Towards Development and Implementation of Learner-Centred Education in Kosovo

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Abstract

This article presents a study that examined how teachers understand student-centred teaching and learning among a sample of in-service teachers in Kosovo, as it emerges as an independent state. In this study, 36 practicing teachers responded to a survey exploring how teachers understand and use contemporary and traditional teaching methodologies. Using a largely qualitative analytic framework, findings revealed that teachers currently appear to understand the philosophy of learner-centred teaching but also possessed a rather superficial view of how these approaches can be implemented in classroom settings. The authors concluded that to broaden the use of these kinds of practices, deliberate emphasis needs to be placed on expanding teacher understanding from theory to practice. The authors recommended that to be most effective, such development will need to be driven by educational policy, embedded in teacher preparation, and supported by opportunities for ongoing collaborations among practicing teachers.

Key words: *learner-centred education, teacher understanding, teacher practices, teacher education, Kosovo.*

Introduction

More than 2000 years ago, Plato noted that to make a lasting impact on students, education needs to be learner-centred. Definitions of *learner-centred education* (LCE) indicate that teaching and learning should allow learners to choose not only what to study but how to study it (Rogers, 1983). Throughout the 20th century, the learner-centred teaching and learning paradigm continued to grow in prominence among educational theorists and practitioners (Warnich & Meyer, 2013) and increasingly, LCE approaches are not only influencing teaching around the world, but are leading to changes in classroom practices (Saqipi, 2014). These ideas have been linked to constructivist philosophies that deliberately incorporate both student interests and needs into teaching, with the goal of preparing learners for a dynamic and changing future. "Pedagogically, student, or learner,

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centred approaches to teaching have emerged from changing understandings of the nature of learning and, in particular, from the body of learning theory known as constructivism. In the broadest terms, constructivist learning is based on an understanding that learners construct knowledge for themselves" (Barraket, 2005, p. 65). Warnich and Meyer (2013) recently summarized the evolution of LCE, "since the start of the progressive education movement in the 19th century and due to the influence of theorists, such as, John Dewey (1915, pp. 240-243), Jean Piaget (Schewebel & Raplh, 1944) and Carl Rogers (1951) whose collective work focused on how students learn, some educators started to replace traditional teacher-centred approaches with more learner-centred 'hands-on' activities" (p. 14). This orientation is predicated on the ideal that all people, including teachers, best learn by doing (McLaughlin, 1976).

Simply put, the LCE paradigm acknowledges the complexity and dynamic nature of learning. "Learning is considered to be a complex process that is not possible to deconstruct into logical parts. The learner is not a passive receiver of knowledge but, rather, an active participant. The learner has the responsibility to accommodate the learning process to his/her own unique learning style in order to structure his/her own learning" (Sablonniere et al., 2009, p. 3). Such methods require teachers to assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning. Learning involves deep exploration of complex problems and ideas in order to acquire new knowledge and skills, while simultaneously developing new ways of thinking and acting. At the same time, learner-centred teaching challenges instructors to release some of their control over the classroom (Brackenbury, 2012). The LCE environment places learner responsibility and activity at the center of classroom functioning. Such approaches are in contrast to more conventional, didactic teaching, that emphasizes instructor control of the curriculum and instruction (Cannon, 2000). In LCE, teachers become change agents by creating, facilitating, and monitoring the learning environment (e.g., Ayele, Schipers & Ramos, 2007).

Shifting teaching practices from didactic to LCE has been a major topic of research for several decades, attracting broad interest because of the potential for reforming education. Researchers have noted that students find learning more meaningful when they are engaged in topics relevant to their lives, needs, and interests, and when they can actively create, understand, and connect to their learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). In LCE, instructors focus on constructing authentic, real-life tasks that seek to motivate learner involvement and participation (Weimer, 2002). LCE aims at developing pedagogy that initially assesses students in terms of prior

experiences, interests, and preferred approaches to instruction and engagement (Emenyeonu, 2012). Learner-centred teaching also emphasizes knowledge and skills that are constructed by students, rather than directed by instructors (Brackenbury, 2012). Thus, teachers practicing LCE recognize that learners in any classroom learn at different rates with different styles, and possess different abilities and talents. Teachers also understand that students will vary in terms of their self-efficacy about learning, both across subjects and over time.

