

## *Full Length Research*

# **Primary teachers' perceptions and implementation of learner-centred education in the Namibian primary classroom: A case study.**

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**Prior to Namibia independence, education system was predominantly teacher-centred. Soon after its independence, education reform becomes Namibia top priorities in order to redress the past imbalances and come up with the education system that is responsive to the new nation needs. A new education system, learner-centred education, was introduced to cater for all Namibian learners. It was seen and still seen as an effective antidote to the stifling teacher-centred practices of the previous education system. The Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) was introduced to prepare teachers to teach in a learner centred approach. However, research has showed that many Namibian teachers have a somewhat naïve understanding of learner-centred education. The small scale case study was conducted in Oshikoto region, focuses on two Grade 4 teachers. The purpose of the study was to explore teachers' perception and implementation of learner-centred education, especially the teaching strategies they use to develop learners understanding. The study uses qualitative approach in its exploration of teachers' lived experiences of becoming learner approached. Data was gathered through semi-structure interview, observation and document analysis. Content analysis was use to analyse the data. The findings of this study have implication for teacher education to induct student teachers to recognise learner-centred education as a pedagogy aimed at improving learners' participation in teaching and learning. This study focuses only on two teachers, hence, its findings cannot be generalised to the entire schools in the region. However, lessons can be learned on the implementation of learner-centred education from these two teachers' perceptions.**

**Keywords:** education reform, teacher education, learner-centred education, teaching and learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Following its independence in 1990, Namibia embarked on a process of educational reform that is still ongoing. Like many other countries in the global South, Namibia has focused on learner-centred education (LCE) and attracted wide donor support for this through aid programmes. The policy of encouraging teachers to adopt learner-centred pedagogies

has been documented in many developing regions of the world, including some middle-income countries and impoverished groups in more developed areas (Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 426). In moving away from traditional teacher-centred education (TCE), LCE was deemed the best option for the newly independent nation. It is regarded as an effective answer to the

“dominance of TCE which is blamed for leading to rote learning and stifling critical and creative thinking among pupils” (Jossop and Pennay cited in Mtika and Gates, 2010, p. 396). Weimar (as cited in Mtika and Gates, 2010) notes that “teacher centred education makes less demand upon pupils whereas learner centred education promotes active learning and requires pupils to play more active roles during teaching and learning experiences” (p. 396). As Schweisfurth (2011, p. 425) observes, “all learners need to engage with and construct knowledge in order to experience deep and meaningful learning.” Pulist (n.d.) sees in learner centeredness the desire to make teaching responsive to learners’ needs and ensure that they play a participating role in their own instruction (unpaged).

Namibia advocates learner-centred education for all its trainee teachers. The Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) for pre - and in-service teachers was introduced in 1993 and 1994, respectively, to strike a balance between theory and practice and encourage teachers to work for more learner-centred pedagogy. The Namibian national educational policy document, *Toward Education for All*, clearly requires teachers to be learner centred in their approach to teaching and learning (Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993, p. 60). For example,

*In the Namibian curriculum the starting point is the learners’ existing knowledge, skills, interests and understanding, delivered from previous experiences in and out of school. The natural curiosity and eagerness of all young people to learn to investigate and to make sense of a widening world must be nourished and encouraged by challenging and meaningful tasks . . . .*

However, there is overwhelming evidence that learner-centred education has not taken root in the classroom, and that teachers do not always have a conceptual understanding of the practice (Sadler, 2012). Despite policy aimed at introducing and explaining learner-centred teaching, research has indicated that teachers hold a narrow and/or simplistic view of learner-centred education (Karlssoon, 1999). In the Namibian context, teachers have created their own version of learner-centred education by equating it to “group work” (Van Graan, 1999). Van Graan (1999) further notes that during teaching and learning, “teachers’ questions do not progress beyond content and comprehension level”, which raises questions about what is actually happening in classrooms

in terms of the application of learner-centred education (p. 55).

This paper seeks to explore teachers’ perceptions and implementation of learner-centred education in the context of teaching and learning in Namibia.

