



Education Think Piece Series

UNICEF has commissioned 10 Think Pieces by leading researchers and practitioners to stimulate debate around significant educational challenges facing the Eastern and Southern Africa region. While the pieces are rooted in evidence, they are not research papers or evidence briefs, nor do they represent UNICEF policy. Rather, they are engaging pieces that aim to inspire fresh thinking to improve learning for all.

Is learner-centred education ‘best practice’?

By Professor Michele Schweisfurth

Learner-centred education (LCE) and related specific methods such as activity-based, inquiry-based and problem-based learning are widely promoted internationally as examples of ‘best practice’ pedagogy. While it can be a slippery term with different understandings and associated practices, a widely-used and simple definition of LCE describes it as “... a pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning. What is learnt, and how, are therefore shaped by learners’ needs, capacities and interests.”¹

LCE has become a ‘travelling policy’ in that it has moved around the world and taken root in many different contexts. Its origins as an idea go back as far as Socrates in ancient Greece, with the Socratic dialogue enquiry method.² In England, its child-centred version was part of education policy reform in the late 1960s; it was also central to the progressive movement in the USA and had expression in Europe through specialist approaches such as Montessori and Steiner schooling. More recently, it has been described as a ‘policy

panacea’³ in the Global South, because it is believed to contribute to development in several ways, as we shall see below. Based on this promise, international development organisations and agencies, including UNICEF, have been active in promoting LCE in the Global South. As a result of the widespread faith in LCE and enthusiasm for it, a 2008 analysis of Sub-Saharan African national education policies demonstrated that since the 1990s, it has appeared virtually everywhere, at least at the rhetorical level.⁴

The aim of this Think Piece is to provoke readers to think critically about the claims regarding LCE, and its suitability for different cultural and resource contexts. It will firstly unpack some of the main arguments in favour of LCE that have made it a travelling policy and ‘best practice’. It will then draw on a wide range of evidence to show some of the problems that have arisen when LCE has been introduced in situations where teachers are unfamiliar with it, where classes are large and poorly-resourced, and where cultural practices work against the kinds of relationships and attitudes to knowledge that underpin LCE.

¹ Schweisfurth, M, *Learner-Centred Education in International Perspective: whose pedagogy for whose development?* London, Routledge, 2013.

² Cited in Brandes and Ginnis P, *A Guide to Student-Centred Learning*, London, Simon and Schuster, 1996

³ Sriprakash, A, ‘Child-centred education and the promise of democratic learning: pedagogic messages in rural Indian primary schools’, in *International Journal of Educational Development*, 30, 2010, pp. 297-304.⁴ UNESCO 2012 Position paper on education for children with disabilities - https://www.unicef.org/disabilities/files/UNICEF_Right_to_Education_Children_Disabilities_En_Web.pdf

⁴ Chisholm, L and Leyendecker, R, ‘Curriculum reform in post-1990s sub-Saharan Africa’, in *International Journal of Educational Development*, Vol 28, 2008, pp. 195-205.

It will also examine some of the Western critiques of LCE; even in relatively luxurious school settings with well-educated and prepared teachers, questions have been raised about it.

LCE is something of a sacred cow and the aim of this Think Piece is not to kill it outright. Rather, it is to encourage readers to think about when and where aspects of it may be possible and appropriate, for whom, and for which learning goals, particularly in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. Part of the problem with LCE is that it is often polarised against teacher-centred or rote learning. In reality, many good teachers draw on a range of methods in their pedagogical practice, which are suited to the cultural and resource contexts in which they work. In addition to this, the implementation of learner-centred practice by teachers can vary a great deal, meaning that a weak use of LCE will not necessarily be any more effective than lecturing or drilling. And although ‘effectiveness’ should be judged by children’s learning in the widest sense, it is often predicated on results in high stakes exams, for which drilling and other intensive rote-learning methods may be more effective. One thing is certain: teachers unaccustomed to learner-centred practice in their own educational experiences or in the systems in which they work are very unlikely to use it effectively based on short-term training interventions or outsider recommendations. These can make things worse as well by undermining teachers’ established practices. In the light of these issues, this Think Piece will provide a set of flexible principles that are broadly learner-centred but can be adapted to different contexts in order to build on the best of teacher motivations, beliefs and practices.

Why has LCE been promoted as a policy and practice?

