which place the learner wholly in charge of learning (Baggaley, 2008). In other words, while the traditional teacher-centeredness has serious shortcomings, extreme learner centredness is also limiting. Jacobsen et al. (1985) posits that enabling classrooms are characterised by a balance between teacher directiveness and student independence. In the same vein, Dembele (2005) proposes both learner centeredness and teacher directivity in the teaching-learning process. In short, while there are conflicting views on what constitutes effective instruction, there is consensus that focus must be on learning, whatever the instructional strategy.

Consequently, some scholars have called for 'learning centeredness' (Dembele, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2004) instead of the teacher centred or learner centred dichotomies. More significantly, research seems to support the notion of pedagogical blend. Drawing from their findings in South African classrooms, Nakabugo and Sieborger (2001) argue that despite calls for a paradigm shift, teachers do not abandon one strategy for another. In their study, lesson observations revealed that teachers displayed a 'mix' of pedagogical practices. The researchers concluded that "the pedagogical pallet is mixed". The problem however is that such 'pedagogical mix' does not augur well for educational planners who want standardized practices across the education system. How do they monitor and measure such a mix?

Secondly, Barrett's (2007) study in Tanzania primary schools showed how teachers effectively employed constructivist strategies in whole class teaching. The findings are significant and seem to imply that teachers can be innovative and utilise instructional strategies within the pedagogical continuum successfully.

Farrant (2004), argues that for good teachers, the divide between child-centred and teacher centred methods is blurred as they use 'something of both'. Similarly, Mautle (1993) argues that in successful schools, teachers use a variety of teaching methods. In brief, effective teachers are flexible with pedagogy and employ 'what works' in their contexts. Pedagogical flexibility gives credence to the goodness-of-fit strategy which we now turn to.

Goodness-of-fit strategy

Some scholars have called for the abandonment of extreme labelling of good and bad teaching methods, and called for the choice of a teaching strategy based on the appropriateness or 'goodness-of-fit' (Tafa, 2001:16). The logic behind this notion is that what may work in one teaching context may not work for others. 'Goodness-of-fit' strategy requires teachers to be aware of their learners' needs. Teachers then employ different instructional strategies within the two continuums exploiting the strengths in each to maximize learning outcomes (Tafa, 2001). The argument here is that none of the methods should be used exclusively since they are prescriptive, often ignoring the complexity of human behaviour and contexts under which teaching and learning occurs.

Tomlinson (1999) observes that in mixed ability classes, teachers refuse to use prescriptive methods and apply 'fitness-of-fit' strategy to suit diverse learners. Such an approach strikes a chord with the reality in large mixed ability classes in developing contexts. Clearly it is impractical for one instructional strategy to meet the learning abilities and styles in such classes.

More importantly, research seems to support the notion that flexibility in instructional practices can work. Sahlberg (2007) states that while teaching in Finland has remained conservative with minimal evidence of learner centred teaching or independent learning, the country has one of the best performing education systems as shown by results from international tests such as PISA. Sahlberg attributes Finland's educational success to an environment which promotes creativity in pedagogy;

where teachers and students are given leeway to try new ideas. Such findings seem to give credence to pedagogical flexibility.

Learner centred methods in Botswana

While calls for a pedagogical paradigm shift have been ongoing since 1994, previous studies (Tabulawa, 1997; Tafa, 2001; Republic of Botswana, 2004) have highlighted teacher centeredness in Botswana classrooms. The broad curriculum, culture and inadequate resources are often cited as major drawbacks in the realization of constructivist strategies.

In a survey by Ntebolang (2010), JSSs teachers cited pressure to cover the syllabus as a major drawback in the implementation of innovative instructional strategies. Whereas the curriculum was reviewed in 2009 to address such concerns by practitioners, the problem still persists, which highlights the conflict between educational policy and implementation. Perhaps such discrepancy can be attributed to lack of partnership between planners and practitioners in educational reforms. In bureaucratic systems, educational goals are conceived and articulated by the planners and teachers' opinions are rarely sought or considered. Nevertheless, with competing interests and politics, bringing practitioners on board and attaining consensus on educational policy reforms is time consuming, if not unfeasible.

