

## *Active Learning in Ethiopian School Context: Widely Phrased, Poorly Practiced*

Kati Keski-Mäenpää, Oulu University, Finland

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### **Abstract**

Active learning and student-centred teaching methods are growing trends all over the world. New teaching styles are brought in to replace traditional methods like lecturing and rote-learning. In Ethiopia, educational sector has been bringing in more active and student-centred learning since the introduction of the new education policy of 1994. However, the process has been very difficult for the teachers. The roots of rote learning, copying and lecturing are based in Islam and Orthodox Christian schools (Ferede & Haile, 2015; Semela, 2014), and these traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen, still dominate most classrooms (Serbessa, 2006). The aim of this study was to clarify the reasons, why teachers in Ethiopian context feel it challenging to use student-centred teaching methods, and to explore how the practical arrangements, such as material or cultural surroundings, constrain or enable usage of student-centred methods. The theoretical framework of the study is a theory of practice architectures and the theories about active learning. The data have been collected by group discussions, interviews, videotapes and field notes. The findings of this study show that existing practical arrangements at the schools do not support the use of a student-centred teaching method. For example, a detailed curriculum, annual tests, a high student-teacher ratio and a lack of teaching and learning materials support teacher-led teaching and make it difficult to implement student-centred teaching methods. In order to launch active learning methods successfully in Ethiopian school context, major changes are needed in these arrangements and in teacher training as well.

Keywords: Active learning, student-centred learning, teaching methods, Ethiopia

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## **Introduction**

This case study has been conducted in one Ethiopian village school and is a part of a wider, four-year long action research project that concentrated on developing new teaching methods based on student-centred learning. In this report I will focus on teachers' perceptions about using these methods and practical arrangements that either support or hinder using participatory and active teaching methods. The participants of the study are 23 primary and secondary school teachers.

The challenge of using the methods based on student-centred learning (SCL) is not new, because the educational sector in Ethiopia has been bringing in more active and student-centred learning since the introduction of the new education policy of 1994. Education Sector Development Program IV (MoE, 2010a) focuses on improving student achievements by enhancing the teaching–learning process and by transforming schools into motivating and child friendly environments. However, the process has been difficult for the teachers. The roots of rote learning, copying and lecturing are based in Islam and Orthodox Christian schools (Ferede & Haile, 2015; Semela, 2014), and these traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen, still dominate most classrooms (Serbessa, 2006).

Reports (Abebe & Woldehanna, 2013; Gemed, Fiorucci, & Catarci, 2014) show that other reasons for challenges in implementation of student-centred teaching in Ethiopian schools are the lack of institutional support and the fact that the curriculum was based on Western cultures and did not take traditional cultures and values much into consideration. Because the new curriculum was imposed from the top down, it did not consider comments from teachers, who are responsible for implementing the curriculum (Abebe & Woldehanna, 2013).

Lectures about student-centred pedagogy are given in teacher training colleges (TTCs), but these theories have not been effectively transferred to real context. Student-centred pedagogy is familiar for teachers at the theory level but transforming the knowledge into practice has been problematic. According to Serbessa (2009), “Little attempt is made by the policy document and other subsequent education strategy documents to give elaborations and to indicate how it can be translated into the teaching-learning process at the classroom level.”

## **Research methods**

In this study, I wanted to hear Ethiopian rural school teachers' perceptions about student-centred pedagogy and find the reasons why using these methods have been difficult. Data for this research consists of material collected through various kinds of methods. These methods were group discussions with all 23 teachers, focus group discussions with smaller groups, interviews with individual teachers, my field notes of observed lessons and videotapes. Two kinds of analyses were undertaken: first, a thematic analysis that identified key themes; and second, an analysis using a theoretical framework that focused on the discursive, material and social conditions (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis & Heikkinen, 2012) that enabled and constrained using the student-centred teaching methods at the Village School.

All discussions, interviews and my field notes were first analysed thematically (Eskola & Suoranta, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). The analysis of discussions and interviews began by transcribing the English spoken and recorded data. At this stage I did not reduce the data. Those interviews that were held in Amharic, were translated and transcribed by the Ethiopian assistant. Because I am able to understand Amharic, I listened and checked those tapes again to make sure I understood them the same way as the person who had translated it. This process of listening to the tapes, reading and re-reading the transcripts helped me to become familiar with the whole data and to raise up a wider range themes.

