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Title: An exploratory study of instructional practice in three Nigerian secondary schools, given student-centred recommendations in curriculum reform.

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Abstract

Recent reforms of secondary education in Nigeria advocate for student-centred approaches in instructional practice (IP) (Awofala & Sopekan, 2013). Student-centred instruction (SCI) is defined as an approach, which reflects a shift from teacher-centred pedagogy, in which the learner becomes the centre of the learning process and creative methods are employed (Collins & O'Brien, 2011; Vavrus, Thomas, & Bartlett, 2011). However, increasing evidence of problematic implementation within developing countries reflects the need to be critical of SCI/learner-centred policy transfer (Schweisfurth, 2011). This study addresses an exposed lack of detailed research around education reforms in Nigeria by exploring the changes in IP since its implementation and stakeholders' dispositions towards IP. Qualitative data collection and analysis generated two themes: teachers' positioning as the expert and activity leader, and positive views of existing IP. These findings suggest that teacher and students' preferences have more influence on IP than the availability of resources.

Keywords

Curriculum reform, Nigeria, student-centred instruction, learner-centred education in developing countries

Background

Floating discourses around education in Nigeria have generated and sustained various notions about IP in secondary schools over the past decade. 'Floating discourses' is a cover term for research reports and opinion pieces that periodically assess and contribute to changes within the education system. The problem is that these discourses often comprise inadequate research and misconceptions transmitted by individuals deemed as 'experts' of the education system (Moja, 2000). Such problematic discourses have contributed to a number of trending notions about secondary education. Firstly, that existing IP in secondary schools is teacher-centred in the sense that it denies opportunity for student engagement and activities in classroom learning (Akinbobola & Afolabi, 2010; Bimbola & Daniel, 2010). Secondly, that private schools are better placed to implement SCI by having small class sizes, more learning resources and constant teacher training (Adebayo, 2009; Akinsolu & Fadokun, 2009).

The first notion emerged through Nigeria's participation in world conferences and subscription to global agendas for education during the past decades (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008; Obioma & Ajagun, 2006). World conferences on education promoted SCI/learner-centred pedagogies within aims to improve the quality of education in developing countries (Vavrus et al., 2011). IP in Nigerian secondary schools was problematized in response to this trend, rather than via an in-depth analysis of current realities and context-relevant solutions. In other words, advocacy for SCI, within floating discourses, has been primarily informed by the desire to match international standards for education (Ahmadi & Lukman, 2015; Chimezie, 2011). The second notion emerged through the influence of national events on education in Nigeria. Especially the push for privatisation and decentralisation of public institutions through structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s (Anyanwu, 1992; Geo-Jaja, 2004). Advocacy for privatisation in floating discourses encouraged the view that private schools are better resourced and equipped to deliver quality education than most public schools (Agi, 2013; Omede, 2015).

Changes to the secondary school curriculum were introduced in 2011, and supposedly featured a 'learner-centred and competence-based approach to education' (Awofala & Sopekan, 2013, p. 102). This introduction of SCI was supposedly indicated by adding sections on performance objectives and students activities to the syllabus of various subjects (Igbokwe, 2015; Omosewo & Akanmu, 2013). Overall, the aforementioned notions about IP and the highly reduced application of SCI, motivated attempts in this study to explore changes in, and influences on IP.

Methods

This study was set within post-positivist and interpretive paradigms and adopted a qualitative approach to research design. Three secondary schools were purposively selected within a city in the south-west region of Nigeria. Lavender, the first school is a private school, funded and managed by a university. It is located in an urban area, and has better resources compared to the two other schools. Cobalt, the second school is a public school, funded and managed by the state government. It is also located in an urban area but has poorer resources compared to Lavender. Jade, the third school is also a public school but is located in a very remote area. It has the least and poorest resources compared to Lavender and Cobalt.

Three participants were interviewed in each of the schools – the principal, vice principal and a civic education teacher. Civic education was chosen over other subjects, because it is compulsory and the syllabus supposedly provides more opportunities for SCI (Jekayinfa, Mofoluwawo, & Oladiran, 2011; Okobia, 2012). In Nigerian secondary schools, students are divided into three disciplines, the science students, social science students and arts students; each of these groups have their own classrooms (Omosewo & Akanmu, 2013). Lesson observations were conducted in the classrooms of science and social science students at each school, and the lessons were taught by the same civic education teacher. Six students were selected from each of the observed lessons and brought together in one focus group. This means that two focus groups were conducted in each school. The focus groups were conducted to

save time and acquire a wide but collective range of views on IP (Mertens, 1998). The interviews and focus groups were also conducted in a semi-structured format to ensure that the main themes were covered while generating flexible responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Findings

Thematic data analysis was conducted using the six phases of analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Findings revealed that the teacher was mainly positioned as the expert and activity leader in the classroom. Data analysis also indicated that that both students and teachers had positive views about existing IP in their civic education lessons.

