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Student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges regarding learner-centred teaching

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Learner-centred teaching education generally involves methods of teaching that move the focus of instruction from the teacher to the learner. The “learner-centred” label is subsequently attached to teaching strategies, learning events, classroom layout and learning programmes. Aspects such as active learning, learner commitment and the construction of own knowledge are among the principles of learner-centred teaching. Worldwide, the thorough training of teachers is crucial. Every organisation preparing teachers should establish whether they offer suitable qualifications that empower student teachers to cope with the abundant difficulties of the teaching occupation, including learner-centred teaching. The aim of this article is to explore student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and challenges of learner-centred teaching. To this end, an inquisitive research strategy and qualitative research approach were selected as suitable methodology. Data was collected through a voluntary written assignment set out in student teachers' teaching practice notebooks. The participants were fourth-year students enrolled at a higher education institution for the Bachelor of Education (BEd) qualification (with speciality in the Foundation Phase). These students were placed in productive, successful schools for the duration of their teaching practicum by the teachers training institution. In addition to their placements, they had to complete their teaching practice at schools in widely differing social environments. The schools' locations ranged from well-off areas, with good teaching means, to schools in poor areas that were lacking learning support materials. The participants were from diverse cultural groups. Furthermore, the constructivist learning theory was used as theoretical framework. The findings reveal that student teachers have a limited understanding of learner-centred teaching and are currently experiencing three serious challenges with regard to learner-centred teaching. To combat this, guiding principles involving lecturers' support and involvement, reflection, and the accountable intervention of mentor teachers are suggested.

Keywords: community of practice; constructivism; internships; learner-centredness; mentor teachers; pre-service teaching; student teachers

Introduction and Background

Each teacher has his/her own teaching philosophy. Some teachers have eclectic teaching ideas which enable them to choose the best features from the major pedagogic belief systems (Mwanza, 2017). Individual and unique teaching ideas guide teachers through various decision-making tasks inside the classroom (Pezaro, 2016). But whichever idea they uphold, it should respond to the needs of the learners.

This distinct and individual meaning is hidden inside what is usually defined as teacher knowledge or the knowledge base of teaching (Freeman, 2002). In this respect, some researchers refer to personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1986). Teacher knowledge or personal practical knowledge is a very complex phenomenon which merits a significant amount of attention and research. Within this knowledge, components (e.g., subject matter knowledge and pedagogic knowledge) are often informed by commonly accepted and agreed-upon theories of learning and teaching derived from various disciplines. “In addition to mastering these theories of teaching and learning, teachers are expected to develop skills and appropriate attitudes towards putting theory into practice” (Johnson, 1996:768). One of these attitudes is learner-centred teaching.

The motivation and rationale for this study was conceptualised when I visited and assessed student teachers at schools where they did their practicum. From my observations I realised that learner-centred teaching was not addressed in student teachers' lesson presentations. My observations convinced me that this important aspect was a specific feature of teacher training that needed to be investigated. The first step was to determine student teachers' understanding of learner-centred teaching, as well as their positive and negative experiences in this regard, which was the inspiration for this research.

Learner-centred approaches are more effective than traditional teacher-centred pedagogies. More than twenty years of research support this statement, which begs the question: Why haven't things changed? According to a classroom observation study discussed by Weimer (2012:67), which involved a group of teachers trained in learner-centred teaching strategies, nearly 75% still implemented lecture-based teacher-centred pedagogies in practice: “Evolving to learner-centered approaches can be challenging. It is human nature to be uncomfortable with change. However, knowing about potential obstacles in advance and planning ahead can help instructors better prepare for the implementation of this approach.” It takes dedication and ingenuity to adopt learner-centred teaching approaches, but their incorporation can improve student learning and strengthen academic programmes (Weimer, 2012).

Learner-centred teaching is a global challenge. Research done by Mtika and Gates (2010) focused on the competence of student teachers to implement learner-centred practice at a teacher education training institution in Malawi. These findings reveal that there was no clear evidence that student teachers or qualified teachers

developed and used learner-centred education during their classroom teaching practice sessions in schools. It was also clear from the findings that progressive pedagogical ideas associated with social constructivism promoted in teacher education institutions had not resulted in extensive change in classroom practice.