There are many accounts of the implementation of learner-centred education in various contexts. Teachers who have correctly assimilated and applied learner-centred education, designing educational experiences that advance learners’ learning, are articulating what national policies require and what society expects learners to learn. Teachers with learner-centred experience facilitate learning by developing critical thinking, problem solving and creativity. They seek to create a learning environment in which learners can encounter critical learning incidents. But in reality teachers are faced with practical barriers that limit their capacity, for example when teachers have not experienced LCE personally. As O’Sullivan (2006, p. 255) notes,

*Teachers may have considerable difficulty in making the leap from learning within the traditional approaches to learner centred approaches, which require the acquisition of great skill and understanding, assumptions that may be beyond the professional capacity of teachers in the light of their training.*

Teachers’ lack of preparation for the new pedagogy may thus lead to an inability to facilitate the learning process. The implementation and application of learner-centred education has been hindered by teachers’ misconception of the notion that learner-centred education puts the learner at the centre of teaching and learning. The idea that learners take charge of their own learning and teachers assume the role of facilitator has resulted in some teachers relinquishing their responsibility for the teaching, discipline and care of learners. It appears that there is widespread misconception as to what learner-centred pedagogy means in practice (Mtika and Gates, 2010).

While learner centredness is an approach that emphasises general interactive enquiry and problem solving skills (Prawat and Floden, 1994), Huban (as cited in Mtika and Gates, 2010, p. 392) observes that teacher-centred education remains robustly alive in the classroom. It is also noted that numbers of teachers have adopted their own version of learner-centred education by incorporating group work, pair work and individual work into

class activities (Van Graan, 1999; Mtika and Gates, 2010). This revolution in methodologies has brought about a shift in perceptions of roles and responsibilities, for both learners and teachers (Datto and Duarte, n.d.). This shift calls for learners to be the creators and developers of knowledge rather than consumers of information, which suggests that the new pedagogical practices are a challenge not only for teachers but also for learners (Mtika and Gates, 2010). The aspect of curriculum and educational management is also crucial. Learners should not be the only point of reference, but they ought to be a continuous point of reference, as defined by the concept of learner centredness (Emes and, Cleveland-Innes, 2003, p. 54). It will be instructive to examine a snapshot of how teachers perceive and apply learner centredness in their practice.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The Basic Education Teacher Diploma course at Onayena College of Education (pseudonym) takes three years for the pre-service and four years for the in-service training of teachers to teach at lower primary to junior secondary phases. The teacher education programme includes two major components, college-based studies (pre-service) and school-based activities (in-service).

The college-based studies account for the majority of the credits. Student teachers attend regularly scheduled classes. The classes cover academic disciplines (majors, which include methodology), education theory and practice. The subjects are Education Theory and Practice, English Communication Skills, Academic specializations (Social Science, Science and Mathematics, Languages (local and English), Lower Primary and School Based Activities/Studies. In-service teachers are expected to select a school subject and/or two subjects in case of mathematics and science, in order to develop content and pedagogical knowledge in those subjects. Education Theory and Practice focuses on educational foundations such as philosophy and psychology as they apply to education.

The basic education system in Namibia is underpinned by the social constructivist theory, the view that knowledge is not a static amount of content, but is what the learner actively constructs and creates from experiences and interaction with the social and

cultural context (Namibia. Minister of Education [MoE], 2007, p. 5). The purpose of the programme is to help in-service teachers (Inset) to build on their skills and experience so as to make learning relevant and meaningful to the child. Hence, learner-centred principles are employed throughout the programme at Onayena College of Education. The Inset teachers are encouraged to stimulate the natural curiosity and eagerness of young people to investigate and to make sense of their widening worlds through varying, challenging and meaningful tasks (Namibia, MoE, 2007, p. 5). An opportunity is provided to Inset teachers to demonstrate their understanding in applying theoretical concepts to classroom experiences through school-based activities. These activities are performed in the schools, where Inset teachers are assisted by a mentor and/or the school principal. During one academic year, Inset teachers are required to be observed in 12 lessons and graded in 3 lessons by the school principal. In the first observation, the blue form (as it is known), the Inset teacher is given an opportunity to observe a mentor. This enables an Inset teacher to share and collaborate with the mentor, fostering reflection on his or her teaching practice and professional growth through modeling best practices and feedback. The second observation, the green form, is completed by the school mentor with whom the Inset teacher is matched. The mentor provides feedback after completing a classroom observation, guiding the Inset teacher's professional development towards attaining mastery of the essential teaching competencies. In short, there is a formal arrangement for Inset teachers to have co-operating mentors during school-based activities. After these observations the Inset teachers are observed by the school principal in three lessons for grading purposes.