Theme I: Teacher as the expert and activity leader in instructional practice

Lesson observations revealed that there were relatively similar approaches to IP across the civic education lessons. All three teachers stated in their interviews that they were expected to follow the syllabus as strictly as possible. However, none of the teachers covered the sections of recommended SCI activities during the observed lessons. Instead, most of the lesson was spent explaining subject content to the students and giving various examples. The teachers also asked questions repeatedly and gave comments on students' answers. Recitations were also prevalent; students completed their civic education teacher's statements and sometimes answered their teacher's questions in chorus. The following extract is taken from lesson observations in Jade:

> 9:05: Teacher continues to ask questions and the students' participate in the recurring recitations.
> 9:09: Teacher shares his personal views on an issue, then cites an example.
> 9:13: Teacher asks another question. Students are still responding in chorus.
> 9:15: Teacher introduces a problem-solving question to the class.
> 9:16: Students respond in excitement.
> 9:17: A whole class discussion follows.
> 9:18: The class discussion continues.

> Field notes – Jade science class observation

In Lavender and Jade, the civic education teachers and students stated that recommended SCI activities like whole-class discussions, class presentations and drama were conducted in their lessons. However, the most frequent occurrence of these activities was confirmed in Jade. As illustrated in the extract above, whole-class discussions occurred for a few minutes during observed lessons in Jade. In Lavender, SCI activities occurred less frequently. Students in the focus groups noted that it was more typical for the teacher to explain subject content and ask questions during lessons. The following extract illustrates these views:

> Researcher: Can you talk about when you are allowed to work on your own during a civic class?
> F2: Like drama?
> …
> F3: I think the only time we work alone is during projects and tests, personal projects and tests. Then, that work together is just during drama and it's only once for the past presentation. It's only once that we've done that.
> F1: Yes, it could be different for other classes like the arts class.
> F3: And we are in science class, so just once. During our normal class, she will just come, explain and interact.
> M1: It's just once in a while actually.
>
> Transcript – Science students' group, Lavender
>
> [Note that F refers to female student while M refers to male student]

Even though the civic education teacher in Cobalt claimed that whole-class discussions and other activities were held frequently during lessons, her students disputed this claim. This suggested that Cobalt had the least frequent records of SCI activities in civic education lessons.

Theme II: Positive views of existing instructional practice

Most participants shared positive views about existing IP in their civic education lessons. All three teachers stated that they were content with the usual approach because it enabled them to achieve lesson objectives. Their students shared similarly positive views. During focus groups, students from Jade

agreed that existing IP in their civic education lessons was adequate and satisfied their preferences for learning. They also highlighted the teacher's explanations and examples as efficient methods of teaching. The following extract illustrates these views:

(Discussing thoughts on teaching methods)
M1: I think it's preferable and good. The reason is that these methods enable the students to understand what he has taught the students.
M2: It really make sense to us ~~like~~ when he gives examples. The examples are just like he explained the definition itself. So students go over the examples and they will be able to put it in their own words. They will be able to say the definition. So that is why the use of examples is good.

Transcript – Science students' group, Jade

[Note that F refers to female student while M refers to male student]

Students from Lavender also shared positive views about the existing IP in their civic education lessons. They agreed that the usual practice was enjoyable and sufficient. Students from Cobalt expressed different levels of satisfaction with the IP in their civic education lessons, then generally agreed that it was beneficial. For instance, the science group stated that they would prefer more opportunities for student engagement in IP. However they also stated, like their peers from the social science class that existing IP helped them to grasp subject content.

Discussion

Research findings showed that the SCI recommendations in the syllabus were not followed with precision during civic education lessons in the three schools. Instead, teachers retained expertise on subject knowledge, and the control of knowledge transmission. These findings resonate with pre-existing literature, which reports that teachers' dominance in IP is often sustained in the face of SCI recommendations in developing countries (Croft, 2002; Sikoyo, 2010). Findings also revealed some degree of student engagement in the civic education lessons through recitations, answers to the teachers' questions and occasional participation in class activities. Such findings, especially in Jade and

Lavender contest notions that existing IP is completely lacking in opportunities for student engagement. Moreover, findings revealed that the most frequent opportunities for student engagement occurred in Jade, which is the least resourced among the three schools. This finding also contests notions that the IP in Nigerian schools is resource-dependent. Finally, positive dispositions to existing IP across the three schools, resonate with pre-existing accounts that teachers and students can be content with IP that remains largely controlled by teachers (Tabulawa, 1997).

Conclusion

This study captured accounts of classroom realities in Nigerian secondary schools in view of SCI recommendations. Its findings contest notions that IP is mostly resource-dependent and lacks student engagement. Findings also revealed sustained teacher's dominance in IP, and positive reactions to this among students. These themes suggested that students and teachers' preferences had more influence on existing IP in the observed classrooms, than the availability of learning resources (Clarke, 2003; Tabulawa, 1998).

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