Emphasizing students and their learning require a fundamental change in the role of the educator, from didactic teacher to facilitator of learning (Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014). Weimer (2002) identified LCE as encompassing five changes to practice: "(i) shifting the balance of classroom power from teacher to student, (ii) designing content as a means to building knowledge rather than a 'knowledge end' in itself, (iii) positioning the teacher as facilitator and contributor, rather than director and source of knowledge, (iv) shifting responsibility for learning from teacher to learner; and (iv) promoting learning through effective assessment" (Barraket, 2005, p. 66). Each of these stages requires educators to rethink traditional classroom approaches, moving the emphasis from the outcomes of learning to processes of learning. In sum, implementing LCE in the classroom will require both teachers and learners to interact in non-traditional ways (Lea & Troy, 2003).

In Kosovo, the education system has been engaging in ongoing reform aimed at developing student-centred environments in its public school systems. These aspirations were articulated in the Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011-2016 and 2017-2021, the 2011 National Curriculum and the 2011 Law on pre-university education. As part of this agenda, the national education system has adopted an educational policy agenda, including curricular revision, in a concerted effort to modernize teaching and learning practices in Kosovar schools (Kosovo Curriculum Framework, 2011). Educational legislation now includes revised *Teacher Professional Practice Standards* that are intended to shape teacher practices around the core elements of LCE (Saqipi, 2014). There has been ongoing efforts to raise standards for the teaching profession with the anticipation that it will lead to enhancement of teacher practice. Most recently, Kosovo adopted in 2017 a more sophisticated teacher development framework that provides for a more elaborated version of teaching standards which reflect all the contemporary characteristics and dimensions of good teaching. However, despite the ongoing efforts and inputs in developing LCE practices, there is scant research examining the extent to which these investments and development efforts are

producing satisfactory results. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether Kosovo teacher practice has progressed to a level that can support broad adoption of LCE approaches. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine two broad research questions: (a) How do teachers in Kosovo understand the LCE philosophy? and (b) How are teachers in Kosovo using LCE in practice?

Methodology

Within this descriptive study, we explored several dimensions of teacher development, curriculum, and quality assurance. Analyzing distinctions between policy aims and actual practice allowed the researchers to identify gaps between actual practice and the potential for development of the student centred teaching culture in Kosovo education system. Data were collected through the administration of a survey composed mainly of open-ended questions that focused on how teachers understand learner-centred teaching philosophy and practice. Before describing the survey, study sample, and analytic strategies used in this study, additional information about the Kosovar context is provided.

Setting

Teacher Professional Practice in Kosovo. Teacher professional practice in Kosovo has been dynamic for almost two decades (Saqipi, 2014; Saqipi, 2017). As Kosovo emerged from a war in the late 1990s, policy development was used to reform education as a way to facilitate societal transformation. Historically, Kosovo education was influenced by the former Yugoslav communist system, which was a control-oriented and centralized education system operating at the service of the state. In other words, schools primarily served political regimes. Pedagogy, particularly objectives, content, and method, was unified and typically externally controlled. Teaching focused on delivering specified and often ideologically flavored knowledge, with little if any opportunity for individual learners to express personal interpretations, initiatives, or critical thinking (OECD, 2003; Sahlberg & Boce, 2010).

Although teacher professional development has been offered in Kosovo continuously since 1999, it has been fragmented, sometimes lacking cohesion and direction. Overall, the focus of teacher education over the past 15 years has focused on activities that were funded by different donors (e.g., grants from international bodies) rather than self-standing mechanisms (Saqipi 2012). However, in 2011, the Kosovar Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) introduced a teacher licensing system under the provisions of the law on pre-university education.