I participated in the programme as a tutor for Education Theory and Practice for six years. The last Inset ETP module in the programme focused on practice-based inquiry (PBI), involving a small-scale research project focusing on challenges experienced in classroom practice, most especially on how to move from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching approaches. It was through Inset teachers' reports and presentations that I came to realize that some misconceptions and misunderstandings dogged the effective implementation of learner-centred education. As result of these experiences, I decided to undertake this study, choosing to explore how

Grade 4 in-service teachers implemented learner-centred education in their practice.

### Research questions

The central research questions in this study were the following:

- What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of the learner-centred approach?
- What kinds of teaching strategies do they use in their attempts to implement learner-centred teaching?

### Participants and setting

The data for this study was collected from two teachers who went through the in-service teacher training programme and are now teaching at different schools. The selection of these participants resulted from convenience sampling, which means that the researcher chose them because they were conveniently available and their schools were easily accessible (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000; Polit, Beck and Hungler, 2001). The participants were also known to the researcher. I had worked with Namalwa (pseudonym) when she was an inset teacher, and Etuhole (pseudonym) was teaching at a reachable school. They were selected because both hold Basic Education Teacher Diplomas gained through an in-service programme, and have had more than five years' teaching experience after their training.

These teachers were visited at different times. I spent one week and 3 days respectively during which I interviewed them and observed a selection of their lessons. I visited the schools to introduce myself and make appropriate arrangements for my subsequent visits. After gaining permission from the school principals and consent from the teachers, I visited the schools for lesson observation, using an open-ended observation guide and interviews. Each teacher was observed teaching one subject, Environmental Studies. The lessons observed were followed by stimulated-recall interviews (Murray and Nhlapo, 2001).

The two teachers work at government schools that are physically similar to each other. Government schools were chosen because that is where the majority of teachers work. In common with many government schools, these schools lack educational materials, though the enrolment of learners was normal, with a range

of 18 to 25 per classroom at the time of the study.

Grade 4 in-service teachers were selected for study because this is the transitional grade where the Namibian learners are introduced to English as the dominant language (language of learning and teaching). In grade 4, English is used alongside the local language, in this case, Oshindonga, to ease learners into the understanding of concepts in English.

### DATA COLLECTION

The data for the study was collected through interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The interviews provided insight into the teachers' understanding of learner centredness and its implications for their teaching. The lesson observation provided insights into the practice of the participating teachers in relation to the implementation of a learner-centred approach.

The two participating teachers were briefed about the study and its purpose as well as the data collection methods. They were assured that the interview and lesson observation would not be shared with either the school principal or staff at the regional offices. I acted as a non-participant observer.

I first conducted interviews with each of the teachers at their respective schools, followed by observation of Environmental Studies lessons for a week and three days respectively. The latter observation period was truncated because one teacher had an emergency situation to attend to on the last two days of the week. Lesson observation focused on the key characteristics of learner-centred education: learners' prior knowledge, conceptual development, interaction with learners and assessment strategies. Stimulated-recall interviews were conducted with each teacher to get clarification on interesting or obscure incidents observed.

Content analysis was used to construct meaning from the data. The teachers' transcribed interviews were coded on the basis of the broad framework of categories informing the interview questions. This involved the translation of questions, responses and respondent information to specific categories for the purpose of analysis (Cohen et al., 2001). A cross-case analysis (Patton, 2002) was used to draw together common threads and contrasts.

In order to protect the participants' and schools' identities, pseudonymous names were used. The findings were also reported anonymously.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study shed light on the participating teachers' understanding of learner-centred education and its practice. The participants in this research evinced, to a degree, a similar understanding and manner of implementing learner-centred education.

### Teachers' views on learner-centred education

The concept of learner-centred education has been defined in various ways, as we have seen above. Learner-centred education involves nothing less than a shift in the roles and responsibilities of the teacher, learners and parents. Both teachers in this study described the learner-centredness as a new approach, an interactive one where learners are seen as active participants in the teaching and learning process.

