Challenges and Cultural Attributes Influencing the Implementation of the Learner Centered Approach

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Abstract: *Many developing countries have been implementing the learner centered approach to improve learning and poor performance of students. The approach enables the system of education to achieve quality education. This article discusses the characteristics of the learner centered approach in an educational provision. Execution of the foregoing learning paradigm encounters various challenges. The observation indicates challenges that have been affecting teachers, students and in general the system of education. It explains teachers' misconceptions and students' resistances against the preceding educational approach. In addition, the article describes the influence of cultural attributes on this style of teaching and learning. It ends by presenting suggestions for improving the implementation of the learner centered approach as well as the educational provision.*

1. Introduction

There has been increasing emphasis in recent years on moving away from teacher centered approach toward learner centered approach. Educators have been insisting on the utilization of the learner centered approach in the classrooms. However, teachers in many countries continued to use the teacher centered approach. This approach has been criticized in the educational systems. It makes students learn passively by receiving information transmitted from teachers as well as textbooks. Teachers consider themselves as subjects matter experts who employ traditional methods during the teaching and learning process. Teacher centered approach gives power to teachers in such a way that they dominate most of the classroom activities. These days there has been an ongoing shift of focus from the teacher centered approach to a more learner centered approach. One of the reasons is the belief that the learner centered approach accelerates the process of knowledge, skill, and understanding gain. The implementation of this style of teaching makes a difference in students learning. In fact, learning becomes more meaningful, interesting, and democratic (Marwan, 2017).

The learner centered approach
The learner centered is an approach to education focusing on the needs of the students, rather than those of others involved in the educational process, such as teachers and administrators. The approach presents several characteristics that are applying during the teaching and learning process. It places students in its heart and it facilitates students' active participation and independent inquiry (Ang et al. 2001). This learning paradigm emphasizes the student's effective involvement in the learning process. It gives students greater autonomy and control over the choice of subject matter, learning methods and pace of study (Pulist, 2001). The learner centered approach requires teachers to use less of their time on instructional teaching to ensure that more of the time is spent on student learning (Ableser, 2012). It considers students as an important factor in the education system. This style of teaching focuses on providing suitable educational services that improve students' learning and develops student deeper understanding. It accomplishes this goal by shifting the educational process from an emphasis on teaching to learning.

In this environment, students are expected to participate fully in the learning process. They are required to be given enough chance to carry out many learning practices by themselves. Sutton (1991) added that the learner centered approach needs teachers to incorporate into the teaching style several methods that encourage and enable students to be less dependent on the teacher and become self-reliant. This environment requires students to make use of new learning roles and responsibilities that go far beyond listening, taking notes and passing tests (Doyle, 2008). Scholars added that teachers should know students as important clients who must be guided well and assisted to learn the subject matter deeply. Teachers should provide feedback, attention, learning support, illustrate the students' backgrounds and experiences, and create a safe learning environment (Westbrook et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the learner centered approach puts students' interests, aspirations, and needs first. The student is responsible for learning while the teacher is responsible for facilitating the learning. By putting responsibility for learning in the hands of learners, we encourage them to be active and responsible participants in their learning. The approach has encouraged moving power from the instructor to the learner, treating the learner as a co-creator in the teaching and learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Learner centered approach can deliver the knowledge to students efficiently and effectively. It improves student learning and student engagement, encourages students to know why they need to learn and how to learn, and allows students to have their self-awareness of their learning abilities and their process of gaining it (Blumberg, 2004; Wei Li., Mai, & Tse-Kian, 2014).

Learner centered approach has been promoted worldwide by national and international forums and organizations. This initiative has been supported based on the fact that this learning paradigm facilitates students learning the subject matter successfully. The model emphasizes deep learning and understanding. The foregoing views are in line with Adams and Sargent (2012) who stated that the mission to make schooling more learner centered has been occurring in many societies and nations. Bransford et al. (2000) supported learner centered approach as the best for

optimizing the opportunity for students to learn effectively. Also, Swan (2005) reported that during the reform of education the teaching environments need to emphasize the learner centered approach which acknowledges constructivist notions. Vavrus (2009) and Tabulawa (2013) insisted on the adoption of the constructivist theory that privilege active, inquiry-based learning, and learner centered approach. This theory has been promoting learners' active involvement, participation, and engagement during the teaching and learning process.