The new licensing scheme included a set of incentives and control mechanisms for teachers. For example, under the new system, all teachers attend ongoing professional development as a requirement of maintaining their professional status. Teachers also are assessed to ensure they meet the minimal performance standards outlined by MEST.

Numerous challenges derive from a traditionally centralized education system (see e.g., McLaughlin, 1976; Day, 2002; Sahlberg, 2011; Hargreaves, 2003) Teachers, for example, often do not have consistent access to professional development. These challenges also have been linked to limited school autonomy and school-based development in the Kosovar education system. Consequently, school systems have not developed mentoring practices or any other form of professional collaboration at the school level. Similarly, because curriculum policy has developed under the same context as teacher professional development, it is seen as a top-down policy. Further, given that curricula in Kosovo, to date, has been centralized and highly prescribed, it is difficult for schools to take on the responsibilities of developing school-based innovations. However, the current curriculum, a competency based approach enacted in 2011, differs significantly from the objectives-oriented curriculum that had been adopted in 2001. The 2011 curriculum provides more flexible approaches that allow schools to develop subject curricula that can be responsive to the local communities they serve (See Kosovo Curriculum Framework, 2011). Moreover, this newer approach also supports learner-centred teaching philosophy.

Linked with both the teacher development and curriculum policy, scholars recognize that a quality assurance system is of crucial importance to support these new initiatives. Currently, however, the Kosovo education system does not have quality assurance practices in place. Although legislation calls for these practices, schools lack guidance about how to implement recent changes. In a system that is transitioning from a centralized to a school-based developmental approach, quality assurance mechanisms are crucial in empowering, rather than controlling, schools to engage in developmental initiatives. Hence, it remains unclear whether recent developments in Kosovo's education system will encourage enhancement of teaching and learning. However, practitioners, researchers, and other education advocates are hopeful that the education system in general is moving towards the creation of school environments that are supportive of student-centred classrooms.

Procedures

Survey. For this study, data were collected through a survey comprised primarily of open-ended questions, which asked teachers to discuss learner-centred teaching philosophy and practice, including questions examining how teachers characterize learner-centred and traditional teaching. Respondents were also asked what best or most characterizes their personal teaching practices. The survey was developed to explore the nature of the professional development programming teachers were experiencing in Kosovo. Focused on issues related to definitions teachers have about LCE, the survey also examined distinctions teachers make between LCE and traditional education, as well as perspectives about the appropriate role teachers need to play in terms of implementing LCE.

Sample. Data for this study were collected from a group of 36 in-service teachers, gathered at the time they were beginning a training designed to expose participants to teaching and learning strategies based on the LCE philosophy. The training had been developed to help teachers understand the new curriculum emerging from the legislative reforms previously described. The sample for this study was drawn from the overall group being trained (N = 330 teachers), by randomly selecting one training cohort. The selected group was diverse, consisting of teachers who differed in age, gender, and profile. Data was gathered in the school year 2013/2014.

Training. The training program included a two-day workshop and was accompanied by follow up mentoring and reflection meetings. The trainers administered the survey at the beginning of the workshop and it took participants approximately one hour to complete. Because the purpose of the survey was to gather information about current perceptions on these issues, trainers played a passive role during survey administration and did not provide any additional explanation to the respondents.

Analytical Strategies. Data were collected and analyzed by the authors using inductive methods that included creating categories and themes. Initially, data were coded into specific categories that described respondents' understandings of learner centred teaching (Mathhew & Ross, 2010). In the first iteration, each author coded the data independently and then met several times to discuss and make initial coding decisions. During initial discussions, a number of themes were identified which in turn were used as a framework to analyze all of the data. After the initial independent coding of data, the authors analyzed the data jointly to form certain categories upon which the interpretation of the conclusions were drawn. From this process, a unified coding

scheme was created and the identified categories were ordered and organized based on the number of respondents referring to certain themes in their responses. In other words, the number of times themes were mentioned by respondents was used as an indicator of relative strength of the findings.