Etuhole explained:

*The teacher only introduces the topic and then learners give their own ideas on how they understand the topic. The teachers help the learners where they experience difficulties. Again parents in this education are playing a role; the teacher asks parents to help where he thinks is needed.*

According to Namalwa,

*Learner-centred education is a new thing. It is not like how we were taught in the past. ... in learner-centred education learner do things both in theory and practice. Learners play a role in learning and teaching because they work on their own and the teacher is there only as a facilitator, checking how they are doing ... assisting them where they are experiencing difficulties.*

The teacher further described it as an approach that is participatory and collaborative, where learners are empowered to take responsibility for their own and others' learning. The following sentiments characterise both teachers' understanding of learner centredness as participatory in nature:

*Learner-centred is the method where learners play a role, more active than the teacher. They play an active role in whatever activity they are*

*given ... learners help one another or they work together ... they work, they learn, they socialize.* (Namalwa)

Etuhole explained

*I understand learner-centred education as the education where the children, parents play a role, where learners work in groups, work in pairs and individually in giving their ideas. Learner-centred education is the education where learners help one another where the learners are assisted.*

The views expressed by the teachers included some of the ideas underpinning social constructivist theory. They seem to have accepted the general principle of Namibia's transition to learner-centred education. The way in which the teachers spoke of learner-centred education revealed that they had been exposed through in-service professional development to the various theoretical positions within which the new pedagogy and its supporting epistemology are situated (Amakali, 2007). But their apparent inability fully to articulate the *practice* of learner-centred education seemed to result from not having been exposed personally to good learner-centred practice. Their understanding of learner centredness is influenced by their past experience of the traditional teacher-centred classroom, where the teacher is seen as the custodian of knowledge. These teachers' views on learner centredness do not demonstrate how they have "internalized" the theory in the Vygotskian sense nor "accommodated" it in the Piagetian sense (Amakali, 2007).

Learner-centred education was introduced into schools and other learning environments through a range of strategies (Schweisfurth, 2011). In Namibia there were reported instances of locally-conceived and innovative forms of implementation (O'Sullivan, 2014). Teachers laboured under conceptual and practical misunderstandings. Learner-centred education registers a shift in teacher-learner power relations, in that it recognizes learners and parents as important players in the learning process. But these teachers were only able to relate LCE to their own learning experiences, that is, their experience at school and in in-service training (Amakali, 2007). The question arises: to what extent are the in-service training and support for teachers adequate to enable them to navigate the difficult waters of LCE?

Although these teachers emphasise the active involvement of learners in teaching and learning, their classrooms were dominated by teacher talk. While they were introduced to LCE

through in-service training, this teacher education might itself not have been learner centred. It seemed that no suitable models were provided for teachers to base their practice upon. Having been personally involved in this in-service training, I have the sense that the training was too theoretical (Altinyelken, 2010), with only a bit of practical application in school-based activities (which might not have been monitored properly). Further mentoring could be helpful for teachers grappling with LCE. However, as Schweisfurth (2011) argues, this requires a very resource- and capacity-intensive environment, a critical mass of skilled trainers and mentors with time and official permission to undertake this role, and 'joined-up thinking' across the sector.

Although the teachers were able to outline some key principles of LCE, their classroom practice showed the teachers in control and learners obedient to the teachers' authority. This was demonstrated by the teachers' use of what I would refer to as traditional methods, the chalk and talk and question and answer transmission model. The two teachers barely focused on teaching for understanding, where learners are required to be active in the learning process through sharing and inquiring, creating and interpreting (Freire and Ramos, 2009; Gordon, 2009).

The two teachers' classrooms lacked a "balance between teacher and student directed learning" (Gordon, 2009). Their classes were characterized by the teachers taking the lead in the learning process. This may be attributed in part to the view entrenched in Namibian culture that the teacher is the expert at the front of the room in control of the class (Jordan, Bovill, Othan, Saleh, Shabila and Walters, 2014, p. 14). There is little dialogue and co-creation of knowledge in such context, less mutual learning than knowledge transfer (Jordan, et al., 2014). Although the teachers claimed to practise LCE, there is clearly a gulf between their rhetoric and the reality of their pedagogy (Jordan, et al., 2014, p. 22).