Implementing learner centred learning is more difficult than didacticism due to resource constraints. For instance, inadequate learning resources in JSSs hamper implementation of learner centred methods. Further, the large class sizes impede interaction characteristic of child centred activities. The average class size is more than 40 and the groups are too large for any meaningful discussion. Ironically, policy makers are often aware of these barriers but expect teachers to implement the policies anyway. This leads to huge gaps between policy and practice as the envisaged benefits of LCE are not realised.

CONTEXT AND METHODS OF STUDY

Methods of study

This study examined the quality of pedagogical practices and their efficacy on diverse learners' capacity to learn and achieve their potential. The broad research question was 'How do instructional processes influence the quality of education in JSSs? The study addressed the following sub questions:

(i) To what extent are constructivist approaches employed in JSSs?
(ii) What are students' perceptions of the instructional strategies in JSSs?

The study employed concurrent procedures where quantitative and qualitative data was collected simultaneously (Cresswell, 2009). Nevertheless, the study had greater qualitative leaning and the quantitative aspect was meant to expand and illuminate the qualitative data. Exploratory tools were important to provide learners' voices on their experiences and perceptions of their teachers' pedagogical practices. Complimentary methods were important for cross validation and corroboration of findings from different data sources (Creswell, 2009).

Context

The study was conducted in 8 JSSs, 4 in an urban setting, 2 peri-urban and the other 2 in a rural setting. The schools were identified alphabetically from A to H. The urban schools are located in Gaborone which is the capital city of Botswana. The city presents diverse cultures and social economic backgrounds ranging from rich to urban-poor. On the other hand, the 2 schools in peri-urban setting are found in the outskirts of Gaborone but are administratively in Kweneng region. Therefore, the peri-urban schools present a mixture of rural and urban socio-economic environments. Peri-urban schools comprise of children from middle and low income families. Lastly, the rural schools are in Kweneng, which is found in the Southern part of the country. The communities here depend on small scale farming while others work in the neighbouring towns.

The urban and peri-urban schools are found within a close proximity between 2 and 6 km whereas distance between the 2 rural schools was 15 km. Proximity between neighbouring schools ensured ease in data collection. The 8 schools provided a glimpse of the social contexts of JSSs in Botswana; that is, urban, peri-urban and rural. The sample also comprised of good, average and poor performing schools. However, it should be noted that the government has distributed educational resources fairly in schools throughout the country. So there is little variation in this regard although all JSSs are constrained in terms of resources.

Participants

The study involved teachers and students in 8 JSSs. The student population comprised of boys and girls aged between 12 and 18 years. The average number of students in each school is 700, giving a total of 5600 students. The teacher population consisted of school heads (SH), and teachers. The number of teachers in each school is about 60, thus a total 480 teachers.

Sampling procedures

Being a mixed method study, both probability and non-probability sampling procedures were employed. First, purposive sampling was used to identify students for individual interviews. To this end, one high achiever (HA) and one low achiever (LA) was sampled in each school hence a total of 8 high achievers and 8 low achievers. For purposes of uniformity across the schools, the top and last student in the End of Year Examination (EYE) was targeted for individual interviews. Only Form 3 students were sampled for interviews. Being in their final year of the JC programme, the Form threes were considered knowledgeable of the nature and effectiveness of their teacher's instructional practices.

For focus group interview, one student from each of the 6 streams in Form 3 was sampled. Unlike in individual interviews, selection of participants for focus groups was flexible and with the assistance of teachers, 6 students across the achievement divide were sampled. The focus group comprised of 2 high achievers, 2

average students and 2 low achievers. The mixed ability group (MAG) had equal gender representation for each category of students.

For the survey, stratified random sampling was employed to select 20 teachers in each school, thus a total of 160 teachers. The teacher population was divided into 5 departments namely Humanities, Languages, Science and Mathematics, Practical subjects and Optional subjects. The 20 teachers made up a third of the teaching staff in each school. For lesson observation, 5 teachers in each school were sampled, making up a total of 40 lesson observations. The teachers were part of the group participating in the survey.

Data collection

Qualitative data

We negotiated access by seeking formal consent from the school heads. The school heads referred us to their deputies who were the contact persons for student and teachers participants. Gaining access to students for interviews varied from school to another. We also sought parents' consent for their children's participation in the interviews. At all times, the nature and purpose of the interview was explained to students and their consent was sought formally.

