# From teacher to learner centred approach: the case of Bulawayo urban schools

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## ABSTRACT

The frequent changes in the education industry have led to many controversies. Among these controversies include one between the learner centred and teacher centred approaches to education. The argument is on whether learning approaches and processes should be tailored to the needs of students or whether students should act just like knowledge receptacles in a situation where teachers act as the sources of knowledge. This study explores how secondary school teachers can move from the teacher to the learner centred approach as they discharge their duties. Adopting an interpretivist paradigm and case study design teachers' views on transitioning from teacher to learner centredness are explored using interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions. While strategies for such transitioning were suggested by teachers in this article, it appears that there is need for frequent capacitation sessions as a way of assisting secondary school teachers to address concerns they have in relation to learner centredness and student assessment procedures.

## INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial educators have used a variety of teaching approaches depending on how knowledge was organised and on what was considered to be important by a particular society. For instance a society which values the study of perennial truths would support the dominance of teacher centred approaches while societies which value learning by doing would largely adopt approaches that place learners at the centre of the learning enterprise. The two approaches referred to above do not exist in isolation. What differs is the extent to which teachers use one approach at the expense of the other. It is in this context that one can consider movement from teacher to learner centredness as a travelling policy (Orga and Jones, 2006).

Several studies on adopting learner centred approaches have been conducted both globally and locally. Du Plessis (2020) conducted one such study in South Africa with 4th year university students at a higher education institution. Results from the study revealed that student teachers experienced challenges such as disciplinary problems, overcrowded classrooms and time constraints which made it difficult to practice learner centred teaching. In Kenya, Hardman et al. (2009) conducted a survey of 102 video recorded lessons and discovered that lessons were dominated by lecturing with occasional question and answer, copying and individual written exercises. What is evident from these studies is that implementing learner centred approaches in teaching and learning has its fair share of challenges. This, notwithstanding, a close examination of learner centred education portrays that this approach has more advantages warranting its implementation in secondary schools in the global south.

Ornstein and Hunkins (2020) posit that teaching approaches can generally be traced to curriculum designs adopted by a country. While one country may decide to plan their curricula using the subject centred curriculum design other countries may decide to adopt problem centred designs and learner centred designs or a combination of both. In the former, emphasis is on organising content according to separate subject disciplines (compartmentalisation). In this set up content is abstract and theoretical often unrelated to most learners' experiences of the real world (Hoadley and Jansen, 2014). In this design assessment focuses on

the ability of learners to recall content. Curriculum tends to be developed by experts and imposed on teachers from above. Teachers and learners have very little say in what they teach and learn. Such knowledge organisation tends to foster teacher centred approaches.

In such approaches the teacher's role is one of an instructor. This instructor's position relates to, as indicated earlier, what Bernstein (1999) called the performance curriculum which portrays the teacher controlling the teaching. A teacher using the performance curriculum transmits knowledge according to defined pedagogical rules (Hoadley and Jansen, 2014) and makes decisions in the classroom without consulting learners. Learners are viewed as passive recipients who should be filled with information from the experts (teachers) (Freire, 1996). The teacher, in a way, uses the banking concept of education which calls for learners to be filled with information which will be retrieved at a later stage by way of summative assessment. This teacher position can be equated to the professional/subject/discipline/concept (Khoza, 2016) or scholar academic ideology. In most cases, the teachers in this position use textbooks as the source of information. This subject/content concept, which relies mostly on textbooks, makes the instructor's role very easy since reading material will be readily available. Teaching methods which limit learner participation are preferred by teachers in this position (Hoadley and Jansen, 2014). Consequently methods such as rote learning which promote memorisation and drilling are promoted. A teacher who uses teacher-centred methods does most of the talking in the classroom at the expense of the learners.

Stated differently, teacher centred or traditional teaching, as it is commonly referred to, is distinguished by its expository form and narrative character. The approach advocates for teacher control in the classroom; teacher provision of structure and teacher determining the social climate of the classroom (Edwards and Beacon 2004). Such an approach seems to imply that all knowledge learnt is beyond the reach of the learner consequently the teacher adopts the "jug-mug theory/ tabularasa concept/ blank slate theory" in discharging his/her duties (Freire 1996). Thus the teacher centred approach is associated with transmission models of teaching (lecture methods) which include drill and practice (Bryant, 2004).