A main requirement of education reform-based initiations in Turkey is teachers' diagnostic logical thinking to overcome the obstacles that they encountered when they attempted to undertake learner-centred teaching. Various barriers have been identified in a research project conducted by Soysal and Radmard (2017:207) when analysing the responses of the teachers. "This study explored Turkish teachers' attributional reasoning regarding the barriers they face when they attempted to undertake learner-centred teaching, which is a core requirement of educational reform-based initiations in Turkey" (Soysal & Radmard, 2017:186). The findings show that the participants made extensive personalised acknowledgements when justifying the explanations for the barriers they faced. "They were the normal suspects of making fundamental attribution error due to the excessive externality of their attributions" (Soysal & Radmard, 2017:186). The teachers' explanations of barriers and supplemented attributional thinking typologies in terms of learner-centred teaching have confirmed that the teachers in this study were only in the early stages of being skilled implementers of learner-centred teaching as a reform-based initiative in Turkey (Soysal & Radmard, 2017).

To move from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching principles is one of the aspects embarked on to address quality issues in delivery of quality education (Mtitu, 2014:17). This shift was motivated by the need for learners to productively engage in their knowledge-construction process. Findings reveal aspects such as the role of language and cultural context in learner-centred teaching, teacher-learner relations, and the nature of the curriculum, which influences the nature of learner-centred teaching (Mtitu, 2014).

Student teachers, as beginners, join a community of practice and the school as social "container" of teaching and learning competences (Wenger, 2000). Schools, as communities of practice, offer student teachers an opportunity to convey competences through direct participation in teaching activities. As a result, schools stay significant social components of learning within larger communities, as a structure of gatherings of interconnected communities of practice (Wenger, 2000). The specific school and teaching culture may also play a role in the type of teaching and learning, regardless of whether schools follow a learner-centred teaching approach.

Against this background, the theoretical framework is especially significant and important

for the interpretation of the findings of my research.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of my study serves as an assessment instrument for learner-centred teaching in schools as communities of practice. According to Hall (2011), the theoretical framework could be referred to as a collection of interrelated concepts which guide the research. Bendassolli (2013) agrees, noting that the accuracy about a theoretical declaration depends on a similar theory of truth: referents for these declarations are to be found in the objective truths available in the world.

The theoretical framework which forms the basis of my study is grounded in constructivist learning theory, postulated by Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Jean Piaget (1896–1980), which grew from a number of learning theories, each contributing valuable ideas that have informed our current understanding. The belief that binds them together is that the learner (in this case a student teacher) is crucial in that s/he must be actively engaged in seeking and constructing meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasises social interaction and collaboration in the classroom and states that the society (school society) plays a vital part in understanding reality, in this case, understanding learner-centred teaching. Piaget's (1968) theory of constructivism maintains that learners (student teachers) generate knowledge and skills from experiences. Piaget's theory covers learning theories, teaching methods, and education reform.

Vygotsky's and Piaget's constructivist learning theories are also supported by Semple (2000:25) who presents a summary of the essential principles that make up the theoretical framework, which is important to learning and teaching. The following principles can be highlighted:

- "Knowledge is constructed from the experience of the learner." Students become involved in learning experiences that question hypotheses and stimulate discussion. When given the opportunity to make predictions, learners often initiate varying hypotheses about learning phenomena. The constructivist teacher should anticipate sufficient opportunities for learners to test their hypotheses, especially through group discussion of concrete experiences.
- "Knowledge resides in the mind rather than externally." Learner-centred education is a contextualised procedure of constructing knowledge rather than obtaining it. Knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of daily experiences.
- "Learning is a personal interpretation of the world in that the learner's beliefs and values are used in interpreting objects and events." Learners have to assimilate and interpret new information according to ethical norms and standards in order to give meaning to and understand their current personal experiences. Learners compare their new experiences with pre-conceived notions.

