



Pupils' and Teachers' Perception of learner-centred methodologies in the teaching and learning of history: A case of selected high schools in Mongu district of Western Zambia

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Abstract

The study aimed at getting pupils' and teachers' perception of learner-centred methodologies in the teaching and learning of history in selected high schools in Mongu district, Western Province of Zambia. Learner-centred learning is an approach to teaching that is increasingly being emphasised in many countries in the world today and the Zambian education system is not an exception. This has seen a change in focus from traditional teaching methods to learner-centred methods. Although these methods are emphasised to trainee teachers at the Universities and Colleges of education in Zambia, little is known about the extent to which these methods are used in the teaching and learning of history in schools and what pupils' and teachers' perceptions are about them.

A descriptive design was used in the study. The population consisted of all grade 12 pupils who took history and teachers who taught history. The sample comprised of 100 grade 12 pupils and 20 teachers. Purposive sampling and stratified random sampling techniques were used. Data was collected using Likert scale questionnaires, focus group discussion guides and semi-structured interviews schedules. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

Findings showed that teachers do not frequently use learner-centred methods in the teaching and learning process of history. Results also indicated that learners are interested in learner-centred methods. The study revealed that the most preferred learner-centred methods by both pupils and teachers were: class discussion, group discussion, debate, field trips, discovery learning, brainstorming, role play and drama.

Keywords: pupils, drama, discussion, centred, teachers

Introduction

Learner-centred learning is an approach to education focusing on the needs of the learners, rather than others involved in the educational process, such as teachers and administrators like head teachers and deputy head teachers. The learner-centred paradigm departs from the traditional teaching methods (lecture methods) by focusing on learners more than teachers and learning more than teaching. Traditionally, teachers direct the learning process and students assume a receptive role in their education. With the advent of progressive education in the 21st century, and the influence of psychologists, some educators have largely replaced traditional teaching methods which focused on how teachers teach instead of how pupils learn (Blumberg, 2008) [4].

According to Muzumara (2011) [31], learner-centred methods in history includes practical activities such as panel discussions, group discussions, class discussions quizzes, projects, brainstorming activities, role plays, drama, debates, field trips and discovery learning. Learner-centred methods also include active learning in which learners solve problems, formulate questions of their own choice, and answer questions. Felder and Brent (2003) [13] state that learner-centred methods have repeatedly been shown to be superior to the traditional teacher-centred approach of instruction. However, learner-centred methods are not intended to diminish the importance of the instructional side of classroom experience but instead; instruction is

broadened to include other activities that produce desirable learners' outcome.

Statement of the Problem

Teaching in schools has been done through teacher-centred (lecture) methods since time immemorial. Of late however, learner-centred methods have emerged as an alternative and complementary form of lesson delivery and have been credited in a variety of ways such as: avoidance of boredom, durability of learnt material and proper understanding of taught material (Farrant, 1991). Learner-centred learning is an approach to teaching that is increasingly being emphasised in many countries in the world today. This has seen a change in focus from traditional teaching methods to learner-centred methods. The Zambian education system is not an exception. Although these methods are emphasised to trainee teachers at the Universities and Colleges of education in Zambia, little is known about the extent to which these methods are used in the teaching and learning of history in schools and what pupils' and teachers' perceptions are about them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to find out pupils' and teachers' perceptions of learner-centred methods in the teaching and learning of history in selected high schools in Mongu District, Western Province of Zambia.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

- i) To investigate the extent to which learner-centred methods are used in the teaching and learning of history.
- ii) To establish pupils' and teachers' perceptions of the learner-centred methods of teaching in history.
- iii) To identify which learner-centred methods are mostly preferred by pupils and teachers in the teaching and learning of history.

Research Questions

- i) What is the extent to which learner-centred methods are being used in the teaching and learning of history?
- ii) What are pupils' and teachers' perceptions of learner-centred methods in the teaching and learning of history?
- iii) Which learner-centred methods are mainly preferred by pupils and teachers in the teaching and learning of history?

Literature Review

Learner-centred methods: An African perspective

Learner-centred methods are now more emphasised as opposed to teacher-centred methods in the teaching and learning process. This has seen many of the countries in the world today including African countries embrace this paradigm shift (Garrison, 2003) ^[15]. Learner-centred education is a 'travelling policy' which has been endorsed by many governments in Africa because it is a foundation for the building of democratic citizens and societies, and the development of a skilled population ready for the knowledge economies of the future African countries (Ozga & Jones, 2006) ^[32]. These methods have been successfully implemented to reform education in countries, such as Tunisia (Khemmani, 2006) ^[18], Ghana (Yakubu, 1994) ^[42], Mozambique (Baloi, 1994) ^[3], and Swaziland (Dlamini, Lubben & Campbell, 1996) ^[8].