Traditional teacher centred approaches have been criticized for relegating education to an act of depositing whereby teachers make deposits and students receive, memorize and repeat to the best of their efforts and capacities. Such approaches have also been criticized for:

a) Being ineffective and leading to the acquisition of skills of a lower taxonomic level (Gauthier and Dembele, 2004)

b) Undermining spontaneity and initiative among students (O Sullivan, 2004)

c) Inhibiting creativity and critical thinking (Freire, 1996).

In an attempt to mitigate the foregoing as well as aligning teaching to learner characteristics progressive movements starting at the end of the 19th century into the early 20th century have proposed alternatives to traditional teacher centred approaches of teaching (Windschtl, 2012). One such alternative is the adoption of the learner centred approach to teaching and learning. This approach has been known by a variety of terms, namely, child centred education/pedagogy and student centred learning. The term has also been referred to as flexible learning, experiential learning and self - directed learning. Tabulawa (2003) adds that the term learner centred approach has been used interchangeably with participatory learning, democratic learning, inquiry based learning and discovery learning. Teachers using this approach to teaching plan practical activities such as discussions, quizzes, projects, brainstorming sessions, role plays, debates and field trips. In these activities learners solve problems, formulate questions of their own and answer questions.

The learner centred approach has historical roots that date back to the time of Socrates (400BC) and other early 20th century scholars like Dewey (1933) who questioned the nature of childhood and how children should be educated. Linked to the progressive movement together with Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1966) these scholars believed that knowledge is co-constructed by learners and teachers, with the teacher playing a social, interpersonal and facilitative rather than a whole class instructive role. Schweisfurth (2013:20) observed that the "learner centred approach gives learners and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the contents and processes of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by the learner's needs, capacities and interests."

From the foregoing teachers who make use of the learner centred approach adopt a facilitator's role during instruction. Learners are highly involved in the learning process and make decisions in the classroom (Hoadley and Jansen, 2014). The teacher gives learners an opportunity to interact on their own to be able to construct their own knowledge. Such a situation, which promotes deliberation of ideas by learners, calls for the use of the communicative

approach (Visscher-Voerman and Gustafson, 2004). The teacher as a facilitator may deliberate with learners in an informal way in small group sessions. During the process of deliberations, the teacher as a facilitator encourages student learning by creating an atmosphere in which an open exchange of ideas is facilitated. It is important to note that this position of being a facilitator requires the teacher to have a sound subject knowledge base as well as the ability to marshal and boost the availability and use of learning resources (Harden and Crosby, 2000).

The teacher's position as a facilitator relates to the competence curriculum which is driven by the learner-centred approach. This curriculum focuses on learning outcomes whereby learners are expected to arrive at an outcome at their own time and pace (Harden and Crosby, 2000). It is a kind of open process which provides the designers (in this case the teachers and learners) the latitude to meet their own targets as they create knowledge. The teacher in this position views the education process as an open ended system which teachers and learners can explore. This position promotes the use of constructivist approach where knowledge is constructed in the mind of the student (Brooks and Brooks, 1993).

The learner centred approach is not, however, expected to diminish the importance of the instructional side of classroom activity, but instead instruction is broadened to include other activities that produce excellent learner outcomes.

### Statement of the problem

Transitioning from the teacher to the learner centred approach is a process which requires capacitation of the implementer. Acknowledging that a substantial number of secondary school teachers were trained using content and examination driven approaches which are teacher centred (Smith and Baik (2019) this study investigates such teachers' understanding of the learner centred approach, the challenges likely to be faced in implementing the approach as well as suggesting interventions that could enhance secondary school teachers' uptake of this approach in teaching and learning.

### Research questions

1. How do secondary school teachers understand the learner centred approach?
2. What distinctions are there between the teacher and learner centred approaches?
3. What challenges do secondary school teachers encounter in their bid to transform from the teacher to the learner centred approach?

4. How can secondary school teachers be supported in order to effectively implement the teacher centred approach?

## METHODOLOGY

Adopting the interpretivist paradigm this qualitative study explores, through the case study design, secondary school teachers' conception of the learner centred approach, its similarities and differences with the teacher centred approach, challenges which teachers are likely to encounter in implementing the learner centred approach as well as proposing interventions that could enhance the uptake of this approach among secondary school teachers in Bulawayo urban schools in Zimbabwe. The case study design described by Bassey and Owan (2019) as an inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real life context was seen as most appropriate for this investigation as it enabled the researchers to interact with users of teaching approaches in secondary schools. Such an approach provided an emic view of the phenomenon. Three secondary schools in Bulawayo urban were purposively sampled thus: one former group A school, one former group B school and one church run secondary school. From each school the head, two heads of department and four teachers were also purposively selected as participants in this study. School heads were interviewed while data from heads of departments and teachers were obtained through focus group discussions and document analysis. These participants were selected as they were considered to be information rich as some of them implement teaching approaches in their respective subjects while others work as supervisors ensuring that teachers adopt appropriate teaching approaches in their subjects. The study made use of interviews, document analysis and focus group discussions as data generation tools.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Secondary school teachers' understanding of the learner centred approach