After the thematic content analysis, I analysed the whole data again through the theory of practice architectures (for example, Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Kemmis & Heikkinen, 2012). I continued by analysing sayings, doings and relatings. That meant, for example, examining what kind of language teachers use when they are talking about school or student-centred pedagogy, how the surrounding materials are arranged at the school or what are the relatings between the different stakeholders.

This theory aims to explain how social and educational practices are constituted in relation to the particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that support them. It has been used, for example, in Australia to research leading and mentoring practices (Bristol & Wilkinson, 2014), and in Finland to examine peer-group mentoring for teacher development (Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä, 2012) According to this theory, practices are organized as bundles of “sayings,” “doings,” and “relatings” that “hang together” (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspors & EdwardsGroves, 2014; Shatzki, 2002). According to this theory all practices are composed in three dimensions. These dimensions are (1) the semantic dimension (in which it is possible to say things and be understood); (2) the dimension of physical space-time (in which it is possible to carry out relevant activities); and (3) the social-political dimension (in which it is possible to relate appropriately to others in the practice).

These three elements of practice architectures prefigure and shape the distinctive sayings, doings and relatings characteristic of a particular practice. For instance, the practices at the school and changes in them are enabled by practice architectures. These architectures do not predetermine the practice, but they enable or constrain it (Kemmis, Heikkinen et al., 2014). When sayings, doings and relatings support the practice, change is possible. These three dimensions are often impossible to separate from each other. We think of “school,” for example, in terms of shared language and shared ways of thinking about things. We also think of “school” in terms of shared spaces (classrooms, desks) and the various activities (teaching, doing sports) that compose its daily rhythms. We think of school in terms of a range of interconnected relationships between teachers, students and parents. “School” appears as some kind of whole, composed of a distinctive and overlapping semantic space, place in physical spacetime, and social space. (Kemmis, Heikkinen et al., 2014)

## **Research context**

The physical context of this research is Ethiopia, which is in sub-Saharan Africa. Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa, with a population of more than 90 million (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2015). Of this, 46. 4 million

(51%) are under the age of 18. In Ethiopia, one of the major challenges for teachers at the both primary and secondary levels is a lack of pedagogical knowledge, particularly in applying student-centred methods of teaching (Abebe & Woldehanna, 2013). The policy emphasizes innovative teaching and learning, but traditional lecture methods still dominate in most classrooms (Serbessa, 2006).

The way teachers are educated in teacher training colleges affects the way they teach their own students at schools. The same kind of obstacles are faced in Tanzania (Ottevanger, de Feiter, O-saki & van den Akker, 2005, as quoted by Soko, 2014), where the approach to teaching in secondary schools is characterised by memorisation of a large amount of verbal information, so as to pass examinations. Practical activities and demonstrations are hardly done at all, and the attitudes towards learning are focused on memorisation. The students carry this attitude forward into their own teaching practices. However, the move towards more practically focused, outcomes-based, school-focused teacher training can be seen in many teacher training systems worldwide (Moon & Wolfenden, 2012).

The setting of this research is a rural village in the southern part of Ethiopia. The regional state is called Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). The Village School is one of the two schools in the village and there are 1569 students in grades 1-10 and 23 teachers at the school. Students go to school in two shifts, a morning shift and an evening shift, because of the large number of students and the small space available in the classrooms.

### **Student-centred learning**

Definitions of “active learning” emphasize students’ participating and collaboration. Learning by “doing” is a theme that many educators have stressed since John Dewey’s argument that children must be engaged in an active quest for learning new ideas. Although there is a ‘considerable disagreement and confusion about what student centred learning actually is’ (Farrington, 1991, p. 16), many research emphasize for example activeness of the students and equal relationship between the teacher and the students. According to research (e.g. Cannon & Newble, 2003; Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2000), student-centred learning includes

- the reliance on active rather than passive learning;
- an emphasis on deep learning and understanding;
- increased responsibility and accountability on the part of the student;
- an increased sense of autonomy in the learner;
- an interdependence between teacher and learner;
- mutual respect within the learner teacher relationship, and
- a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner.