Findings

Analysis indicated that the data could best be organized into the following categories: *Understanding learner centred teaching; role of the teacher; and how teachers perceive their roles.* Each category is described in the following sections. Overall and not entirely unexpected, findings suggested that although respondents know about LCE, they also held rather superficial views of learner-centred teaching philosophy and practice.

Understanding Learner-centred Teaching

Respondents demonstrated general pedagogical knowledge about modern teaching practices and correctly understood that traditional teaching practices tend to be more teacher-centred than contemporary approaches. Relative to their understanding of student-centred education, responses nicely fell into several categories (the numbers associated with each group refer to specific themes in the narrative responses to survey questions): (a) Students being at the centre of the teaching process (14); (b) Making students active in the learning process (13); (c) Encouraging free expression of ideas (11); (d) Using group work (11); (e) encouraging students as inquirers (10); and (f) implementing inclusive educational practices (7). These data suggest that the teachers involved in this study understood learner-centred teaching philosophy in terms of the students' role in the learning process; namely, that teaching is a student-driven process. However, these findings also indicate that although teachers understood student-centred teaching as "students being at the centre," how actually to apply these concepts appears to be less understood by respondents. Specifically, some basic elements of student-centred teaching, such as the importance of students engaging in research activity or the provisions of authentic teaching situations that reflect real life, seemed to be problematic for the teachers who participated in this study.

Role of the Teacher

One goal of this study was to examine how teachers orient themselves to the various tasks of teaching. Findings suggest that the teachers who were involved in this study viewed their primary roles more as: (a) Manager (15); (b) Teaching concepts and ideas (8); (c) Using a variety of teaching techniques (8); (d) Conducting assessment (7); (e) Implementing a variety of teaching

resources (6); and (f) Teaching the curriculum (4). Again, the numbers next to the categories represent the amount of times statements were coded for each specific category from the narrative survey responses. In sum, findings suggest that teachers' thinking is characterized more as being oriented towards teacher-centred than student-centred approaches. These data reflect teachers who view themselves as more techno-rational practitioners instead of facilitators of LCE approaches. In other words, teachers are viewing themselves as the facilitators of student-centred classrooms.

How Teachers Perceive Their Approach to Teaching

Table 1 (in the Annex A) summarizes the results of the forced choice portion of the survey, providing the frequency of how often teachers perceive that they use various activities in their work. The numbers represent actual teacher responses derived from the survey, which were then ranked based on the order of teacher preference for certain activities. As can be seen, teachers are not emphasizing the development of students' taking responsibility for their own learning and inquiry. On the other hand, data suggest that teachers demonstrate a preference for making sure students are active and involved in the class. Teachers also show preference for involving students in large and small groups aimed at problem solving. Furthermore, teachers indicated a preference for offering students support for problem solving, as well as for debate, and encouragement to learn. Overall, data indicate that this group of teachers appears to understand their role as (i) developing deep learning, (ii) enabling active student learning, and (iii) developing relationships in the classrooms in terms of students working with one another.

Discussion

A clearer understanding of the current realities of teacher practice and support in Kosovo can provide a major step towards improving schools. We recommend to the Kosovar educational leadership that having a better understanding of support structures for teachers will allow for the development of explicit plans for improving educational opportunities for all students. Indeed, the findings from this study indicate that practicing teachers possess a general understanding of student-centred teaching and learning approaches. Teachers were able to define and differentiate LCE approaches from more traditional pedagogies. This is an encouraging finding because it suggests that the practicing teachers who participated in this survey understand, at least in principle, the importance of using LCE approaches in classroom practice. On the other hand, even though teachers demonstrated a relatively clear and comprehensive understanding of LCE

approaches to student-centred teaching, they also appeared to lack the ability to apply these ideas in practice. Indeed, our findings indicated that educators may have difficulties in understanding the relationship between theory and practice, particularly in terms of assessing and utilizing students' prior experiences or interests.