The learner centered approach was introduced to boost the quality of education at all levels of education. This initiative guided many nations to transform the learning paradigm to enable the system of education to attain a quality education. It is a concept that provides all students with capabilities they require to become really productive. According to UNESCO (2000), quality is at the heart of education, and what takes place in classrooms and other environments is fundamentally important to the future well-being of children, young people, and adults. A quality education is one that satisfies basic learning needs and enriches the lives of learners their overall experience of living (p.17). In addition to that, the quality education should also accompany with the student attention to overcome learning difficulties through learner centered teaching, every activity is organized around learners development. On the other side, teachers are given opportunities learning through educational training, workshops, seminars, co-teaching with expert teachers to improve classroom practices.

Challenges affecting the implementation of the learner centered approach
The execution of the learner centered approach encounters a number of challenges. They could be confirmed from what was researched and addressed from the previous studies. According to Brackenbury (2012), curriculum in many countries instructed teachers to use the learner centered approach, although teachers continued with the old methods under the teacher centered approach. Alexander (2000) explained the differences that happened between teachers' adopted theory and the theory they apply in teaching. This is to clarify that the theory teachers apply in the classrooms was observed to be different compared to the theory advocated in the teacher education. This situation might be caused by several factors linked to the education system. It was demonstrated that the instructed practices from the curriculum have not been effectively implemented.

Many studies reported the limitations of traditional teaching in educational contexts (Yap, Neo, & Neo, 2016). Therefore, lecturers have started to implement learner centered teaching to promote better learner understanding and motivation. It was discovered that there are lecturers who still felt uncertain about the application of learner centered teaching because they went through the traditional teaching environment during their studies in educational institutions. Thus, the effort of shifting from a teacher centered teaching to a more learner centered teaching has been challenging. In addition to the same perspective, the learner centered approach encourages students' engagement in teaching and learning activities. However, inadequate resources, small sized classrooms, and lack of expertise on the part of

teachers were the challenges to the teaching learning activities in various schools. Moreover, it was asserted that the traditional way of teaching has the limitation to focus on active learning insisted on the learner centered approach. Due to a complex learning environment, only a few teachers who are highly skillful and have expertise can handle the learner centered approach in their classes but the majority of teachers blame poor resources, shortage of time and insufficient support as challenges. This situation offers teachers a chance and justification to continue with teacher centered approach (Qutoshi & Poudel, 2014).

There are other weaknesses reported concerning the implementation of the learner centered approach. One of them is connected to misconceptions built by educators and teachers. Educators have to note that even though the learner centered approach has shifted power to students, this does not mean teachers have lesser roles to play in the classrooms. So the roles of teachers are not diminishing. They act as facilitators of students learning and help them become active learners. They should play vital roles in nurturing talents and contributing to human capital development. Also, the misconception that this approach requires a lot amount of materials/resources should be neglected. This is because the style does not necessarily need extra materials/resources. Much can be done in the classrooms without spending a lot of these substances. Students might be facilitated actively through group and pair work, discussion, debate, role-playing, experiment, inquiry method, and peer monitoring. The misunderstanding that a learner centered approach is difficult for large classes needs teachers to be creative. They should know that this approach does not occur only in small groups. Several methods might be devised for teaching a large group (Abdullah et al., 2012).

Others said that students have more work in the learner centered. Actually, the learning paradigm does not create a greater workload for students. Instead, it requires students to become more skilled and thinkers who can plan and manage their learning activities and solve learning problems successfully. This view will lead to more fruitful learning outcomes. In another view, teachers think that a learner centered approach can only apply in certain disciplines. The truth is that the approach is adaptable to all subject matter. It provides a philosophy that can be applied across disciplines. Other educators perceive that students learn less of the subject matter under a learner centered approach. But the reality is that students are likely to learn more, understand better the small content area, and able to solve problems effectively (Abdullah et al., 2012).

Together with the misconceptions explained above, there are several difficulties students have been facing related to the learner centered approach. Most of them are uncomfortable with the new roles and some students show to be hostile toward the new approach. They are against the teachers who are employing this approach. In some areas, students have been discouraging teachers. In such a situation, students need a clear understanding of why teaching shifted from teacher to learner centered. Students should know why they are required to collaborate, work on their own, teach and evaluate each other and themselves. Therefore it is up to

educators finding ways of helping students understand the changes and teach them how to learn in the learner centered environment. They must be willing to facilitate students to become successful learners and help them be able adjusting to a new approach on their own. The single biggest challenge educators' face is how they can motivate students to change and switch to this approach (Doyle, 2008).

Moreover, there are some reasons why students resist the learner centered approach (Bishop *et al*., 2014). They include old habits students have been experiencing die hard. This is to say that it takes time for the students to develop and apply new learning habits. So to be successful students and teachers should be serious in working under the learner centered environment. Another reason is schools remain teacher centered institutions. Teachers have been controlling the teaching and learning process and students have been working under the old learning approach. Further to that students do not like taking learning risks. They often see failure as a negative experience and painful. They fail to maintain a willingness to take risks in the school environment. Also, students do not want to put forth the extra effort required by the new approach. They have been complaining that learner centered teaching requires extra work. Students need to be more active so as to comply with a new approach. In general, students' mindset makes them adapting to this approach more difficult. They view efforts in varieties of learning activities as being of little or no use to them (Bishop *et al*., 2014; Doyle, 2008).