Data collection commenced with individual interviews. We conducted an in-depth interview on the 8 high and 8 low achievers using an interview guide. In-depth interviews sought to understand learners' perceptions of teaching methods in their schools. Participants were identified as HA 1 to 8 and LA 1 to 8. The interviews were conducted in the afternoons and completed at the closing of the school day, at 4 p.m. A general observation was that whereas high achievers were fluent in English, most low achievers were not. Therefore, LA interviews were characterized by short statements followed by a long pause as they thought of their responses; while high achievers spoke at length about their experiences. Therefore, focus groups were useful in providing more insights on low achievers' learning experiences.

Once the individual interviews were completed, we embarked on the focus group interviews using the interview guide discussed above as the framework to guide group discussions. The groups were identified as MAG 1 to 8 and participants labelled as LA, average (AV), and HA followed by the gender of the individual student. Focus groups were used to validate perceptions held by individual participants. Students were allowed to speak freely in a psychologically safe environment and dissenting voices were given a fair chance to express their opinions.

Lastly, a structured interview was conducted for school heads. The school heads were identified as SH-1 to SH-8.

Quantitative data

In the quantitative segment of the study, a questionnaire was used to solicit information from teachers. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended items. The closed ended questions comprised of rating scales about teachers' opinions and pedagogical practices. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter which explained the nature of the study and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The Deputy School heads assisted in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires. Out of the 160 questionnaires distributed, 108 were filled and returned. Of these, 4 of the respondents were male and the other 57% female. The majority (61%) had a teaching experience of between 6 and 15 years.

The teacher survey was complimented by lesson observations. To negotiate lesson observations, we took time to explain the nature of the study and to win the teachers' trust. During the lessons, an observation schedule was used to study classroom dynamics. The schedule elicited data on the frequency of learner centred instructional strategies and teacher-pupil interactions. The findings were recorded in a chart through the tallying method.

The subjects observed were Mathematics, English, Science, Social Studies and Agriculture in classes ranging from Forms 1 to 3. Lessons were divided into 4 quarters and the findings were entered at 20 min intervals in the observation schedule. Each observation lasted 80 min, which is the duration of a double lesson in the schools. Lastly, a summary of each lesson was done to capture salient features that could not be recorded in the observation tool.

FINDINGS

Here, we report on the findings on pedagogical practices in selected JSSs and their efficacy on diverse learners' capacity to learn and achieve their potential. Of interest here will be findings on the dominant teaching strategy (teacher centred methods), the epistemological considerations that the teacher and learner have to grapple with and learner perceptions of pedagogical practices.

Teacher centred classrooms

Firstly, since LCE is entrenched in the education policy in Botswana, it was important to establish the extent of constructivism methods in the classroom. The findings from lesson observation revealed quiet classrooms characterised by "teacher talk". While in the survey 87% of teachers had indicated that they used learner centred methods often (with 58% daily, while 29% indicated three days a week), lesson observation revealed minimal learner centeredness. Out of the 40 lessons, the researchers witnessed 5 cases of group work, and 2 of pair work. The findings are similar to the Ministry of Education (MOE) 2004 Evaluation Report where during interviews teachers claimed to use learner centred methods but lesson observations revealed teacher centred classrooms. The findings go a long way in reinforcing the importance of using multiple data sources to corroborate data. Teachers may tell researchers what they are expected to do in line with policy but behind closed doors, teachers teach the way they want or the way it is practically possible in the prevailing conditions.

In terms of overall rating of the lessons which was based on the frequency of teacher or learner centred activities within the 20 min observation interval, 5 lessons were rated as learner centred, 27 as teacher centred and 8 as both teacher and learner centred. Therefore, most lessons (68%) comprised of 'teacher talk' with occasional question and answer sessions. Teacher talk was punctuated by rhetoric questions such as 'are we together'? This was promptly followed by a chorus "YES"

from the class. Such lessons were quiet and tense with the teacher in absolute control of the teaching and learning process. Prominence of teacher centred methods was collaborated by students' interviews, especially high achievers who complained that the majority of their teachers 'talk, talk, talk'.