In the next section I provide a more detailed account of this pedagogy, first describing the participating teachers' teaching environment.

### Teaching and learning environment

The teaching and learning environment of the participating teachers is characterized

more by teacher talk and less by learners' engagement in a process of collaborating and constructing knowledge together. The way learners behave during teaching and learning is largely influenced by the teachers' beliefs about knowledge and learning. The teachers tend to adopt the role of an expert, emphasizing their authority. Their classrooms therefore display elements of a traditional learning environment, dominated by teacher talk rather than learner talk. Learners' involvement in lessons was relegated to mere response to the teachers' questions or demands. What was to be learned was handed down to learners by the teacher/expert. Notwithstanding this, some aspects of a learner-centred approach were also observed, when learners participated through teachers' questioning and use of concrete objects. The findings from this study show that teachers have struggled and continue struggle to work in the constructivist way expected by the official curriculum. Both teachers acknowledged the difficulties they experienced in working with a learner-centred approach, saying "this new approach is not like the way we were taught".

Having provided an impression of the general classroom environment, I now give an account of the various teaching strategies used by the participating teachers.

### Teaching strategies

#### *Teaching strategy 1: Code switching*

This strategy was not pointed out by the participating teachers during the interviews; however, observation revealed that it was widely used. This is probably necessitated by the fact that the two schools are in a rural area where English is rarely used, while the teachers and their learners share the same mother tongue, Oshindonga. According to Etuhole, code switching was used because learners lack competency in the English language. Etuhole explained, "*I use it when there are learners who do not know a word in English or mother tongue, and also for them to learn new vocabulary ...*". Namalwa explained: "*it is because they do not know the meaning of some words in English*". This corroborated the finding of Karen (2003), who argued that code switching is used by learners because of their lack of the word in English. The findings further revealed that the participating teachers had recourse to code switching to ease interpersonal communication

between themselves and their learners (Halliday, 1975). Here is an example of how one of Etuhole's lessons unfolded:

*Etuhole: Okay, we are going to continue with water transport. Can you give the names of water transport?*

*Answer: 'okawato', in mother tongue (meaning a canoe in English).*

*Etuhole: you are right but you have only given it in mother tongue.*

*Answer: 'sikepa' (in mother tongue) (the correct word is actually osikepa with a prefix)*

*Etuhole: 'sikepa' that is a ship*

*Answer: canoe*

*Etuhole: can you spell canoe?*

*Answer: (spell out) c-a-n-o-e.*

Namalwa's lesson followed a similar pattern:

*Namalwa: Where does the rabbit sleep?*

*Answer: Okokwena (in the hole)*

*Namalwa: Bees? Where do you think they sleep? Ohadhi kala komututu. Ohadhi tungu enima lyafa ehila. Olye a mona mpa dha valela?*

*Enima ndyono ohatu li ithana kutya is what? (They live in a hole. They make a thing called a hive. Who has seen where bees have their hive? That thing we call it a ....?)*

*Answer: a hive*

The meaning was only given in the learners' mother tongue and then translated into English; learners were not asked to say the words in English, nor were they provided with any commentary or explanation in English. It ended like a simple vocabulary lesson. The lessons were also not contextualized to assist learners to make links with their daily lives. Although code switching can be used to facilitate learning (Borlongan, 2012), the participating teachers here used it merely for the translation of words from mother tongue to English or vice versa. The findings demonstrate that learners understand the questions, but their lack of (fluency in) English has prompted them to respond in their mother tongue. One wonders whether the participating teachers understood the pedagogical principles of using code switching, since code switching was used simply to facilitate communication between learners and teachers.