For example, cooperative learning and problem-based learning are approaches that promote active learning. Emphasis is on the activity of students, and this pedagogy is often seen as opposite to teacher-centred learning. In Ethiopia, the term “student-centred” is not defined clearly in MoE publications, words like “child-friendly teaching,” “learner-centred,” “active learning” and “problem solving” are frequently mentioned (FDR Ethiopia, 2005). More detailed advice is given in the subject

curricula. For example, teachers of grade 1 and 2 students are encouraged to use a variety of teaching methods in their math lessons, including discussion, pupil activity and enquiry, along with games, puzzles, rhymes, songs and competitions (MoE, 2008).

The policy statement of the MoE (2008, 2010) emphasize a learner-centred approach, active learning, and problem-solving approaches at every class level. Teachers and schools are not only encouraged but demanded to plan and accomplish their Continuous Professional Development programme, which is supposed to concentrate on practicing student-centred and student activating methods. ESDP IV (MoE 2010a) emphasizes translating schools into genuine learning environments, which concentrate on increased student participation. Publications and workshops about active learning and student-centred pedagogy are offered to schools.

Although the employment of innovative teaching and learning is emphasized in the policy and teachers are encouraged to use student-centred teaching methods, traditional lecture methods, in which teachers talk and students listen, still dominate most classrooms (Serbessa, 2006). Frost & Little (2014) observed 776 math classes in Ethiopian primary schools, and their study showed that 74.5% used teacher-oriented teaching, 10.7% had student-centred learning and 14.6% involved off-task activity. Group tasks were observed only 2.7% of the time. Their study showed that students are more likely to be engaged in student-centred activities if they are taught by a female teacher with a Diploma. Observation also showed that in the Village School, teaching is mainly based on lecturing. In the lower grades the teachers used songs and small games, but in the upper grades teaching was based only on lecturing and copying.

Research (Dagneu & Asrat, 2016) regarding concerned teachers' perceptions toward quality of education in Northern Ethiopia showed that 30.1% of the respondents agreed that quality teaching is the extent to which teachers give good lectures and 63.1% of the teachers thought that quality learning is the extent to which students score high marks on the final examination. A majority (63.1%) responded that quality learning is the extent to which students recite what has been said in the class. The study also showed that some teachers tried to use active learning, but others still dominated the lecture teaching learning activities. These rates show that the delivery of student-centred learning is not yet to the desired levels in Ethiopia. (Dagneu & Asrat, 2016.)

## **Results**

This research shows that current arrangements support more teacher-led teaching than student-centred learning methods. For example, the detailed curriculum and annual tests force teachers to use lecturing, because they have to cover the content which is very wide. If teachers use more time for group activities or dialogue during the lessons, they do not have time to teach the content that is enquired by the curriculum. The detailed curriculum with wide content, annual tests and large groups make student-centred teaching difficult.

*Using participatory teaching methods with more than 60 students with no assistant teacher feels impossible. I have to follow our curriculum carefully and have no time for extra activities. Otherwise my students will not pass the annual tests. (male-teacher, secondary school)*

In Serbessa's (2006) study, when asked why teachers are using the lecture method strategy, 86.6% of teachers responded that the lecture method of teaching is more suited to the current curriculum and students' backgrounds. In the same research, most teachers (85%) complained that the teaching materials are full of large amounts of information to be memorised by students, and teachers feel responsible to cover the curriculum in the available time. The teachers (87.5%) replied that the only way they can "get through" their subject in the available time is to deliver it in a formal, didactic style, with as little "distraction" from students as possible. (Serbessa, 2006.)

The government's order to prepare detailed annual, weekly and daily lesson plans and close follow-up in classes of 60 - 80 students is considered extremely stressful. Teachers describe the situation in rural areas as demanding overall for the teaching process because of, for example, long distances and working hours, low conditions of class rooms, high temperatures and lack of materials. Therefore, teachers feel that they do not have the capacity for other teaching activities at the school, like CPD activities, follow-up of the students and preparing the lessons based on student-centred methods.