Nevertheless, not all lessons were characterised by the extreme teacher or learner centeredness. In 8 observations, lessons seemed to oscillate between teacher and learner activities. Such lessons were not only interesting (without the predictable monotony in either method), but very successful. Whereas these seemed to be 'islands of excellence', the lessons portrayed a glimpse of 'learning centeredness' irrespective of the pedagogical approach employed discussed earlier. Perhaps, teacher centred methods ought not to be boring so long as teachers make lessons interesting.

Epistemological question

Another finding that has a bearing on the implementation of constructivist approaches in JSSs is the nature of knowledge that is supposed to be 'constructed' by learners. In national education systems, the curriculum is prescribed with clear objectives. In such cases, epistemological consideration can influence teachers' curricular decisions on what and how to teach. Findings showed that while the JC curriculum is learner-centred, specific instructional objectives hampers the implementation of learner centred pedagogy. For instance, in 25 (63%) of the 40 lessons observed, teachers began the lesson by outlining the specific objectives and on 3 occasions, teachers carried the syllabi with them and wrote the objectives on the board which were taught rigidly.

Moreover, teachers dismissed students' responses not because they were wrong *per se*, but if perceived not to be the 'best answer'. The findings are similar to Tabulawa's (1997) ethnographic study which showed that teachers encouraged 'right answering'. Except in Mathematics, students were cautioned to always give best answers 'to avoid being marked wrong in the final examination'. Teachers discouraged debate on any response that they deemed divergent; and yet, debate and challenging the norm is the hallmark of constructivist pedagogy. Therefore, prescribed knowledge can force teachers to use transmission methods to deliver the 'right knowledge'.

Learner perceptions of pedagogical practices

An interesting finding was the diverse learner perceptions of instructional strategies. When asked about teaching methods in their schools, high and low achievers held different views and preferences. High achievers detested 'teacher talk' which they found boring. For instance, when asked about the teaching methods in school B, one girl commented:

> "Most of the teaching methods in this school are not interesting; I think this is one of the reasons why our school is going down. In most cases, the teachers spend most of the time talking; just imagine talking in the 80 minutes not giving the students maybe a discussion. It is very hard just to listen. It can make you to lose concentration and sleep" (HA, 2).

In school H, in an urban setting, the high achiever had this to say:

> "The teaching methods are boring. At the beginning of the lesson I concentrate but as the lesson goes on, I lose concentration because some teachers like talking too much which bores me. Some teachers come to class and talk, talk, talk. They should try and make learning fun for us so that we can stay awake. It is a good way to learn when we are having fun" (HA, 8).

Interviews revealed that high achievers preferred teachers who made lessons 'interesting' 'creative' and 'practical' instead of 'teaching everything' as one high achiever in school F explained:

> "In most subjects, teachers teach us everything, but in science we do a lot of group work. Students teach each other, so we are always participating and I think that is brilliant because we are not being spoon fed, because being spoon fed just makes you lazy" (HA 6).

Ironically, with the exception of one, low achievers did not mind "teacher talk". Their only complaint was the speed at which lessons were delivered. The 7 low achievers reported that teachers talked "quickly', "fast". They wanted teachers to talk "slowly" (LA 1, 4, 6, 7) so that they could follow during lessons. Low achievers also wished teachers could take time to explain to them what was taught, as one explained:

> "Sometimes I understand but I need somebody to read slowly with me. Teachers talk fast. I wish teachers could call me during study and explain to me" (LA 4)."

The low achievers' learning experiences were corroborated by high achievers. Generally, there was consensus among high achievers that most instructional strategies benefited bright students and the slow learners

were left behind. For instance, while high achievers were discontented with 'teacher talk' they were aware that low achievers were faring worse and could not catch up as one quipped 'the speed is too high for low achievers' (HA 4).

Nevertheless, the findings were not without contradictions. While individual high achiever interviews revealed preference of learner centred strategies, in mixed ability groups there were dissenting voices where some high achievers perceived constructivist approaches especially group work ineffective. In 3 schools, high achievers in MAG complained that they were forced to do all the work assigned to their groups. One boy had this to say:

> "I really hate group work, sometimes some people will be making noise especially low achievers so high achievers end up doing all the work. Then later those who did not do anything take the credit for the work and if it is wrong they blame us. I don't like it. I prefer working alone" (MAG 5-HA boy).