- “Learning is an active process of making meaning from experience.” Learners use previous knowledge to fit new information into the pre-existing learning experiences.
- “Learning takes place in contexts relevant to the learner.” Because knowledge is so community-based, learners deserve the right to use knowledge of different communities.
- “Reflection is an essential part of learning.” Learners should be placed in situations that might challenge their prior conceptions. Reflections need to promote perceptions that will create similarities or contradictions, which might encourage learners to reconsider construction of new knowledge. Ask follow-up questions and seek elaboration after a learner’s initial response. Learners must be encouraged to engage in critical thinking and inquiry by asking them thoughtful, open-ended questions, and encouraging them to ask questions to each other.
- “Learning is a collaborative process in which multiple perspectives are considered.” It is an exercise where learners team together to explore and interpret questions. Interpretation is heavily influenced by different perspectives, such as inquiring-based learning, case-based instruction, problem-based learning and discovery learning. These aspects are important to develop new knowledge and to determine the meaning behind the knowledge.

It is imperative to integrate *authentic, reflective* and *collaborative* learning involvements when planning lessons or programmes for learner-centred teaching.

Constructivism further proposes that each individual mentally constructs his/her world of experience through cognitive processes (Young & Collin, 2004). Thus, adherents of constructivism propose that learning is individually or socially constructed by learners, rather than simply being received from a teacher or other source.

In the following section I review the literature on learner-centredness to reveal the key concepts and ideas, which form the basis of my research.

Conceptualising learner-centred teaching

Learner-centred teaching involves exposing each teaching activity (method, assignment, or assessment) to the test of a single question: “Given the context of my learners, course, and classroom, will this teaching action optimise my learners’ opportunity to learn?” (Learner Centered Teaching, n.d.:para. 1). Learner-centred tactics are educational practices that “move the focus from the teacher and instruction to the student and learning” (Schuh, 2004:835). In this mode, learner-centred methods emphasise the learner as a dynamic collaborator in the processes of teaching and learning.

Spencer and Jordan (1999:1280) reason that [t]he educational shift from the old-fashioned teacher-centered approach, in which the importance is on teachers and what they teach to a learner-centred approach, in which the importance is on learners and what they learn, needs an ultimate transformation in the role of the teacher from

that of a didactic teacher to that of a mediator of learning.

Accordingly, Ayele, Schippers and Ramos (2007) contend that learner-centred approaches require the active participation of both teachers and learners. A learner-centred viewpoint couples an emphasis on individual learners – their experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, abilities, and needs – with a focus on the best accessible knowledge about learning and teaching practices that encourage inspiration and achievement for all learners (Seel, 2012).

Characteristics of learner-centred teaching

Over the past decade, the principles of learner-centred teaching have been applied extensively in all levels and disciplines of education. Although strategies like learner engagement, active learning and other practices, which involve learners in their own learning, are necessary components of learner-centred teaching, these practices do not represent the entirety of what it means to be a learner-centred teacher.

According to Weimer (2012:61–62, 72–74), learner-centred teaching has five characteristics:

- 1) Learner-centred teaching involves learners in the hard, messy work of learning.
“I believe teachers are doing too many learning tasks for learners. We ask the questions, we call on learners, and we add detail to their answers. We offer the examples. We organize the content. We do the preview and the review.” On any particular day, in the majority of classes teachers are working more than learners. Teachers have to do these tasks, but learners have to develop refined learning abilities without the opportunity to practice, and in many classrooms the teacher gets far more practice than the learners (Weimer, 2012:61–62, 72–74, 132; see also Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014).
- 2) “Learner-centred teaching includes explicit skill instruction.

Learner-centred teachers teach learners how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyse arguments, generate hypotheses—all those learning skills essential to mastering material in the discipline. They do not assume that learners pick up these skills on their own, automatically. A few learners do, but they tend to be the learners most like us, and most learners aren’t that way. Research consistently confirms that learning skills develop faster if they are taught explicitly along with the content” (Weimer, 2012:132).

Learners not only need to develop an understanding of a discipline’s knowledge base (content), but they also need to understand how that knowledge is organised and acquired (learning skills). By learning how to solve problems, think critically, apply information, and integrate knowledge, learners can learn to think like experts in a discipline. In other words, they not only need to learn content, but they also need to know how they can learn more, which is critical in today’s environment where information is easily accessible and exponentially growing. Teachers already possess these skills because they are experts within a discipline, so they often overlook the

importance of teaching them to learners. Research, however, confirms that learners do not automatically learn these skills (Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014).