*I walk six kilometres to work. It is very dusty and hot. I don't have a change to refresh myself before starting the job. We teach from morning to afternoon without rest. We don't have even a tea break. Especially in the dry seasons classrooms are very dusty and dirty. (male teacher, secondary school)*

Serbessa's (2006) study also found out that the classroom seating arrangement in Ethiopian schools do not allow teachers to employ active learning. Front to back seating arrangements encourage one-way communication and discourage students to discuss among themselves.

Lack of materials hinders the use of student-centred methods, especially at the governmental schools and rural areas. Lack of material like computers, proper libraries or text-books make the use of the SCL method difficult. In Ethiopia, 41.0% of primary schools and 92.8% of secondary schools have adequately organized libraries (EFA, 2015). Private schools, which collect student fees, have better possibilities of purchasing materials. At the Village School, teachers are in need of even basic materials like copy paper and pencils. An Internet connection is not available in the village.

*We don't have enough text books. Four or five students are sharing a book and taking it home turn by turn. (female teacher, primary school)*

*There is no modern technology, even we don't have enough chairs. Those things are harming the teaching process. We have shortage*

*of teaching aid and reference books. We have only outdated books here. The number of text books and students is very different. We don't have books for all of them. Teachers are struggling and doing their best to use the limited source. (male teacher, primary school)*

In the study by Serbessa (2009), the majority of teachers (79.2%) replied that they were constrained by the lack of adequate resources from using an active learning approach. The available teaching aids were only used by teachers to assist their lectures. Student-centred learning methods emphasize the activity of students. They are supposed to take a responsible role in their learning instead of receiving information from the teacher. However, obedience and politeness are the overriding goals in bringing up children in Ethiopia, and children are taught to fulfil without question any request made by any older person. They are disciplined to ensure that they obey and respect the decisions taken by their elders and accept their place in a hierarchic social order. (Kjorholt, 2013; Serbessa, 2009.) According to Serbessa (2009), the traditional education and the Ethiopian tradition of child upbringing do not provide a good learning climate for employing an active learning strategy. Making students, especially girls, more active is difficult. Also the low level of students' fluency in spoken English makes it even more challenging.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The theory of practice architectures, which was used in analysing the data of this research, showed that the teaching methods based on SCL and the prevailing arrangements at the schools do not “fit together.” Either changes in these practical arrangements are needed, or the teaching methods have to be developed to be more suitable with the culture and not transferred straight from other cultures. Education does not happen in a vacuum, because the surrounding people, culture, history, material environment and political decisions affect the way how education is seen and conducted. For these reasons teaching methods developed in other contexts do not necessarily function in other surroundings. If changes in prevailing practices are wanted, it is necessary to provide new ideas, resources and new kinds of relational support to make those practices possible. In the context of this research, this means establishing new languages appropriate to the new ways of teaching, constructing spaces and times and physical resources appropriate to the activities based on student-centred learning. It also means connecting the people involved – students, teachers, parents and governmental representatives – in new networks of relationships. (Kemmis, Wilkinson, et al., 2014). All these have to be made in a genuine context with all stakeholders, including the teachers.

Changing the school culture is a slow and challenging process, because it demands changes not only in practical arrangements, but also in teachers' thinking. According to Kimonen and Nevalainen (2005) the opposition to reform may be a result of a conflict between the teacher's own beliefs and the new ideas. Changes in teachers' ways of teaching require changes in the beliefs, values, expectations, habits, roles, and power structures of the teachers. Therefore, reforms in curricula or equipment only do not necessarily have an impact on teaching (Kimonen & Nevalainen, 2005). In Ethiopia, the prevailing school culture and thinking of teachers are still based on very traditional values, where the teacher is believed to be the only source of information and the main value of education is to give students the basic knowledge and to

prepare them to manage well in the annual tests. The conflict between teachers' values and beliefs about education and the new ideas may be one reason why teaching methods have not changed during the last few years, despite of the MoE's attempt. One of the Village School teachers felt that negative attitude was one barrier for using teaching based on active learning methods. He said that students were used to receiving the information from the teacher and not in participating actively in the learning process. However, teachers described later that their students were highly motivated when teachers used SCL methods like group working or everyday-related tasks.