Learner-centred methods have been emphasised in Africa for more than a decade now. The United Nations Education and Scientific Culture Organisation (UNESCO) and the International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA) have been committed to enhancing the quality of education in Africa assisting in capacity building and promoting learner-centred education (UNESCO & IICBA, 2011) ^[40]. Many African countries have been reforming the historically common teacher-centred curriculum, which employs a lecture style which promotes rote learning to a learner-centred one. Since the early 2000s Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania have instituted policies specifying that teachers should use pedagogical approaches that engage students and make learning more interactive. National curricula in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, and a growing number of African countries seek to promote such skills as analysis, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. The aim of these reforms is to enable teachers to move away from standard 'learning by rote' methods and utilise alternatives that encourage inquiry among students as they develop research skills (Henson, 2001) ^[17].

In Zambia, the national education policy of 1996 (Educating Our Future) stresses the importance of using methods which focus on the learners. The policy document states that:

Through the inspectorate, teacher training colleges, resource centres and school-based activities, the

Ministry of Education(MOE), will promote a variety of teaching strategies with focus on stimulating learning through inquiry, guided-discovery, problem solving, application, and similar activity-based teaching and learning method (MoE, 1996:47).

Therefore, it can be clearly seen that the Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education promotes teaching methods which are learner-centred. The policy document further states that:

The Ministry of Education emphasises that the child is at the centre of the entire education process which exists solely for the sake of the learner. It also recognises that each child is unique with his or her own individuality and personality, fashioned in family and community backgrounds that are themselves unique. This contributes a rich diversity to the entire educational enterprise which would seek to cultivate the qualities and potentialities of each learner, without trying to mould all children according to the same pattern (MoE, 1996:28).

The Ministry of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education recognises that learners have individual differences and they require methodologies which cater for their different abilities. It places emphasis on individual learners as opposed to teacher-centred methods which focuses just on the learning and teaching process without taking into consideration the potentialities and capabilities of individual learners.

Rationale for learner-centred methods

Learner-centred methods increases motivation

Research indicates that learner-centred methods increases motivation to learn. The benefits of learner-centred education include increased motivation for learning and greater satisfaction with school; both of these outcomes lead to greater achievement (Slavin, 2009) ^[39]. Research also shows that personal involvement, personal commitment, confidence in one's abilities to succeed, and a perception of control over learning lead to more learning and higher achievement in school (Alexander & Murphy, 2000) ^[1].

Learner-centred learning is based on the belief that people learn more effectively when they are interested in a topic or problem and thus are motivated to seek solutions to such problems (Pierce, 2003) ^[34]. This idea is similar to Bruner's constructivist learning theory which states that the learning process is an active one in which the learner must discover principles for himself /herself and that instruction must be offered in the context of experiences that make the learner willing and eager to learn (Pierce, 2003) ^[34]. Slavin (1998) ^[38] further states that the teacher helps the learner to construct his or her own knowledge by giving the learner the opportunity to explore concepts and apply ideas. A learner understands new events in relation to his or her past experiences, and the active learning process helps the learner to develop logical thinking.

Learner-centred methods promote individual differences

Learner-centred methods promote and cater for individual differences among learners. According to Lambert and McCombs (1998) ^[19] learners each come to the learning situation with their own personalities, learning styles,

motivation and focus. When a learner creates knowledge based on his or her previous knowledge, he or she has to instill concepts or things with personal meaning. Each individual has a typical way of thinking, remembering and solving problems. Learners come to the learning experience with prior knowledge that is peculiar to themselves and with different beliefs and backgrounds and must be respected if learners are to participate actively in their learning process. Lambert and McCombs (1998) ^[19] contend that differences in talents, emotional states, abilities and needs must be taken into account if learners are to participate successfully in the learning and self development that they need. Litzinger and Osif (1996) ^[22] point out that learners also think and learn in different ways and tend to have a consistent approach to learning. In general, sensitivity to individual differences in learners in the classroom and variations in learning materials is needed if one happens to accommodate all learners and if one wants to help learners learn effectively in a learner-centred classroom. Research indicates that learners not only come to the learning environment with certain history behind them that colours their opinions, interests and goals, but also with differences in their learning styles, development, abilities, feelings of efficacy and various other needs. Therefore, learner centred methods play a pivotal role in catering for individual differences of learners (Lambert & McCombs, 1998) ^[19].