- 3) “Learner-centred teaching encourages learners to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it.

Learner-centred teachers talk about learning. In casual conversations, they ask learners what they are learning. In class they may talk about their own learning. They challenge learner assumptions about learning and encourage them to accept responsibility for decisions they make about learning; like how they study for exams, when they do assigned reading, whether they revise their writing or check their answers. Learner-centred teachers include assignment components in which learners reflect, analyse and critique what they are learning and how they are learning it. The goal is to make learners aware of themselves as learners and to make learning skills something learners want to develop” (Weimer, 2012:94).

This is also applicable for helping learners reflect on how to take responsibility for changing their learning strategies according to their needs, as confirmed by Chiphiko and Shawa (2014).

- 4) Learner-centred teaching inspires learners by providing them some control over learning processes.

“I believe that teachers make too many of the decisions about learning for learners. Teachers decide what learners should learn, how they learn it, the pace at which they learn, the conditions under which they learn and then teachers determine whether learners have learned. Learners aren’t in a position to decide what content should be included” (Weimer, 2012:98–108).

When teachers make all the decisions regarding material and textbooks, the motivation to study declines and learners become reliant. Learner-centred teachers explore ethically responsible ways to share power with learners. They might give learners some choice about which assignments they complete. They might make classroom rules something learners can deliberate on. They might let learners set assignment cut-off dates within a given time window. They might ask learners to help set assessment criteria (Weimer, 2012:98–108).

- 5) “Learner-centred teaching encourages collaboration.

It sees classrooms (online or face-to-face) as communities of learners. Learner-centred teachers recognize, and research consistently confirms, that learners can learn from, and with, each other” (Weimer, 2012:81). Surely the teacher has the knowhow and a responsibility to share it, but teachers can learn from learners as well. Learner-centred teachers work to cultivate guidelines that promote shared commitments to learning. They see learning exclusively and cooperatively as the most important goal of any educational experience (Weimer, 2012:81; see also Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014).

Advantages and disadvantages of learner-centred teaching

When learner-centred teaching is applied, learners and teachers share the emphasis. Instead of only listening to the teacher, learners and teacher interrelate equally. Group work is accentuated, and

learners learn to collaborate and communicate with one another.

In the following section I discuss some advantages and disadvantages of learner-centred teaching.

Advantages

The advantages are as follows:

- Learning imperative communicative and collaborative skills through group work. Communication and collaboration are interpersonal skills that enable learners to work together. The aim is to focus on understanding, to discover, negotiate outcomes, and cultivate trust. Communication skills can be promoted in the classroom by using video resources that model conversations. For example, learners can listen to or read along with audio books to hear how the words are pronounced correctly and to articulate different statements or phrases. Cooperative learning groups are created when small, temporary, ad-hoc groups of learners work together to ask questions and share responses. Cooperative learning is created when small ad-hoc groups of learners work together to ask questions and share responses (Brame & Biel, 2015; Burnage, 2018).
- Develop learners’ ability to direct their personal learning, ask questions and complete tasks independently. Self-directed learning implies making own choices and determine own goals. It also involves self-motivation through internal incentives, viewing problems as challenges, desiring change and enjoying learning (Rosati, 2016).
- Learners are more fascinated in learning activities when they can interact with one another and partake actively. Group work is an excellent example of classroom interaction. All three kinds of classroom interaction and participation can be included in group work, namely interaction and participation between teacher and learners, between learners and teacher and between learners and learners (Brame & Biel, 2015).

Disadvantages

The disadvantages are as follows:

- Because learners are talking, classrooms are regularly hectic, loud, and disordered;
- Teachers must try to manage all learners’ activities at once, which can be challenging when learners are working on different stages of the identical project;
- Because the teacher does not deliver instructions to all learners at once, some learners may miss vital facts;
- Some learners choose to work alone, thus group work can become challenging (Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014).

