

Chapter 41

Teachers' and Students' Role in the Learner-Centered Classrooms: Experiences from Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Prior to Namibia's independence in 1990, the role of the teacher in an educational environment has been defined as the transmission of information to students, and the teacher was regarded as the all-knowing person in the classroom, who slavishly followed the textbook in transmitting the subject matter to the students. In some cases, the teacher did not understand the subject matter that he/she transmitted to students. Therefore, there was no explanation of what was being taught. Students had to sit passively and listen to the teacher; learn by memorization (rote learning), and recall the transmitted information. This study explored perceptions of the role of teachers and students in learner-centered classrooms in a primary school in Namibia. Learner-centered teachers create learning environments that promote students' active engagement with learning and develop critical thinking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The learner-centered approach is based on the assumption that students learn by “actively constructing and assimilating knowledge rather than through the passive addition of discrete facts to an existing store of knowledge” (Mtika & Gates, 2010, p. 396). Thus, the teacher's role in a learner-centered class is viewed as one that should create an interactive and participatory learning environment. Learner-centered theories of knowledge view knowledge as “created through a process of new information interacting with the prior knowledge and experiences of learners” (du Plessis & Muzaffar, 2010, p. 45). Learner-centered principles advocate learning through the mediation of the teacher, students and other people. It is through mediation that students make intellectual progress. I draw upon the social constructivists that “knowledge is something that is constructed within a social context” (Kelm, 2011, p. 507).

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The classroom is a social context where the teacher plays a role in helping students to learn by supporting them and guiding them to interact with each other for them to construct knowledge in a collaborative and meaningful manner. However, classroom teaching and learning environments in the Namibian education system prior to independence failed to provide stimulating learning environments as well as engaging students in activities that provided them with opportunities to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills or their high order thinking skills. The teaching and learning process was more teacher-centered. The following scenarios explain the above statement:

Teacher: *Good morning class.*

Class: *Good morning teacher.*

Teacher: *How are you?*

Class: *We are fine, how are you teacher?*

Teacher: *I am fine. Sit down. Take your textbooks. Look on page twenty. Let us start reading. I will read the first paragraph. You read after me.*

The reading continues without any explanation. Later students are asked to do an exercise. The bell goes off.

Teacher: *It is the end of the lesson, collect your books. Goodbye, see you tomorrow.*

Here is another example:

Mr. Tim entered the classroom. After greeting the students, he told them to take their summary books. He then asked Tau to come and write the summary on the chalkboard while others copied it down in their summary books. After the students finished copying the summary in their summary books, Mr. Tim told them that they should study it because they would write a test the following day. The students had to memorize the summary for the next day's test because there was no explanation from Mr. Tim. It was a matter of rote learning, that is, learning without understanding.

Next was Ms. Kate. The same procedure was followed: Greeted the students and read them a text from the textbook. Asked them to read one by one. Asked students recall questions from the text, e.g., "What is the name of the boy mentioned in the text?"; "Mention two places that the boy mentioned in the text visited." The recall questions continued, and the lesson was over.

One may ask what the students learned in the three examples given above. The teachers did not play a significant role in the teaching and learning process. Neither did the students. Students were passive listeners learning by memorizing the facts and reproducing in tests and later in examinations, without understanding. Students in the Namibian classroom prior to independence could be explained in line with Massouleh and Jooneghani's (2012) statement that they were "conceived as empty receptacles to be filled. The teacher was seen as having a "jug" of knowledge which he poured into learners' "mugs" (p. 58).

Teacher-centered and rote learning is further explained by Miranda and Adler (2010, p. 15) thus: "In many Namibian classrooms, engaging learners is done through textbook exercises in which the learners are expected to complete lists of exercises and have them checked right or wrong by the teacher". Students were tested on how well they could recall the knowledge presented to them by the teacher. When students could not recall or reproduce the knowledge presented to them, they were regarded as having not learned anything and they failed.

The teacher-centered paradigm is summarized in Table 1.

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