Changes in the understanding of how humans learn are supported by the use of learner-centred methods

Doyle (2008) ^[9] indicates that new discoveries about how the human brain learns and subsequent recommendations for how to teach in harmony with these discoveries have guided the learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. For example, we want learners to do more firsthand learning, practicing, reflecting, teaching of others and presentations because all these learning activities require active learner engagement. Research from neuroscience indicates that dendrites of our brain cells only grow when the brain is actively engaged and the neuron-networks formed in our brains only stay connected when they are used repeatedly (Ratey, 2009) ^[35]. We need to continually reinforce to our learners that the learning tasks we are asking them to take on, which require them to adapt to new learning roles are done to optimise the development of neuron-networks they need to be successful at school.

Learner-centred methods encourage attention and cognitive processing

Research suggests that instructors have a tendency to overestimate their learners' level of cognitive involvement in the classroom. For example, Fassinger (1996) ^[12] surveyed more than 1,000 learners in over 50 classes from a wide range of disciplines that met at the same period; She discovered that learners perceive themselves as less involved in the classroom than faculty perceive them to be. While we would like to think that learners are engaging in reflective thinking while listening to lectures, research demonstrates that learners' note-taking during learning is often performed in a reflexive, mindless manner.

Research further indicates that prolonged performance on any passive, repetitive task (such as continuous note-taking) eventually results in that task being assumed by lower centres of the brain that control automatic behaviour, with limited involvement of higher (cortical) areas of the brain

responsible for higher-level thinking. This finding is captured anecdotally in the old saying: "*During lectures, information passes from the lecturer's notes to the students' notes and through the minds of neither*" (Gibbs, 1995:123) ^[16].

In studies of learner behaviour in classrooms, it has been found that about half of the time during lectures, learners are thinking about things unrelated to the lecture content and up to 15 percent of their class time is spent '*fantasizing*' (Milton, Pollio & Eison, 1986) ^[29]. Student attention and concentration tend to drop off dramatically after 10-20 minutes of continuous instructor discourse. Thus, attention loss during lectures cannot be dismissed as a learner problem, such as lack of motivation, lack of effort, or an outbreak of attention deficit disorder among today's learners; instead, the problem seems to lie with the lecture method itself (Milton *et al*, 1986) ^[29]. It may be that listening attentively to lectures for prolonged periods of time is simply not something that the human brain is particularly well equipped to do.

Some neurobiologists have argued that our brains may not be neurologically wired to process information for prolonged periods of time because it was more adaptive for our early ancestors to have shorter attention spans, which enabled them to react quickly to a predator or prey and then shift their attention to the next life-preserving priority. This suggests that the human brain processes new information more effectively in shorter, focused sessions (lasting no longer than 15 minutes), followed by opportunities to '*act*' on that information via activities that involve personal engagement and reflection (Matlin, 2002) ^[24].

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) ^[33], research revealed that even if learners miraculously managed to maintain attention and concentration in a typical 40-minute lecture, important educational outcomes such as higher-level thinking and attitude change, are less likely to take place. This is when learners listen more to lectures than when they engage in more active forms of learning. For instance, McKeachie (1994:77) ^[28] conducted an extensive review of the research literature on school teaching methods and concluded:

If we want learners to become more effective in meaningful learning and thinking, they need to spend more time in active, meaningful learning and thinking not just sitting and passively receiving information.

Learner-centred methods promotes autonomy in class

Weimar (2002) ^[41] reviewed extensive literature on learner-centred teaching and learning and she summarised her findings as follows: Pupils and students are capable learners who will blossom as power shifts to a more egalitarian classroom. The role of a teacher has changed from sole authoritarian to fellow *traveler* in search of knowledge. Returning the responsibility for learning to learners so that they can understand their learning strengths and weaknesses and feel self-directed in their knowledge quest. Her research also indicates that the emphasis from teacher-centred to learner-centred is not always initially welcomed by students who often prefer passive learning but those who find the experience interesting. Such does involve a reallocation of power in the classroom although it is clear that the ultimate control still remains with the instructor. Her research concludes that student learning becomes even more

effective when students are teaching students and are involved in subsequent evaluation.