### **Teaching strategy 2: Use of questions**

Asking questions was one of the strategies used by both teachers, as observed during their lessons. It was one of the modes used to deliver content to the learners. The

examples showed the type of questions asked by both teachers. In a lesson on transport:

*Etuhole: Give the ten modern transports that you know.*

*Answer: Bus, donkey cart, car, bicycle, helicopter, train (eshina), motorbike.*

*Etuhole: How many of you have seen a train?*

*Whole class raised their hands.*

*Etuhole: Eshina lya shike?*

*Answer: Eshina lyokolutenda.*

*Etuhole: Do you know what a donkey cart in mother tongue is?*

*Whole class is quiet.*

*Etuhole: What is a bicycle?*

*Answer: Ombasikela.*

*Etuhole: Helicopter?*

*Answer: Edhagadhaga.*

Namalwa, in a lesson on living things:

*Namalwa: What is a spider?*

*Answer: Ewiliwili (spider).*

*Namalwa: What are bees?*

*Answer: Oonyushi (bees).*

*Namalwa: What is a rock?*

*Answer: Omamanya (rocks) but a rock is emanya.*

*Namalwa: Where does the bird sleep? In what ...?*

*Answer: In a nest.*

The questioning technique suggests that the participating teachers showed a lack of creativity, since it positioned the teacher as the one possessing knowledge to pass on to the learners. The questions did not provide learners with meaningful, contextualized learning, but consisted rather of translating words into Oshindonga. All the questions assume a single right answer, and none of them went beyond factual recall or provided opportunities for the learners to be challenged. They conveyed little conceptualization of the content being taught.

### **Teaching strategy 3: Use of learners' prior knowledge**

Learner's prior knowledge has the potential to impede rather than facilitate new learning if it is not used appropriately. However, if it is used to start 'where the learners are', with what is familiar to them, it can enable teachers to make informed and strategic decision about the content to be taught. In the Namibian learner-centred context, learning is supposed to start with learners' existing knowledge. It is seen as one of the essential part of effective teaching. Etuhole noted during the interview that the use

of prior knowledge “is the best way to teach ... best way to access learner’s ideas”. Namalwa explained, “like to test their knowledge first before I supplement what they already know, it is learner centred ‘mos’. In learner centred education learners have to something first, on their own; ... teacher will add to their knowledge”. The teachers seemed to have some knowledge of learner-centred principles as outlined in the national curriculum. However, their classroom practice reveals a different picture: for instance, prior knowledge was confused with previous content learned.

The findings showed that instead of tapping into and activating learners’ prior knowledge, the previous content taught was used as a starting point. For example in the five lessons observed, the lesson was started in this fashion using the following questions:

*Give the names of different transport you see in the picture. (Lesson 1)*

*What is transport? (Lesson 2)*

*What is transport. (Lesson 3) (a repeat of the previous day lesson?)*

*Mention five kinds of transport we use these days. (Lesson 4)*

*Here are the results of yesterday’s pair work. (Lesson 5).*

Namalwa started her lesson in a similar fashion:

*What do you understand by the word living things? (Lesson 1)*

*What did we learn yesterday about living and non-living things? (Lesson 2)*

*What do people and animals need to live? (Lesson 3)*

These examples reveal some misconceptions about prior knowledge and its use in the classroom. At the same time, the findings show that the participating teachers have a fairly good understanding of the structure of the curriculum because they tried through their questions to build upon what learners had already learned. The strategy is more-or-less covered by the following formulation: “activating the student’s background knowledge involves teaching students to access information they have stored in their permanent memory” (Wessels, 2012, p. 34). Although not clearly articulated or precisely implemented by the two participating teachers, activating learners’ prior knowledge reflects good teaching.

#### **Teaching strategy 4: Pair and group work**

Group work was one of the strategies used, possibly excessively, by the two participating teachers. This was perhaps because the learners in both classrooms were seated in groups. In the interview, Eтуhole remarked that “as learners work in groups they help each other by sharing ideas, working together, learning together ... they socialise, they learn to socialise ...”. For her part, Namalwa pointed out: “after the activities, I ask each group to give me feedback so that I can check what they have done. Then I give them different activities: this group I give them this task; that group I give them another task”. The teachers acknowledged the value of pair work as a way to encourage learners to assist one another. For example, Eтуhole noted: “I pair gifted learners with weak learners ... so gifted learners assist those who do not know, the less gifted one ...”. Namalwa also shared similar views, “when I pair them, I try to pair them with someone who is better than the other, with someone who is able to assist”. Although the findings showed that the two teachers understood group work as learners interacting as partners to help one another towards mastery of the material to be learned (Larson, Dansereau, O’Donnell, Hythecker, Lamboitte and Rocklin, 1984), classroom observation showed that group work was consisted more of mere contact rather than sharing (Hornby, 2011). The activities provided during group work did not do much either to encourage working together or socialization. Since learners were grouped with the able learners, the latter ended up doing the work on the former’s behalf, which defeated the object as it was described by the participating teachers during the interviews. This finding showed that “cooperative learning group work is rarely used; that teachers rarely think about the strategic use of groups in relation to learning tasks, and that little training is provided to help children develop the skills necessary for working in groups” (Hornby, 2011, p. 162).