Their account was corroborated by lesson observations where during group activities only few students dominated the discussion. In one learner centred science lesson where groups took turns to present, only 1 or 2 students participated out of the 8 members in each group. Some students hid behind others or passed on the information to the same student(s) when it was their turn to speak. Further, in 2 Mathematics lessons where teachers called on students to come to the front and work out some problems the students stood next to the board quietly. Teachers quickly told the students to sit down and called on another student.

Notwithstanding, students seemed to prefer a mixture of both learner and teacher centred instructional strategies. For instance, in a mixed ability group in school A, when asked about the teaching methods in their school, a high achiever responded "Teaching methods are ok for high achievers, but some of them are not interesting" (MAG 1-HA boy). In support, the other HA a girl, commented "Some teachers should spice up their teaching" (MAG1-HA girl), and when asked to elaborate, the student quipped "Some teachers preach, preach, preach". The comment was met with laughter and approval (nodding) from the rest of the group. Moreover, while most low achievers preferred 'to be taught' in school B, the LA detested teacher talk and commented "Some teachers when they teach you sleep" (LA 2). Perhaps, too much teacher talk was equally ineffective for low achievers.

Students also preferred a situation where teachers taught difficult content. Students complained that sometimes teachers gave them work to research on which either there are no sources for the same or which was hard to comprehend. In one focus group, an average student explained:

> "Group work can be a problem since we are children. Sometimes we present wrong information. They (teachers) should teach some of the content, we are here to learn". (MAG8-AV boy).

The students' sentiments seem to imply that both teacher and learner centred approaches are essential for effective learning. For instance, in 2 lessons where teachers were introducing a new topic, the teachers took time to lay the foundation and although this involved a lot of teacher talk, the lessons were successful. Therefore, the lecture method may be necessary when dealing with new concepts. What seemed to work in such lessons was the teachers' capacity to relate content to real life experiences and to create a relaxed learning atmosphere which made learning enjoyable.

DISCUSSION

Here, we highlighted the findings of the study that examined pedagogical practices and their efficacy on diverse learners in selected JSSs in Botswana. The findings revealed teacher centred classrooms. However, from lesson observations, teachers' overemphasis on class control stifled learner participation. Findings showed that teachers seemed to cherish absolute silence and students seemed conditioned to this. Hence, a common practice was that the teacher always initiated a discussion and students were supposed to respond and not vice versa. This is in contrast with constructivism philosophy guiding the education system where the teacher and learner are partners in the learning process.

However, classroom interactions should be conceptualised from unequal power relations among participants. Learner centred methods are premised in western cultures with democratic child rearing practices; which is contrasted with the Tswana culture (Tabulawa, 1997; Chilisa, 2000), and indeed African cultures' where adults control children. Thus, teachers can use transmission methods in order to be firmly in-charge of the classroom discourse. Teachers may also resort to transmission methods to cover more content. In the survey, 60% (n = 108) of the respondents agreed with the proposition that 'learner centred methods are time consuming'. The teachers' responses were supported by school heads who explained that the syllabus was long hence, teachers had to 'chase the curriculum'.

Secondly, the findings have shown that the nature of knowledge has a bearing on the realisation of learner centred methods. As Chilisa (2000) argues, the espoused instructional strategies and behavioural objectives are underpinned by opposing philosophical paradigms. Learner centred approaches are grounded in

constructivism where knowledge is subjective, whereas specific instructional objectives are premised on rational and single way of knowing. How do teachers reconcile subjectivity of knowledge espoused by constructivism with behavioural objectives where knowledge is specific? More fundamentally, how can students create knowledge which is already given?

Tafa (2001:333) suggests that objective knowledge reduces teachers to 'technicians' or 'delivery service workers'. While such depiction seems harsh, it provides a mental picture of the teachers' role in curriculum implementation. The syllabus is delivered to teachers who are expected to deliver the content; which is promptly followed by national examination. Teachers may use transmission methods to ensure that learners get the 'right knowledge' to pass examinations. In the process, the learners' ability to create knowledge is abandoned. Whereas predetermined knowledge is important for standardization within an education system, such practices discourage divergent thinking and creativity on the part of learner. This has implications at a time when Botswana and Africa at large needs to be promoting creativity and innovation for economic development.