In my experience of teaching and researching in a wide range of countries, LCE is widely seen as a ‘modern’ pedagogy that is superior to ‘old-fashioned’ teacher centred practice. Individuals on the ground state these beliefs, and they are often embedded in policy as well. My study of education policies and research across the Global South uncovered the following narratives about LCE, all of which help to fuel it as an advocated practice:

1. The emancipatory narrative suggests that by putting more decisions in the hands of learners, learner-centred approaches free them from teacher authoritarianism and from strict curricula that do not reflect their personal needs. By doing this, LCE is believed to protect learners’ rights and develop the skills and attitudes that promote democratic citizenship.
2. The cognition narrative suggests that everyone learns more effectively when lessons build on their capabilities and interests and are based on problem-solving and application rather than pure individual rote learning. There is also an assumption that LCE is more activity-oriented and engaging for students, thus prompting more meaningful learning.
3. The preparation narrative is increasingly common in national policies. It refers to the need for learners to develop ‘21st century skills’ for life in the ‘knowledge economy’. These include abilities and attributes such as critical thinking, independent research, and flexibility. LCE is believed to support the development of these by reducing the content basis of learning and encouraging independence and collaboration rather than reliance on the teacher and text.

I have used the term ‘narrative’ purposefully, because the evidence that any of the above is entirely true is limited. That they are beliefs, rather than proven facts, doesn’t seem to make the narratives any less powerful.



What does the evidence tell us about the implementation of LCE? What critiques help to explain this?

In 2011, I synthesised the findings from every available article on LCE published in the *International Journal of Educational Development*, which is the main academic journal on education in developing country contexts. I reviewed 72 articles on this theme and almost every single one carried the same strong message: LCE isn't working. Whether it was a case of full-scale policy changes, or smaller-scale interventions by individual programmes or agencies, even when teachers were apparently enthusiastic about the ideas, there were not the expected changes to practice or learning. The evidence for this lack of change was, frankly, overwhelming.

There were a small number of success stories. In a few cases, a multi-pronged approach to implementation, which supported teachers in a range of ways over a long period, did bring about some changes. But the prevailing story was what different researchers called 'implementation failure', or, metaphorically, 'tissue rejection' (as in when a transplanted heart is rejected by the body). In some cases, there was little if any lasting change to practice. In some worrying cases, the intervention made things worse. For example, in contexts where group work was being advocated, teachers sometimes put learners physically into groups but continued to teach from the front. The net effect on learning was that fewer learners could see or hear what was going on. Some teachers, who were not clear on the concept or on their responsibilities, implemented independent learning in ways that left too many decisions to unprepared learners, and classrooms became unfocused and unproductive.



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Some of the articles put this lack of change or inappropriate change down to a range of problems with the implementation process and barriers to it in schools. A number of explanations were put forward for this. The main categories were:

- Unrealistic expectations for change from policy
- Lack of information dissemination on policy changes
- Minimal preparation – for example, expecting teachers to change their longstanding practice through a short intervention or workshop
- Low teacher capacity – for example, in terms of initial training, pedagogical or subject knowledge, or motivation
- Teacher preparation which teaches about LCE but does not model it
- Resource shortage in terms of teaching materials
- Large classes and crowded conditions
- High-stakes assessments which remain based on content which promote rote learning and teaching to the test
- Management and inspection regimes which were unsupportive of LCE
- Language of instruction (usually English) being uncomfortable for teachers and making them prefer text-based or scripted lessons.

The list of barriers is a long and convincing one and demonstrates that there are factors beyond teachers that can affect whether LCE can be sustainably implemented. But some other critiques strike at the heart of LCE itself, asking some challenging questions about whether it is actually suitable for all cultural or resource contexts. In many African cultures, for example, respect for elders is ingrained; in such contexts where children do not question adults or the texts they have written, the critical and independent thinking and questioning attitudes demanded by LCE do not come easily. Others have argued that LCE is a Western import and a form of neo-colonialism. Botswana researcher, Richard Tabulawa, for example, has written extensively on why this 'paradigm shift' is not appropriate in African contexts. He argues that authoritarian adult-child relationships are deeply held from both traditional and colonial roots, and that changing classroom practice in learner-centred directions is not just a case of modifying teaching technique but also cultural beliefs and practices.