Barbara McCombs has published extensively on the topic of learner-centred teaching (McCombs, 1997, 1999, 2000) [25, 26, 27]. Her work emphasises the role of positive feedback between student and instructor and the importance of encouraging good climate of learning both in and outside the classroom. Her work also found significant value of better understanding an individual student's perspective on the learning experience and having diverse approaches that allow all students to be better invested in their learning experience. Parker Palmer's *"The Courage to Teach"* eloquently addresses the paradox of teaching-versus learning-centred education practices. His view is that if we separate teaching from learning, the result is *"teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk."*

Learner-centred methods prepares learners for their careers

The justification for teaching many of the learning skills, behaviours, attitudes and critical thinking strategies now a part of learner-centred methods is that learners will need these skills for their careers. For instance, learners are put into small groups not only to promote a deeper level of learning, but because learning to talk with or listen to others is perhaps the single most important skill needed to be successful in any career field (Doyle, 2008) [9].

The underlying principle for asking learners to make presentations before the whole class is that learning to speak in front of others is crucial to career success. One of the reasons learners are being asked to take on more responsibility for their own learning is because they will be responsible for it the rest of their lives. The responsibility we have to develop our learners' lifelong learning skills is justification for many of the changes we are asking our learners to maintain in a learner-centred classroom. When we ask them to manage their time; work well with others; listen attentively; defend a position or find a proper source; accept and give feedback and criticism; express ideas in clear concise ways; we do so because they will have to do these things the rest of their lives (Ratey, 2009) [35].

Teachers' views of learner-centred methods

Macgregor, Smith and Robinson (2000) [23] address several questions or concerns that teachers have raised about learner-centred methods like smaller group learning. The first question that they raised is about content coverage. The teachers who were interviewed expressed consistent satisfaction that students in their classes are demonstrating one or more of these indicators of increased learning, much greater conceptual understanding, more complex critical-thinking skills, better class attendance, and greater confidence. About two-thirds of teachers who were interviewed said that they covered fewer topics in class when they used group work, but that students learnt and retained more of the *'big ideas'* that they chose to address relative to using lecture formats.

According to Cooper (2000) [6], teachers may find learner-centred learning approaches to be more enjoyable and lead to improved student learning, but they still have questions about the amount of content that can be covered using these approaches. Content coverage is still high priority for teachers. Although some teachers indicate that they cover as

much or most content with learner-centred learning approaches, some adopters of learner-centred learning approaches indicate that they cover less content with the same me

Methodology

Research design

This study used a descriptive design. A descriptive design was used because it was aimed at getting pupils' and teachers' perceptions of learner-centred methods.

Study population

The population consisted of all grade 12 pupils who take history and teachers who teach history in high schools in Mongu district.

Sample size

The sample size comprised 100 grade 12 pupils who take history, and 20 teachers who teach history from the four selected high schools in Mongu district namely: Sefula High School, Kambule Technical High School, Namushakende High School and Limulunga Day High School

Sampling techniques

The study employed purposive sampling and stratified random sampling techniques.

Research instruments

The research instruments used were focus group discussion guides, Likert scale questionnaires and semi-structured interview schedules.

Data collection procedure

In the first place, permission to conduct the research was sought from the District Education Board Secretary as well as the respective School managers of the four schools. After the researcher was given permission to conduct the research, he went to the selected schools and administered questionnaires and conducted focus group discussions as well as semi-structured interviews on different days.

Each school was given 20 quantitative questionnaires and 5 qualitative ones making the total number of 100. After that pupils were given enough time to answer the questionnaires and when they completed answering, questionnaires were collected. After that, 3 girls and 3 boys were randomly sampled to take part in a focus group discussion. After that, teachers helped to organize a conducive venue where the discussions took place. The researcher then facilitated the discussions by structuring appropriate questions and exploring the topic. A recorder was used to record the conversations. Opinions, attitudes and emotional aspects of the respondents were captured. After that, researchers categorised the statements and summarised them in a narrative form. Key statements were quoted and thereafter a report was written.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers teaching history at the four selected schools on different days. History being an optional subject at senior, only 5 teachers from each of the four selected schools were purposively sampled to be part of the interview. This brought the total number of teachers who were interviewed to 20. The researcher was given an opportunity to interview 5 teachers at the same school separately. The researcher interviewed each respondent while recording the

conversation using a recorder. After this, the researcher wrote a report on each of the 20 individual teachers interviewed from the four selected schools in Mongu district.

Data analysis

Subjective responses from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. Objective responses from Likert scale questionnaires were analysed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The data was then presented in form of graphs, tables and statistical figures so as to give meaning to the findings.