When learner and teacher-centred approaches are used together, learners can enjoy the positives of both types of education. Instead of losing interest in teacher-centred education or losing sight of their objectives in a completely learner-centred classroom, learners can benefit from a well-balanced educational atmosphere.

Accordingly, Chiphiko and Shawa (2014) and Opoku-Asare, Agbenatoo and DeGraft-Johnson

(2014:128) point out that a limited range of effective teaching strategies can be used in overcrowded classes. Teachers are restricted to the “chalk-and-talk” teaching technique, which means that they cannot apply a diversity of procedures (for example higher-order questioning and lively learning approaches) and may find themselves unprepared for the everyday challenges of teaching in overcrowded classrooms.

Against this theoretical and conceptual framework, I explain the research methodology in the following section.

Method

An inquisitive research plan was employed to investigate the perceptions of student teachers with regard to learner-centred teaching. I attempted to understand fourth-year student teachers’ considerations of learner-centredness, with the intention of concluding what is desirable to train upcoming cohorts in this regard. A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyse data. Marshall and Rossman (2006:2) highlight that “qualitative research examines the complexity of social relationships expressed in daily life and the significance participants attribute to these interactions.” Frequency-count recording was deemed necessary for the purposes of this study, because I was only interested in the frequency with which particular behaviours occurred.

Data was collected through purposeful selection of participants. Therefore, 38 evidence-rich assignments submitted by fourth-year students enrolled at a higher education institution for the BED qualification (with speciality in the Foundation Phase), were used. The procedure for data collection was based on a workbook as a non-compulsory assignment to be completed during the teaching practice at schools. These workbooks were distributed to fourth-year students in all the provinces.

The purpose for selecting fourth-year students as participants was that their practices in the three preceding teaching practice units provided them with important practical teaching skills. Thus, their contribution was likely to be further developed than that of students not yet in their final year. The following three questions were asked: What is your understanding of the practical application of learner-centred teaching? What were the advantages of learner-centred teaching? What were the drawbacks when trying to implement learner-centred teaching?

Maximum variation selection of participants was used. Participants were selected from diverse cultures, from both genders between the ages of 24 and 32 and must have completed their teaching practice at schools from widely differing social environments. (see Table 1 for a summary of the participants’ biographical details). The schools’ locations ranged from wealthy areas rich in human

and material resources, to schools in poverty-stricken areas that were lacking teaching resources.

Table 1 Biographical data of participants ($N = 38$)

Gender: Male	7
Female	31
Age: 20–25	15
26–30	5
Older than 30	18
Ethnicity: Coloured	1
Black	9
White	16
Asian	12
Province: KwaZulu-Natal	18
Gauteng	7
Limpopo	1
Western Cape	2
Mpumalanga	7
Free State	1
North West	1
Eastern Cape	1

A thematic analysis was used for data analysis. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is that it is a workable strategy that can be used for an exploratory study like this one in which I was interested in a specific theme. Data analysis involves constantly scrutinising the entire set of data, the coded extracts of data, and the analysis of the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) a thematic analysis comprises six steps, namely (1) familiarise yourself with your data, (2) assign preliminary codes and categories to the data in order to describe the content, (3) search for patterns or themes and sub-themes, (4) review themes and sub-themes, (5) define and name themes and (6) produce the report. Furthermore, the data analysis also involves searching for patterns in the data and interpreting them according to themes (Neuman, 2012:360). In the data analysis I also applied the five steps identified by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006:322):

Step 1: Familiarisation and immersion: The researcher reads through the data and reflects on the meaning thereof, to deepen understanding of the interpretation;

Step 2: Inducing themes: While reading and reflecting, emerging themes are identified;

Step 3: Coding: Pieces of qualitative data are collated into the identified themes;

Step 4: Elaboration: Sections of text that appear to belong together are compared to elaborate on existing themes (patterns);

Step 5: Interpretation and checking: For the sake of this study this step was included in the section that deals with the discussion of the findings. For every main theme the voices of the participants were presented first. Then the voices (perspectives of the participants) were interpreted by the author. Next the author’s interpretations were linked with relevant literature and lastly the theme was linked with the theoretical framework. This procedure was used for every main theme.