From interview and focus group discussion data it was evident that the learner centred approach was interpreted to mean slightly different things by the various teacher categories in this study. For school heads the learner centred approach entailed ensuring that learners were given tasks which they do on their own during teaching and learning sessions. School head A made the following observation:

"My own understanding of the learner centred approach is that students must be given regular exercises and tests since at the end of the year it is them who will write the final examinations."

The foregoing is indicative of the examination driven mode which the school head is concerned about. The head of School B indicated that the meaning of learner centred approaches to teaching is confusing. In her own words:

"Some of us were trained way back and what we know is that teachers are expected to cover as much content as is possible. Teachers are therefore expected to know their subject matter so that they can impart it to learners."

Evident from the above is that school heads expect secondary school teachers to largely use transmission modes of teaching. Such modes place the teacher at the centre of teaching and learning. Learners are thus expected to listen and assimilate the knowledge delivered by the teacher. Such a view is consistent with Freire's (1996) banking concept of education.

Teachers and heads of departments from Schools A, B and C who constituted three focus groups displayed some grasp of what constitutes the learner centred approach. Responding to questions during these sessions it was evident that they viewed the learner centred approach as an arrangement where learners take an active part during teaching and learning situations. A teacher from School A who concurred with teachers from schools B and C had this to say:

"Learner centred approaches are the teaching methods that involve learner contributions e,g group work, experimentation etc where learners actively engage by working collaboratively as a team while the teacher facilitates the learning activities. The teacher is not fully involved in the teaching and learning process."

According to them this could be done through adopting experimentation, using group work as well as debates. Heads of department at the three schools concurred with teachers by citing the competency based curriculum as an illustration of learner centredness. One head of department from School C opined that:

"The new competency based curriculum introduced in schools thrives on learner centred approaches. Learners can only develop skills and competencies if they are involved during teaching and learning sessions."

Heads of departments and teachers in this study indicated that if they had their way they would implement learner centred approaches in the discharge of their duties. The teachers, in particular, however noted that it is difficult to adopt such an approach because they are expected to complete the syllabus early so that sufficient time for drilling and revision are set aside in preparation for the examinations.

**Distinction between teacher and learner centred approaches**

Responding to questions on the difference between the teacher centred and the learner centred approach two school heads indicated that in the former the teacher is in full control of the class, directing learning activities and ensuring that there is order in the classroom. Additionally, the two school heads pointed out that it is the teacher's responsibility to answer all learners' questions. These school heads observed that the learner centred approach allows learners to work on teacher assigned tasks individually. According to these two school heads, what is called learner centred approach begins with and is organised by the teacher. Evident from the above observations by these school heads is that the teacher is the focus whether it is in teacher centred or learner centred approach. One school head, however, observed that the distinction between teacher and learner centred approaches can be viewed as, in the former emphasis is on the teacher and subject matter while in the latter emphasis is on the learner and learner activities. This school head had this to say about the distinction between teacher and learner centred approaches:

"The difference between the two is that teacher centred approach ensures that learners acquire knowledge from their teachers while learner centred assumes that learners are able to acquire knowledge through research, by doing or by discovering new concepts on their own with little guidance from the teacher."

This observation by this particular school head is consistent with King (2018) who noted that it is the child/learner, and not the curriculum that should be at the centre of the school.

Heads of departments responded to the issue of the distinction between teacher and learner centred approaches by indicating that in the former the focus is on the instructor. A head of department from school B concurring with other department heads from schools A and C indicated that:

"The instructor controls the conversation in the classroom and also evaluates students' learning while in the learner centred approach, the role of the teacher is more of a coach than a person with all the answers."

Teachers in the three schools concurred with observations made by heads of departments. A

teacher from school A had this to say about this distinction:

"The difference is that in learner centred approaches the learner is in control of their learning and is actively participating in the learning process while in the teacher centred approaches, the teacher is in control and learners are passive. In learner centred approaches, the learners discover knowledge on their own while in teacher approaches, it's the teacher who knows and must give knowledge to their learners."