The findings also showed that the teachers may not have skills necessary for managing successful group work, because their classrooms were arranged according to the traditional pattern of learners seated side-by-side, presumably to complete a learning task. Learners in this study did not socialise, not because they lack the skills to do so but because teachers did not structure and organise tasks that would encourage them to work

together. For example the group work tasks given by Etuhole were to “*give the names of long ago transport*”, “*choose two kinds of transport we use in our region*”. During these activities, one learner was expected to write down the responses provided by the others; however, as the findings showed, the ablest learner in the group did all the work while the others merely looked on. The findings from this study showed, that for learners to work usefully together on academic performance and social behaviour, tasks should be structured to prevent a minority of learners from dominating the group process, which is likely to lead to passivity on the part of weaker learners and thus impair their learning (Krause and Stark, 2010, p. 264).

## CONCLUSION

This study is far from comprehensive, and I wish to caution that its conclusions concerning the integration of learner-centred strategies in classroom practices are based on three to five days of observation of Namibian BETD in-service primary teachers. This observation has yielded some concerns about the implementation and application of learner-centred education in primary school classrooms in Namibia. The findings show that learner-centred education needs to be re-launched in teacher education if quality education is to be attained, with a renewed focus on its theoretical assumptions, appropriateness and application in the classroom. If not, teachers may end up adopting own version of learner centredness which may actually serve to compromise learners’ learning. According to O’Sullivan (2006),

When primary education in developing countries has problems with quality education, the literature indicates that professionals involved in addressing them too often do not begin the process by examining the location of the illness – the classroom, the teaching and learning that take place in it – in their efforts to make a diagnosis and recommend a cure that will work. (p. 247)

This study takes some first steps to remedy this. It seems that teaching and learning in the classroom has not been integrally transformed, and that constructivism, especially the social constructivism that underpins the Namibian education system as a best learning theory, has not been well understood by the teachers. What is required is a shift in

methodologies that would bring about a shift in the perception of their roles and responsibilities for both teachers and learners (O’Sullivan, 2006). The shift must be away from teacher-centred education, where the teacher plays the role of controller of the class and learners that of consumers of information. Therefore there is a need for teacher education to induct teachers to recognise learner-centred education as a pedagogy aimed at improving learners’ participation in teaching and learning. Teaching strategies need to ensure that all learners are provided with the opportunity to engage with the learning materials. This scenario begs for teachers to start to motivate learners to work together during the lesson through lesson activities. However, there is also a need for teacher education to equip teachers with the appropriate strategies required by the learner-centred approach, such as cooperative learning. Learners also need to be taught the social and personal skills needed to work cooperatively with others to fulfil learning tasks.

Although this study focused on BETD in-service that has long been phased out, teacher education needs to drive the national curriculum by incorporating pedagogies to empower teachers to apply learner centredness with confidence. A conceptual framework for learner-centred education need to be emphasized in the teacher education curriculum. But this must be accompanied by more opportunities for student teachers – through micro teaching and other appropriate methodologies – to *practise* aspects of learner-centred education. Opportunities should be provided for immediate feedback after the micro teaching. Teacher educators also need to model typical learner-centred pedagogies during their lectures. They will be faced by the challenge of large numbers of students per lecturer, since the colleges of education merged with the University of Namibia, which has assumed the responsibility of inducting teachers at all levels in the education system. The lack of action research in current teacher education may pose another challenge, because there is no clear-cut arrangement for collaboration between lecturers, teachers and student teachers on aspect of classroom practice. Since educational reform is an ongoing phenomenon, discussion on curriculum reform can still seek to align the teacher education curriculum with the principles of learner-centred education. The quest to align teaching and learning with a learner-centred conceptual and theoretical framework may well

require continuous professional development for lecturers, teachers and curriculum developers.

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