This is important as LCE orients the teacher as *activity organizer*: someone who creates, arranges, and facilitates learning processes, then motivates and encourages students, and ultimately provides authoritative feedback on students' performance (Tudor, 1993). In the student-centred environment, teachers provide the learning opportunity (e.g., issue, case, problem), and then facilitates learning, while students determine the nature of engagement and production of learning outcomes, then formulate plans and carry out those plans in developing products and outputs (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). In an authentic student-centred environment, the teacher sets the learning objectives, and then offers a set of possible activities designed to help learners reach those objectives (Massouleh et al, 2012). Furthermore, although the teacher provides the architecture for learning, s/he does not directly determine all of the content to be learned (Brackenbury, 2012). This goes beyond the use of certain teaching techniques, requiring certain activities in the class, or setting the same learning objectives for all students, and is critical to bear in mind when examining the development of LCE environments.

Results of this study also suggest that teachers are not necessarily going to implement LCE principles in ways that encourage students to explore topics, by utilizing contemporary tools and techniques like the Internet. Moreover, it appears that textbooks still prevail as the primary classroom learning resource and the provision of opportunities to engage in real-life learning situations are not widespread. It has to be noted though that Kosovo school system is faced with the challenges of teachers having the access to resources for materials creation. These kinds of limitations may in turn interfere with opportunities for students to actively engage in inquiry and discovery-based learning (Saqipi, 2014). Although it goes beyond the data collected in this study, we suggest that education system variables lead us to believe that this disconnect between understanding the ideas of LCE and the willingness to implement actual LCE practices in the classroom are a consequence of an education system which, for decades, focused mainly on the development of theoretical knowledge. Thus, one challenge for the Kosovo education system now is to transform from a primary focus on the theoretical to implementing practical and pragmatic schooling.

While these findings also suggest that respondents appear to prefer activities that would connect academic concepts to real life, participants indicated lower preferences for activities related to creating and/or using wider varieties of learning resources. This may be connected to our results that teachers appear to place less emphasis on the importance of developing student autonomy in the inquiry processes of learning, or developing classroom environments in which students engage in creating and using learning resources. As indicated, these differences between knowledge and practice likewise present barriers to the widespread and successful implementation of LCE classrooms. This level of teacher understanding in Kosovo also points to a reality in how initial teacher education institution trains teacher at the level of reflecting about practical implementation of good teaching. Because the LCE goals of deep, performative, and proactive knowledge have been connected to significant learning experiences, we recommend that teachers strive not only to assess the abilities of different students, but become experts at differentiating curriculum and instruction to ensure all learners have sufficient and appropriate opportunities to learn (Mutlaq Al-Zu'be, 2013). As acknowledged by LCE principles, authentic teaching and learning are highly complex processes that largely transcend the limitations of many traditional teaching techniques, requiring instead that teachers facilitate and enable their students to create their own learning experiences (Saqipi, 2014). We are reminded of Mclaughlin's (1976) seminal work on importance of mutual adaptation when attempting large scale changes in education: "Implementation was a dynamic organizational process that was shaped over time by interactions between project goals and methods, and the institutional setting" (p. 340).

Finally, it is worth reiterating the idea that classrooms are diverse, dynamic socio-physical systems, that "contain actors, artifacts, and relationships that are potential resources, and it is through interacting with resources that students can learn" (Kurdziolek, 2011, p. 120). Scholars have shown that although many educators view contemporary teaching as inquiry-based problem solving that incorporates various teaching aids, this study found limited recognition of the importance of these practices. Even the most basic ideas, such as using library or the internet to find information, did not appear to be highly valued by respondents. We end with a reminder that the teacher-student relationship is one of the most powerful elements in any learning environment (Liberante, 2012) and student-centred teaching can significantly make teacher-student relationships far more interactive. In such settings, teachers view their role as being assistive, while at the same time developing mutual respect. Unfortunately, this idea of more dynamic student-

teacher interactions was not found in this study. We therefore recommend that Kosovo reformists encourage and support positive relationships between teachers and students, with the goal of ultimately promoting a "sense of school belonging" that encourages all students to "participate cooperatively in classroom activities" (Hughes & Chen, 2011, p. 378). This study points to the need to look at broader school factors, including the school culture and the overall accountability and quality assurance mechanisms to understand the challenges in pushing the reform ideas beyond the stage of understanding, More sustainable organized effort is required for deep change.