In this study, ethical considerations were adhered to. In an accompanying note to the participants, the objective of the research, the participants' part in the research, and the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any time, were clarified. Concealment was addressed by instructing the participants not to include their names, neither that of their mentor teachers, nor the names of the schools where they completed their teaching practice. The student teachers were requested to remove the assignments from their workbooks, and to post these to me without indicating from whom they were sent. Ethical concerns were addressed in instructions in the accompanying note.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented by reflecting the voices of the participants in the form of verbatim quotes. Their opinions are discussed, after which the interpreted data is linked to the literature as well as the theoretical framework. Upon reaching data capacity, the findings were prepared according to three themes: 1) the participants' reflections on learner-centred teaching, 2) the advantages of learner-centred teaching, and 3) the challenges facing student teachers with regard to learner-centred teaching. Table 2 summarises the themes based on the findings.

Table 2 Themes and categories

Main themes	Sub-themes	Categories/patterns
Participants' reflections on learner-centred teaching	Understanding learner-centred teaching	Teaching strategies Teaching methods Assistance to all learners
	Collaboration	Participation of all learners Solving problems together Teacher as facilitator Results in knowledge construction
Advantages of learner-centred teaching	Personal and individualised attention	Addresses learners' needs Individuality of learners taken into consideration Enhance cognitive, emotional and physical development
	Motivation	Higher achievement Better performance Feeling of taken care off
Challenges facing student teachers with regard to learner-centred teaching	Disciplinary problems	Misconduct Out of control behaviour of learners Teaching in disruptive classrooms Disruptive classrooms
	Overcrowded classrooms	Minimum learner support Neglected assessment Negative impact on teaching
	Time constraints	Time consuming to teach in disrupted classrooms Managing behaviour is time-consuming Too many interruptions

Participants' Reflections on Learner-Centred Teaching

The primary theme that emerged from the data was student teachers' reflections on their understanding of learner-centred teaching. This theme was divided into two sub-themes, namely understanding learner-centred teaching and collaboration.

Understanding learner-centred teaching

In total, 73% of participants revealed that they understood learner-centred teaching as teaching that places the learners at the centre of the teaching activities, that it involves a variety of teaching methods, and that it assists all learners equally. The second sub-theme was collaboration.

Collaboration

The first sub-theme dealt with collaboration between student teachers and learners while implementing learner-centred teaching. One participant said that "*strategies such as asking questions, solving problems together, and participate[ing] in discussions [are] important*". Twelve percent of participants claimed that "*learner-centred teaching is involvement of learners throughout the lesson whilst the teacher acts as a facilitator*." Four percent of participants agreed that learner-centred teaching focused on collaboration in the form of what the learner was learning, how the learner was learning and under what conditions the learner was learning.

From the participants' remarks it became clear that fourth-year student teachers were aware of the importance of learner-centred teaching in terms of definitions of the concept, teaching methods and strategies as highlighted in the conceptual framework. This can be linked to Piaget's principle that teaching methods play a crucial role in constructing knowledge. Furthermore, this is evident from the fact that the student teachers recognised learners' participation and collaboration during lessons, and the need for learners to be actively involved in their own knowledge construction. This is in line with one of the principles of Vygotsky's constructivist learning theory as he emphasises social interaction and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). However, no participant mentioned that learner-centred teaching involved teaching learners how to think, solve problems, evaluate evidence, analyse arguments or generate hypotheses – all learning skills crucial to mastering material in a discipline (Weimer, 2012). In addition, learner-centred teaching focuses on the talents, interests, capacities and needs of learners (Seel, 2012), but this was not mentioned by any of the participants. According to the constructivist learning theory, learners' knowledge construction depends, inter alia, on their experiences, talents, beliefs, values, and reflection – aspects that should form the basis of learner-centred teaching (Semple, 2000:26). Research by Mtika and Gates (2010) suggests that teacher training institutions and policy makers need to be aware of the above-mentioned finding and that teacher training institutions must discover relevant ways and possibly revisions that can be reasonably made to ensure that learners benefit from the strengths of learner-centred pedagogy.