Ethical consideration

Ethical issues were taken into consideration in this study. In the first place, consent was sought from the respondents to find out whether they were willing to participate in the study or not. The researcher ensured that names and personal details of the respondents were not revealed or published. The data which was collected was kept confidential and was only used for research purposes.

Results and Discussion

Results

Extent to which learner-centred methods were used in the teaching and learning of history

Most of the pupils indicated that their teachers do not frequently use learner-centre methods like quiz, debate, field trips, drama, role play, brainstorming when teaching history. For instance, Pupils were asked to state how often their teachers took them on field trips to learn more of history. Their responses are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Frequency at which teachers used field trips in teaching history

Frequency	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Very often	1 (1.0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.0%)
Sometimes	3 (3.0%)	4 (4.0%)	7 (7.0%)
Rarely	19 (19.0%)	14 (14.0%)	33 (33.0%)
Very rarely	27 (27.0%)	32 (32.0%)	59 (59.0%)
Total	50 (50.0%)	50 (50.0%)	100 (100.0%)

Most of the pupils (59.0%) indicated that teachers very rarely took them on field trips to learn more of history.

Pupils’ and teachers’ perception of the learner- centred methods of teaching history

The majority of pupils and teachers stated that they found learner-centred methods interesting to learn and teach history with. For example, Pupils were asked to indicate how they perceived group work as a method of learning history in class. Their responses were as shown in Figure 1 below.

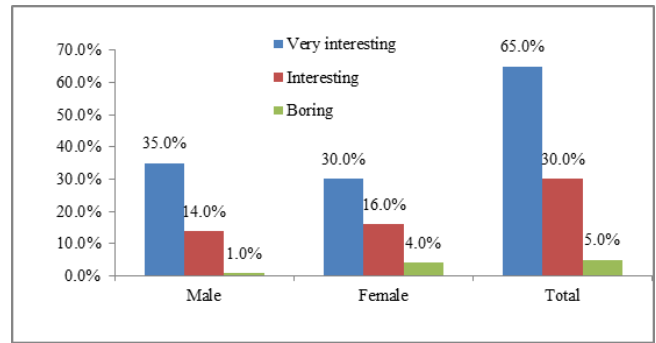


Fig 1: Pupils’ view on group work (n =100)

Figure 1 above shows that the majority, (65.0%) of the pupils said that group work was very interesting to learn history with.

Pupils’ and teachers’ preferred learner-centred methods

The preferred learner-centred methods by both pupils and teachers were: class discussion, group discussion, debate, field trips, discovery learning brainstorming, role play and drama. For instance, teachers were asked to state the learner-centred method they preferred to teach history with, One of them stated that:

I prefer role play and drama because when pupils role play or imitate certain characters in history, they will not easily forget the role they played. It makes them have the view and feel of what actually happened.

Discussion

Extent to which learner-centred methods were used in the teaching and learning of history.

These findings are in line with Rickinson (2004) [36], s observation that despite learner-centred methods being valuable in improving academic standards in most western schools, they are very difficult to undertake in most African schools due to financial and logistical constraints.

Pupils’ and Teachers’ perceptions of the learner-centred methods of teaching history

These findings are in conformity with Astin (1997)’s [2] study which revealed that pupils and teachers are interested in learner-centred methods because they are associated with positive experiences like retention and overall academic success.

Pupils’ and teachers’ preferred learner-centred methods in the teaching and learning of history.

These findings are similar to Francis (2005) [14] who stated that such methods are preferred because they provide them with an opportunity for learning in innovative, creative and interesting ways.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of this study, it could be

concluded that teachers did not frequently use learner-centred methods during the teaching and learning process of history. The study concluded that learners were interested in learner-centred methods. The study further concluded that the preferred learner-centred methods by both pupils and teachers were: class discussion, group discussion, debate, field trips, discovery learning, brainstorming, role play and drama.

Recommendations

- The government should fund some learner-centred methods such as field trips and projects.
- The Ministry of Education, Science Vocational Training and Early Education should provide in-service training programmes for teachers so that they learn current trends in teaching like learner-centred methods.
- Schools should provide and arrange activities in line with learners' interests. This can be done through schools organising activities which can captivate pupils' interest like picnics, debates and video shows depicting certain interesting topics in history. This is because most of the pupils were interested in learner-centred methods.
- Teachers should ensure that they foster learner-engagement. This can be done by teachers giving pupils practical activities like drama, role play and projects.
- School managers and teachers should establish a safe learning atmosphere. This can be done by school managers encouraging teachers to make sure that learners are respected, given autonomy and avoiding using discouraging remarks which can demotivate learners.

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