According to this study, in order to launch new teaching methods successfully in an Ethiopian school context, major changes need to be made. Curriculum reform is needed in any case on to a national level (Moon & Wolfenden, 2012) and it cannot be transferred from other kinds of cultures. For instance, the Village School teachers said that using methods like debate or dialog are difficult in the Ethiopian context because children are expected to obey the teacher and not to question an older person's speech. The teacher has to know beforehand where the discussion is going. In addition, the culture of lecturing and rote learning derives from the time of church education and has strong roots in history. Changing this culture by bringing new methods does not happen in a short time. According to Serbessa (2009), "The attitudes and expectations of society in general and of the family of the learner in particular affect how learning is viewed and how teaching is organized. These attitudes and expectations vary from society to society and attempting to copy a learning and teaching strategy from one society into another without trying to adapt it to the local conditions may not be successful."

I also suggest that the curriculum would be modified in order to support SCL methods. The current curriculum is very detailed and teachers are pressured to "cover the content." This makes using SCL methods difficult. Detailed annual tests force teachers to cover everything in the curriculum to prepare students for the tests instead of taking the time for deep learning and understanding. The implementation of active learning requires a certain amount of time to think and explore. Such strategies take more time than a straight lecture. (Serbessa, 2009.)

Teachers interviewed for the USAID report (2007) described that the way the curriculum is organized and the types of questions included in exams make it more difficult for them to devote time in class to organizing group work and other, more participatory activities, or to asking students to answer higher cognitive-level questions. Because of a detailed curriculum and examination system, there is pressure for teachers to cover as much material as possible and, when there is time, to ask students questions, to see if they can recall what they have been taught.

The number of students in most classrooms is too high in order to use group working, dialog or drama effectively as teaching methods. In Ethiopia, the student-teacher ratio is considered to be a critical indicator of quality education in all class levels (MoE, 2010b). Although the government targets for student- teacher ratios (primary schools 50, secondary schools 40) have been met in a majority of the schools in urban areas (MoE, 2010b), many children in Ethiopia are taught in very large classes (Abebe & Woldehanna, 2013). In order to implement teaching methods that activate students



more, either the student teacher ratio needs to be made smaller, assistant teachers have to be added or, as one solution, teaching space could be reconsidered.

I would suggest that attention continue to be given to sufficient and suitable teaching and learning materials. Currently there is lack of textbooks, teacher guidance books and basic materials like chalks, pencils and paper. If several students are using the same book together, their progress is insecure. Access to extra materials like library books or Internet would support students in finding information by themselves, but currently these are not available in the majority of rural schools. At present, 22.2% of secondary schools have Internet access, and about 76.1% of secondary schools have access to electricity (EFA, 2015). In addition, teachers said that the existing material are planned predominantly for an urban setting and are too detailed. The guidance books and the textbooks are now planned to prepare students for the annual tests, which increases the teachers' load to cover the content, and do not support them for using teaching based on students' activities, which often requires more time than lecturing. New material based on SCL pedagogy need to be made to replace the current material.

To be able to implement SCL methods, teachers need be encouraged to develop contextually suitable ways to teach based on student-centred learning pedagogy. Until now, teachers have not been part of the development processes, but have received orders given by the MoE from top-to-down. Their participation in policy, curriculum and textbook preparation and involvement in decision making processes would be useful because teachers best know the context and situation of the schools. Instead of a top-down approach, which leaves the teachers feeling that they do not have a real personal investment in the programme, teachers should be made participants in the development programmes. Instead of "one-shot" workshop, teachers could be encouraged to implement development projects in their own contexts (Gemeda & Tynjälä, 2015b). According to Kemmis, Wilkinson, et al. (2014), changing professional practice requires commitment of the practitioners of the profession, and the school system wanting to change its teachers must create very specific kinds of conditions under which teachers can change. In the situation like Ethiopian teachers are facing now, they should be considered as agents of the change, not just implementers of the government's new idea or policy.

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**Contact email:** [katikeski@gmail.com](mailto:katikeski@gmail.com)