Thirdly, the study has furnished students' perceptions of pedagogical practices. The findings seem to suggest that learners have different pedagogical preferences where high achievers preferred independent learning while low achieving students preferred to be 'taught'. More fundamentally, the findings seem to suggest that students preferred a mixture of both methods. There could be two explanations to these conflicting findings. Either, low and high achieving students have distinct pedagogical preferences or both groups prefer a mixture of independent learning and 'teacher talk'. The findings are important and seem to reinforce the notion that in large mixed ability classes, none of the methods should be used exclusively. Perhaps, teachers just need to 'spice up' their teaching methods, which may require variety as evidenced in the 8 successful lessons reported earlier.

Findings also revealed that low achievers do not benefit from learner centred activities. A common observation during interviews was the low proficiency in English among low achievers, which can stifle their participation in group activities. Perhaps, this explains why low achievers were unenthusiastic about constructivist approaches. While using local languages at secondary school level may be limiting in the current globalised world, targeted interventions to bring struggling students to a level where they can engage with the curriculum is vital. More fundamentally, such interventions should commence at primary school so that learners are prepared for the JC curriculum.

In many developing countries, Botswana included, children join school at different entry points. In such classrooms, some students may be bored being taught basics, while others may need somebody to 'teach them' basics. Thus, *one size fit all* teaching strategies may not work in such classrooms. Learner centred pedagogies require smaller classes where teachers can provide individualised instruction. Yet smaller classes are unattainable in education systems which operate with small budgets. With the clamour for free education to attain universal basic education, the situation is likely to get worse as classes get larger, presenting greater learner diversity. In such circumstances, the education systems will be concerned with providing basic educational resources such as classrooms; in the process, massive resources required for LCE become a luxury.

More fundamentally, even in classrooms where teachers labour to implement learner centred methods, it may not be effective for all learners. The implication is that for many education systems in developing contexts, implementation of learner centred pedagogies will remain a mirage. Therefore, developing countries may require pedagogical flexibility to spur students' achievement.

CONCLUSION

The argument in this paper is that learner centred pedagogies are not only hampered by contextual constraints, but fail to cater for diverse learners, for whom such strategies are meant. The paper has suggested 'pedagogical flexibility' not only based on context as dominant discourse has often emphasised, but also on the type of learner. The paper has provided diverse learners' perceptions of effective instructional approaches. Although the findings may not be conclusive, it seems that in mixed ability classes, instruction dominated by one teaching method is not effective. Therefore, teachers in developing contexts can experiment with pedagogy to maximise learning under difficult conditions.

However, 'pedagogical flexibility' may require a change of mind-set by educational stakeholders. The challenge however is how planners and practitioners can move beyond the polarised teacher and learner centred methods dualism. Again, the low morale among the teaching profession in developing contexts can hinder pedagogical flexibility. Teachers may also refuse to re-think their pedagogical practices if it complicates their work life. Teachers may need re-training to exploit the strengths inherent in teacher and learner centred methods. On the part of the planners, the drive for standardized educational practices can stifle pedagogical flexibility. More fundamentally, as mentioned earlier, in developing contexts global political pressure to adopt externally determined educational reforms can be a major hindrance in pedagogical flexibility discourse.

Whilst numerous studies have examined the 'why'

question for the LCE minimal success in developing context, there is need for more research on the way forward. There is also need for re-conceptualization of effective teaching methods based on practitioners and learners. While suggesting the way forward, Scheisfurth (2011) calls for learners' voices on their LCE experiences in developing contexts. The question however is, "will the significant others listen?" Bringing the voices of practitioners and learners in pedagogical debate is prudent since school is the arena where such policies are implemented.

To conclude, whereas this small scale study does not dispute the merits of constructivist approaches, it highlights important observations for further discussion and research. The implication for policy is that there is need for greater debate on pedagogical flexibility in the developing world. Implication for research is that more work is needed to understand how teachers can be flexible with pedagogy to maximise learning across the achievement divide. Without pedagogical flexibility, some students are likely to underachieve which curtails their life prospects and contribution to national development.

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Citation: Mungoo, J. and Moorad, F. (2015). Learner centred methods for whom? Lessons from Botswana Junior Secondary Schools. African Educational Research Journal, 3(3): 161-169.