It is not only in the Global South that questions have been asked both about how widespread learner-centred practice is, and whether it fulfils all its foundational promises. Even when it was inscribed in policy in England, practice differed between teachers and many remained quite teacher-centred in their practice. This remains the case in many countries in the Global North, where, ironically, many countries look for pedagogical inspiration from Asian countries such as Singapore with successful results on international tests. On a more foundational level, children from less educated families are likely to be disadvantaged by LCE. If they are left to choose what they wish to learn, such children will not have access to the ‘powerful knowledge’ that might help to promote social mobility and redress the imbalances that stem from the home environment.⁶

Are there some basic principles that can be adopted that draw on the best of learner-centredness while respecting context and avoiding failure?

This list of failures and critiques may be uncomfortable reading for professionals who, for sound reasons, are committed to LCE. The human rights basis of LCE will be particularly powerful for UNICEF staff given UNICEF’s mission, commitments and ethos. However, the evidence of the risk of failure needs to be acknowledged and the issue of fitness-for-purpose in low-income contexts also needs to be addressed. One response is to say that LCE should not be promoted at all, but that instead teacher development programmes should focus on making existing teacher-centred practice more stimulating and learning-oriented.⁷

However, I have argued that if we combine the rights basis of LCE with the evidence concerning pedagogy that stimulates learning, it is possible to create a flexible set of principles that might be helpful in improving practice everywhere. Using such a set of principles would help to ensure that the best promise of learner-centredness does not get lost because of the problems with previous attempts to implement it. The principles are intended to be adaptable to all local contexts. They are also intended to take us away from prescriptions about specific learner-centred classroom techniques toward a more holistic and context-sensitive approach. Some of them are addressed to teachers and teacher educators, but some require the engagement of policymakers and cannot be tackled at the classroom level alone.

The seven principles to make current teacher practice more learning-oriented are:

1. **Lessons should be engaging to students, motivating them to learn.** In some contexts, this might include the use of technology or experiment equipment, for example, but this is not always available. In some contexts, this might involve games, for example, but in other contexts this might be seen as insufficiently serious for the classroom. There is considerable evidence that engagement does enhance learning, even though what constitutes engagement may vary between contexts. I have observed lessons in China, for example, where a variety of carefully-timed, intensive activities reinforce the same learning goal, with short bursts of physical activity in between.
2. **Atmosphere and conduct reflect mutual respect between teachers and learners.** Interactions and punishments must not violate rights, and so corporal punishment or humiliation have no place. It is worth noting, though, that in some cultures the tone of interaction may not be as relaxed as in others – this does not mean there is not mutual respect. Teachers with serious demeanours may be the norm in contexts of higher power distance between elders and children, and this can potentially inspire affection as well as trust and respect in those settings. UNICEF’s Child-friendly Schools Framework⁸ is an excellent basis for the realisation of this principle.
3. **Learning challenges build realistically on learners’ prior knowledge.** There is considerable evidence that many syllabi are too demanding for many learners and that accountability to higher authorities means that teachers’ first priority is to get through the syllabus. This leads to ‘flat learning profiles’⁹ when learners cannot keep up. This is a real dilemma for many teachers, but policymakers also need to engage with this reality so that teachers do not have to teach at the expense of learning. Recommended interventions include early remedial work with learners at risk of falling behind. Given the limits of teacher time and attention to individual learners, successful experiments in India have used volunteer community teachers to help bridge the learning gap.¹⁰

⁶ See Michael Young ‘The curriculum and the entitlement to knowledge’, 2014 for a discussion of ‘powerful knowledge’. He argues that all children should be entitled to learn content that can help them to succeed in school and in life, especially since this knowledge is not evenly distributed among them if they are not taught it explicitly in school.

⁷ Gerald Guthrie is an example of such a critic. See: Guthrie, G, *The Progressive Fallacy in Developing Countries: in favour of formalism*, New York, Springer, 2011.

⁸ https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Child_Friendly_Schools_Manual_EN_040809.pdf

⁹ Pritchett, L and Beatty, A, ‘Slow down, you’re going too fast: matching curricula to student skill levels’, in *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 2015, pp. 276-288.

¹⁰ Banerji, R, ‘Poverty and primary schooling: field studies from Mumbai and Delhi’, in *Economics and Politics Weekly*, 35 (March), 2000, pp. 795-802.