An analysis of schemes of work and lesson plans indicated a preponderance of using the teacher centred approach. The lesson steps focus on what the teacher should do with little or no learner activities at all except written exercises done at the end of the lessons. A cross examination of teachers and heads of departments on the discrepancy between the answers they gave orally on the differences between teacher and learner centred approaches and what obtained in the records revealed that teachers plan as expected by their supervisors.

Heads of department and teachers' views on differences between teacher and learner centred approaches are summarised below:

| Teacher centred approach | Learner centred approach |
|---|---|
| Focus is on the teacher | Focus is on both the teacher and the learner |
| Students work individually | Students work in groups or alone depending on the nature of the task/activity |
| Teacher observes and corrects learners' responses | Teacher provides feedback and corrective action when required |
| Only the teacher answers students' questions | Students may answer each other's questions and use the teacher as a resource |
| Only the teacher evaluates students' learning | Students may evaluate their own learning, which is supported by the teacher |

**Challenges secondary school teachers encounter in their bid to transition from teacher to learner centred approaches**

Heads of department in Commerce indicated that the current forms 1-4 syllabus advocates for the development of learner competencies and that teaching should be learner centred. This position, verified by the researchers through document (syllabus) analysis is portrayed below:

"Teaching was to be learner centred, allowing space for learners to be active participants in their own learning and sometimes even in the design of what was to be learnt... The following methods are suggested: group work, research, educational tours, simulations/role play, question and answer, case study, mini enterprise approach, discovery, problem solving, demonstrations, seminars, debates, quizz, games, project work."

While the greater part of the syllabus is consistent with learner centredness, a challenge raised by heads of department and teachers is one of examination demands. According to them, while they see the need for enabling learners to explore, experiment and discover on their own, at the end of the year they are required to account for the academic performance of their students.

From the assessment section of the Commerce syllabus analysed by the researchers it was observed that students are expected to answer two papers namely, paper one which consists of 40 multiple choice questions constituting 20% of the total mark; paper two where section A has 6 compulsory structured questions and section B where candidates are expected to answer three essay questions constituting 50% of the total mark. The other 30% represents continuous assessment. Thus to answer multiple choice and structured questions teachers rely on the teacher centred approach which is not consistent with the various learner centred approaches suggested in the syllabus as indicated above. If the future education and career of students depends on examination results, then open ended exploration of content not likely to be tested will seem a luxury and teachers will teach to examinations in order to meet students' needs and to protect their own reputations. Thus the contradiction within the same syllabus is a challenge which curriculum designers should address together with curriculum implementers.

To buttress the observation that what counts at the end of the school cycle are results, heads of departments and teachers cited instances where teachers were often chided by their supervisors for poor results in their specific subject areas. One head of department had this to say when students did not perform well in some subjects under his supervision:

"After being summoned to the school head's office I was told in no uncertain terms that it is either I get the results improved or I get demoted so that a competent member takes over the leadership of the department."

Another head of department from a different school got the following comment from the school head:

"Every time I get to your department I notice students making noise while teachers go round from group to group. That is a sign of poor class control. Next time ensure that your teachers control the class effectively so that students get appropriate knowledge disseminated by teachers."

The above comments tend to discourage teachers from adopting approaches that encourage students to discover information on their own. It is in light of the above that Scheisfurth (2013) observes that it is difficult to promote the learner centred approach where high stake examinations which test fixed knowledge drive teacher, student and parent motivation. Acknowledging that the majority of school heads were trained using content and examination driven approaches (Bremmer, 2019) noted that it is not easy for them to move away from the comfort of how they were trained to new pedagogies.

Another challenge teachers experience is the fact that when school heads and their deputies supervise teachers the expectation is that subject content should be the main emphasis during lessons. These supervisors go to the extent of checking on the number of tests administered per week in a subject. An examination of teachers' documents revealed weekly signatures by school heads and their deputies against all tests administered. Additionally, teachers pointed out that class sizes and lack of resources militated against implementing the learner centred approach in schools. In this respect a teacher from school C had this to say:

"At our school we have 2 Agriculture textbooks to be used by a class of 46 learners. Secondly the teacher- learner ratio is such that it is extremely difficult to adopt learner centred approaches."

School heads noted that the school time table is so full that it does not allow learners to "waste time engaging in playful activities." Perceiving learner centred approaches as playful activities ignores the fact that such approaches encourage communication, collaboration as well as acknowledging the classroom as a community where everyone shares the learning agenda. Furthermore, Weimer (2020) observes that that approach teaches students how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyse arguments and generate hypotheses.