Advantages of Learner-Centred Teaching

The second main theme that emerged from the data was student teachers' comprehension of the advantages of learner-centred teaching. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme, namely personal and individual attention and motivation.

Personal and individualised attention

Sixty-two percent of participants agreed that learners understood better if they received personal and individualised attention. In their view, this was invaluable for learners. A common remark was that the "*cognitive, emotional, physical development of learners [is] promoted.*" One participant stated that learner-centred teaching "*develop learners to their maximum potential and it caters for both the high achievers and those learners who experience learning difficulties.*" Four percent of participants pointed out that learner-centred teaching addressed the individual needs of all learners. One participant argued that "*it allows teachers to spot problem areas in the teaching and learning process.*" Moreover, 11% of participants testified that learner-

centred teaching entailed giving individual learners more opportunities to learn by taking diversity into account.

Motivation

From the finding it is clear that learner-centred teaching promotes motivation. Eighty-one point five percent of participants indicated that learner-centred teaching resulted in learners becoming more motivated. In turn, this resulted in higher achievement and heightened learner motivation. Two percent of participants disclosed that when learner-centred teaching was used, learners felt more important and that they were cared for.

Interpreting the participants' remarks from the two sub-themes above, it is evident that participants' views emphasised that learner-centred teaching offered learners more advantages such as greater insight into learning content, stimulation of different aspects of development, improved performance, improved motivation, and feelings of trust and value.

In a broader sense, however, learner-centred teaching holds many more benefits, according to the participants. Research by Chiphiko and Shawa (2014) show that learners develop better communicative and collaborative skills through learner-centred teaching and learnt to complete tasks individually and independently. Furthermore, learner-centred teaching focuses on the solving of problems, the investigation of arguments, critical reflection, the relevant application of information and the assimilation of knowledge (Weimer, 2012). Therefore, from the findings it is clear that the participants were not fully aware of the benefits and advantages of learner-centred teaching – a knowledge discrepancy that cuts deep into teaching and learning.

In terms of the constructivist learning theory, each learner rationally builds his/her world of experience through cognitive and emotional processes. It is thus essential to integrate authentic reflective and collaborative learning experiences for the learners when designing programmes for learner-centred teaching. These findings are confirmed by Schuh (2004) and Weimer (2012).

Challenges Facing Student Teachers with regard to Learner-Centred Teaching

Three sub-themes were identified from the analysed data. The three sub-themes were consolidated as challenges that existed in the classrooms where the participants did their teaching practice. These challenges, disciplinary problems, overcrowded classrooms and time constraints, made it impossible to practice learner-centred teaching.

All the participants agreed that classroom discipline remained a concern. They explained that they could not control the learners who disrupted classroom activities and therefore no learner sup-

port could be given. Even assessment was not always possible. The learners kept talking, laughing, walking around aimlessly, and making noises, even after being warned that such behaviour would not be tolerated. One participant testified: *“I cannot imagine learner-centred teaching in classrooms, as my mentor teachers all agree that they all experience out-of-control behaviour of learners.”*

A second challenge, identified by all 38 participants, was teaching in overcrowded classrooms. The participants agreed that when a classroom has a large number of learners sitting in close proximity, the chatter becomes loud and everyone has to shout in order to be heard. One participant declared that *“even the best teaching strategies have no effect in overcrowded classrooms.”* Another participant was convinced that learner-centred teaching *“can only be successful in classrooms with [a] low number of learners.”* The participants maintained that overcrowding impacted teaching negatively because individual problems could not be addressed in such conditions.

The above participant responses reveal that student teachers struggled to teach in overcrowded classrooms, and that learner numbers usually determined the choice of teaching strategies, of which learner-centred teaching was not one. In one study reported on in the literature, the participants indicated that they were intimidated and that they were consequently unable to deliver satisfactory academic results (Imtiaz, 2014:251). Furthermore, in accordance with the constructivist learning theory, learning is rooted in making sense of real-life situations, such as learner-centred teaching. The mentoring that students receive during their years of training should empower them to build knowledge of, and tactics aimed at dealing with instilling discipline and managing overcrowded classrooms, for learner-centred teaching to come to life.