4. **Authentic dialogue is used, including open questions.** Drills and whole-class chanting serve purposes in reinforcing some learning and pulling the class together. However, dialogic teaching requires a fuller engagement and has been shown to have a greater impact on learning. Dialogue is not only stimulating to learners by engaging learners and making space for creativity. It also makes the learning visible to teachers so they can formatively assess the extent to which individuals and the whole class are ‘keeping up’. Above all, teacher education at both pre-service and in-service levels should model it, as interventions in South Africa have demonstrated,¹¹ since teachers who have not personally experienced dialogic pedagogy cannot simply be told how to do it.
5. **Curriculum is relevant to learners’ lives and perceived future needs, in a language accessible to them (home language preferred).** This is not always possible in multilingual contexts, but dialogic teaching will be facilitated by this and teachers will be more confident to respond to learners and be flexible in their teaching. This is in part a policy issue and the (mistaken) belief persists that colonial languages such as English can be learned through using them as language of instruction, and that this will lead to better employment opportunities for learners. However, if teachers are not fully proficient in the language of instruction, they will use more closed pedagogies and be unable to teach dialogically.¹² And if learners cannot understand lessons, then their learning is jeopardised. Where teachers have no choice regarding the main language of instruction, code switching should not be seen as poor practice.
6. **Curriculum is based on skills and attitudes but does not ignore content.** These should include skills of critical and creative thinking and attitudes related to national and global citizenship. It is difficult for teachers who have not personally experienced such teaching in their own education to know how to approach it. Evidence reviewed points to the need for in-service training which not only teaches about these approaches, but, again, models them.¹³ Most teachers are used to teaching knowledge. The proposed framework is not asking them to stop doing that, but not to focus exclusively on content or to do so only through rote methods.
7. **Assessment follows these principles by testing a wide range of thinking skills.** Exams should not be purely content-driven as success is often based on rote learning. Where systems are driven by high-stakes examinations that are largely based on knowledge, policymakers need to consider whether these reflect the kind of citizens the country needs, and also to note that these examinations will have a powerful impact on teaching practice. In most contexts, teachers have the freedom to introduce formative assessment that adheres to these principles, but if learners are concerned primarily with passing common examinations, alternatives may not be perceived as a good use of time. Assessment for learning¹⁴ is a helpful general principle, while keeping in mind that assessment can be happening informally on a daily basis in a dynamic, dialogic classroom. It needn’t add unduly to the teachers’ formal marking load but does require he or she to be attuned to the learning constantly taking place.

UNICEF professionals may not have control over all of these principles, but it is worth reflecting on how they might be implemented in the contexts where they work and what changes, if any, this would mean to teaching and learning. UNICEF may have a role at country levels to convene government and partners to review the evidence around the critiques of LCE and the implementing of it and encourage a shift, building on these principles, to more context-relevant and evidence-based teaching and learning methodologies and approaches. The ultimate goal is LEARNING, and respect for rights, rather than superficial (and probably doomed) changes to classroom techniques.

¹¹ Banerji, R, ‘Poverty and primary schooling: field studies from Mumbai and Delhi’, in *Economics and Politics Weekly*, 35 (March), 2000, pp. 795-802.

¹² Cooper, A, ‘We Need to Talk About Learning: Dialogue and Learning Amongst South African Youth’, in J Wyn and H Cahill (eds), *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, 2015, Ch. 29, pp. 419 – 433, Singapore, Springer.

¹³ Westbrook, J; Durrani, N; Brown, R; Orr, D; Pryor, J; Boddy, J; Salvi, F *Pedagogy, Curriculum, Teaching Practices and Teacher Education in Developing Countries: a rigorous review*. London: Department for International Development. 2013.

¹⁴ Black, P and William, D, ‘Lessons from around the world: how policies, politics and cultures constrain and afford assessment practices’, in *Curriculum Journal* (16) 2, 2005, pp. 249-261.



Further reading

1. Atwal, K, '[Dialogic teaching: 10 principles of classroom talk](#)', TES 19 January 2019:
2. Cooper, A, '[We Need to Talk About Learning: Dialogue and Learning Amongst South African Youth](#)', in J Wyn and H Cahill (eds), Handbook of Children and Youth Studies, 2015, Ch. 29, pp. 419 – 433, Singapore, Springer. Downloaded from
3. Schweisfurth, M, '[Learner-centred education in international perspective](#)', in Journal of International and Comparative Education, Vol 2. 2013.
4. Tabulawa, R, [Teaching and Learning in Context: why Pedagogical Reforms fail in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), African Books Collective, 2013. Downloadable at:
5. Young, M, '[The curriculum and the entitlement to knowledge](#)', 2014.



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