This study is subject to several limitations that require readers to use caution when considering the importance of these findings. First, it was a single point-in-time study and was focused only on the perceptions of a small group of teachers. This study was intended only to establish a baseline that could be used to identify themes that need further examination. The goal being to provide scholars and policymakers better understandings of both opportunities and challenges in widespread implementation of LCE philosophy in Kosovo. Future research needs to be focused on comprehensive examinations of teachers' classroom beliefs about LCE philosophy and how belief patterns can be operationalized into classroom practice. We further recommend that future research also looks at how pre-service teacher training and in-service professional development can be embedded with a much greater focus on the practical applications of LCE against the set of contextual variables of an education system undergoing transition.

Conclusion

The foundations for educational change in Kosovo have been established and there is an exciting opportunity for making substantive and long lasting change in teacher and classroom practice. We are encouraged that teachers, at least the participants in this study, are thinking about the importance of developing LCE environments. However, the need also exists to deepen teachers' abilities to actually implement LCE philosophy in the classroom. To reach the stage of meaningful and widespread implementation of the LCE philosophy in Kosovo schools, both organizational culture changes, along with support for implementation, must be systematically addressed. In line with earlier research (McLaughlin, 1976), evolution towards a LCE-focused educational system should: (i) be easily explained to teachers, (ii) enable teachers to be engaged in trial efforts to internalize new policies and approaches as part of their professional identity, and (iii) ensure that

the existing but outdated values and practices are challenged in thoughtful but firm ways. Implementing a new philosophy throughout Kosovo schools will not be sustained if previously-held values are not changed to ensure that new practices are in congruence with the principles and practices of LCE.

To achieve these ends, school systems not only must allow, but also must encourage and support teachers to engage in meaningful collegial collaboration about how they will implement LCE philosophy in their own settings. Additionally, teachers will need to be consistently supported and monitored to translate LCE into a meaningful professional practice. These transition processes will require ongoing interactions between and among individual teachers, administrators, community partners, families, and other interested stakeholders. We recommend new system policies be developed and enacted that reflect both support for and expectations that LCE approaches will be effectively utilized and sustained. Obviously, ongoing opportunities for engagement in continuous professional learning processes that go beyond formal ad-hoc workshops will be required. Transitioning from understanding to implementation should be supported vis-à-vis an educational culture that embraces this new philosophy as a precondition to successful change of teacher beliefs and practices. LCE is not just another educational "fad."

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Annex A

Table 1. Task Orientation of Teachers (N = 36)

Action/ Approach	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
Students are highly involved in class activities and exams	34	2	0
Students share their ideas with each other and me	31	3	0
Students work in small or larger groups when solving problem	24	6	2
I help students to explore, extend, and connect their ideas	23	7	5
I give support for solving problems, but do not give away the answers	23	9	4
Students debate issues and viewpoints	21	9	6
I ask questions that encourage students to think	20	10	6
Students can relate new concepts to their own lives	19	13	6
I relate new information or problems to what students have already learned	19	10	7
I provide diagrams or pictures to make information cleaner	18	12	6
Students use a range of resources to help them try out their ideas e.g. making models	15	15	5
Students prepare with a partner or team before sharing ideas with the class	15	8	11
Students suggest possible problems than can be addressed	14	8	13
Students develop ideas using a variety of resources	10	13	13
Students collect information that extends across subject areas	12	10	11