**Scaffolding secondary school teachers to implement the learner centred approach**

An analysis of the various syllabi in Zimbabwe secondary schools revealed that most of them are competence based requiring learners to develop specific exit profiles through hands on approaches. The assessment sections of a considerable number of these syllabi appear to be inconsistent with the learner centred approaches. They appear to require learners to recall knowledge with little application which is consistent with norm referenced assessment thereby sidelining criterion referenced assessment which addresses what learners can do as individuals. To address such a systemic challenge curriculum planners, educational administrators and teachers would need to create a curriculum platform (Walker, 1971) where issues of curriculum alignment are ironed out so that curriculum expectations are realised through adopting appropriate assessment procedures.

Heads of department and teachers, through focus group discussions, noted that in order for secondary school teachers to be ready for taking up the learner centred approach there is need for continuous teacher professional development. Such teacher development, should address what the learner centred approach entails. Firstly secondary school teachers should understand that the foundation of learner centred teaching is rooted in a constructivist framework of learning (Weimer, 2020). Constructivists postulate that humans are perceivers and interpreters who construct meaning from new and prior experiences. Instructional designs should therefore focus on providing tools and environments for helping learners interpret the multiple perspectives of the world in creating their own world (Karagiorgi and Symeou, 2005).

As a consequence of the foregoing, secondary school teachers should also be made aware, through staff development, that the learner centred pedagogy creates an environment that speaks to the heart of learning. It encourages students to deeply engage with material, develop a dialogue and reflect on their progress. In agreement with King (2018) heads of department and teachers noted that learner centredness represents a shift away from the "sage on the stage" mentality and puts the students' learning at the centre stage.

The above observation is supported by Bremmer (2019) who noted that in order to transition from teacher to learner centredness instructional practice needs to change in five key dimensions, namely: role of the teacher, balance of power, function of content, responsibility of learning as well as purposes of evaluation as illustrated below:

| FACTOR | LEARNER CENTRED PEDAGOGY | EXAMPLE |
|---|---|---|
| Role of learner | Teacher action should focus on student learning | Approaches that avoid the tendency to tell students |
| Balance of power | Teachers share decision making about learning with students | Assignment choices and policy setting |
| Responsibility of learning | Co-create learning environments that motivate students to accept responsibility for learning | Student driven activities to create constructive classroom climates and logical consequences |
| Function of content | Content should be used to build a knowledge base and develop learning skills and learner self awareness | Approaches that do not separate learning strategies from content<br>● End of class summaries<br>● Exam review sessions |
| Purpose of evaluation | Evaluation activities should also be used to promote learning and develop self as well as peer assessment skills | Self and peer assessment/evaluation of participation |

Acknowledging that their role, in its present form, contradicts the development of skills and competencies in students school heads proposed the need to be capacitated, at school or cluster level, through workshops on the implementation of the learner centred approach. This, as suggested by Hall and Hord (2016), would enlighten teacher supervisors on what to look for in teachers' lessons. This can be effective if learner assessment ceases to be based on final examinations only. Both school heads and teachers in this study concurred that the introduction of continuous assessment learning activities (CALA) by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education was one way of giving value to what learners do before final examinations. Teachers, heads of department and school heads however noted the need for training in administering CALA if this is to be effective.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopting learner centred approaches by teachers is a process which should move away from not only changing visible structures within schools (restructuring) to accepting that teachers have prior knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, norms and values which too need to change (re-culturing) if the change is to take effect (Fullan, 2018). Consequently school heads, heads of department and teachers need to be gradually eased into learner centred approaches taking into account where they are coming from. While it is indeed true that teacher centred instruction is still useful in education a movement to learner centred approaches is recommended if

learning is to not only take into account learner characteristics but also offer an emancipatory education for posterity. Another lesson that could be learnt from this case study is that gate keepers like school heads should be kept abreast of the implications of adopting curricula that foster the development of learner competences (competency based curriculum). Additionally school heads should be able to interrogate, at appropriate fora, the misalignment that may exist between syllabus objectives, teaching approaches and assessment procedures. To assist secondary school teachers to transition to learner centredness they should subscribe to Doddington and Hilton's (2007) observation that the teacher's task is not only to instruct but to stimulate the self-activity of children through the training of the senses. This can be done through encouraging secondary school teachers to think of the curriculum in terms of activity and participation rather than knowledge to be obtained and facts to be stored. As pointed out by UNESCO (2008) while there may be challenges in implementing the learner centred approach efforts to adopt this approach must go on while ministries of education and schools find ways of utilizing it in different cultural contexts.

## DECLARATIONS

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**Data availability**

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests in this research and publication.

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