The third challenge that the participants identified was about time constraints. Fifty-one percent of the participants mentioned that learner-centred teaching was time-consuming. One participant admitted that she could not *“accommodate this kind of teaching due to time constraints.”* Another confirmed this by adding the following: *“I cannot present my lesson in time if I pay attention to every learner in the classroom.”* This finding links to the previously mentioned findings, pertaining to disciplinary problems and overcrowded classrooms. Due to overcrowding, learners become unmanageable, and it is virtually impossible to enforce discipline. Chipshiko and Shawa (2014) also found that these issues were hindrances to learner-centred teaching. Mtitu (2014) also reveals that facets such as social context in learner-centred teaching, teacher-learner relations, and the nature of the curriculum influenced the nature of learner-centred teaching.

Based on the literature and the empirical evidence, the following recommendations are made.

Recommendations

Learner-centred teaching is a global approach to teaching that is increasingly being encouraged in education today. The following recommendations can be made as a result of this research.

Learner-centred teaching needs to be a priority in training programmes

Student teachers need to be trained to use learner-centred teaching in their classrooms to provide their learners with a better learning experience. This has specific implications for teaching practice modules, as student teachers need to obtain the abilities and self-assurance essential to impose discipline and teach large numbers of learners within a single classroom. By understanding and applying the principles and strategies of learner-centred teaching, such as learning through working together, learning to deal with others, solving problems together and gaining collaboration and communication skills, teacher trainers can provide valuable opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop skills that will better equip them for their professional careers. These skills are crucial for national and international environments. As institutions continue to review curricula and redesign processes, they should consider their responsibility to the student teachers who participate in their programmes. While programmes tend to focus on teaching disciplinary content, it is imperative to recognise the importance of teaching students how to learn and teach so they are able to apply life-long learning throughout their careers.

The need to include practical implication of the principles of learner-centred teaching in study material

During their training, student teachers should be encouraged to implement learner-centred teaching and to use a mixture of teaching approaches in their lessons to ensure that all their learner's needs are met. To facilitate such implementation, simulation and more practical examples of learner-centred teaching could be included in the students' study materials. Some practical examples that can be included as assignments in the teaching practice journal or workbook for completion during teaching practice sessions at schools are the following:

- modelling how to seek and construct meaning;
- letting learners choose learning activities and assessment criteria;
- choosing content from the curriculum that voice the unique social and cultural needs.

Importance of mentor teachers at schools

It is imperative to uphold discussions and cooperative inventions concerning the challenges

confronting student teachers in practical circumstances, in particular with regard to learner-centred teaching. Student teachers need to keep open channels of communication and co-operate with their mentor teachers, lecturers and other student teachers to receive guidance and assistance in teaching according to the principles of a learner-centred approach.

Support from academic lecturers

Student teachers need a great deal of support from their lecturers and guiding principles regarding learner-centred teaching can and should also be obtained from mentor teachers. Furthermore, a relationship between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is vital. It should be fostered by both parties in order for the student teachers to gain self-confidence and self-assurance – characteristics that are essential for his/her professional growth.

Conclusion

The main focus of this research was to investigate student teachers' perceptions, experiences and challenges of learner-centred teaching during teaching practice. Caution needs to be taken in drawing generalised conclusions in a study of this nature where only students from one university were used as participants. However, the findings of this study provide evidence that learner-centred teaching, which is a pedagogical principle, might be a valid priority that needs attention at teacher training institutions. The findings reveal three neglected aspects that need to be addressed and investigated regarding learner-centred teaching, namely (1) student teachers' lack of sufficient knowledge and skills about the importance, benefits, and advantages of learner-centred teaching, (2) the negative influence of overcrowded classrooms on learner-centred teaching, and (3) a need for managing discipline in classrooms.

If they have not acquired the necessary skills during their training, student teachers might find learner-centred teaching overwhelming during teaching practice. The research reported on in this article merely touched on the importance of learner-centred teaching. Further research is recommended in this regard, as learner-centred teaching is complicated, perplexing, and fatiguing, yet rewarding when applied to teaching and learning events.

Notes

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