In general, there are challenges, teachers' misconceptions, and students' resistances that have been observed in the implementation of the learner centered approach. The observable facts confirm the challenges the system of education has been encountering and they might be caused by several factors. It includes factors connected to political, economic, social, technological, and cultural attributes. In this perspective, cultural attributes are given the main concern compared to other characteristics. This is likely based on the fact that culture is a way of life in society. It guides teaching and learning practices taking place in the classrooms. In every learning environment, there should be a culture that influences the educational components and practices. By referring to this perspective culture might have an effect on the learner centered approach.

The influence of culture on the learner centered approach

According to Giroux (2004), culture is defined as a route of power, ideologies, and values in which various characteristics are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded. Culture could influence the life of peoples in various ways. For example, culture is instrumental in that from it people select the techniques of performing things and reach an objective. Also, culture is regulative that the actions of persons and the use of the instruments are subject to rules and regulations. As well, culture is directive that from it peoples derive their ultimate as well as immediate values, their interpretation of life, and the goals which they strive (Ikpeze, 2015).

Culture matters in all organizations, institutions, groups and societies. For an organization to develop and sustain competitive advantage over various competitors, the management should pay attention to its organizational culture. This is because, the organizational culture is connected to its success as it inspires workers all the time to achieve the intended objectives. There is direct positive relationship between the organizational culture and workers daily performance. The culture established in an organization arouses enthusiasm in workers to accomplish the stated goals. It improves the behavior, experience and motivation of human resources leading to its performance and attainment of goals. Therefore, organizational culture is an important determinant of performance (Darmawan, 2013 as cited in Ghanney, Antwi & Ali, 2017). The foregoing idea could be connected to what is taking place in the school as an organization. In this case, the school has some educational objectives that need to be accomplished by all the members in the school. So teachers, students and other stakeholders are supposed to work together and guided by an organizational culture which facilitates the achievement of the school objectives. Positive school culture promotes teachers and students ability to teach, learn and perform examination effectively.

The main contribution cultural studies make to pedagogy is the insistence that any kind of critical education must be rooted in the culture, knowledge, and experience that students bring to the classroom. Thus cultural studies have an important role to play in helping educators rethink about the nature of pedagogy and knowledge, the purpose of schooling, and the impact of larger social forces on schools (Giroux, 2004). Cultural understanding includes one's culture and its current impact on practices and beliefs. Understanding the cultural impact of the educational process requires that teachers need to understand their own cultural identities and the impact they have on the beliefs and educational goals of students. This understanding is necessary to provide authentic and meaningful experiences that help to increase the academic achievement of all students (Osborne, 1997 as cited in Morrier *et al*., 2007).

It is demonstrated that there is a connection that exists between culture and what is taking place in schools/classrooms. Therefore, there is no way educators could exclude culture from educational studies. This is because culture influences the learner centered classroom practices performed by teachers in their everyday life. It is in line with the scholar who explained that teachers and students perform classroom practices by following cultural ideas (values, beliefs, behaviors) and these are powerful determinants influencing developments in education systems (Pepin, 1998). Based on the foregoing reality it is important for educators to build an understanding that classrooms and its accompanying materials are cultural (Medin & Bang, 2014). In general, the school culture is a culture of teaching and learning where teachers and students are mutually engaged in various ways for the purpose of improving educational achievement.

For any society to survive, its culture must be passed on to teach successive generations as appropriately as possible (Njok & Sunday, 2014). Culture provides the template for all human activities, interactions, and understanding. It influences how teachers and students think, believe and behave; therefore, it is imperative for educators to

understand culture's role in the curriculum design, its implementation and its effect on students (Morrier *et al*, 2007). The curriculum is an embodiment of culture as it reflects what the society values and the skills and dispositions the society wants to see in its children and future leaders. Culture can shift and change as societal needs change (Ikpeze, 2015).

The scholar argued that everything in education relates to culture, to its acquisition, its transmission, and its invention. Culture is in us and all around us just as the air we breathe. Culture is shaped by numerous interactions and practices, teaching and learning that happen throughout our life span. Teachers rely on cultural references when they conduct teaching. Their pedagogical approach has been shaping culturally (Ikpeze, 2015). Teachers bring themselves their life experiences, histories and cultures into their classrooms. They bring their personalities and teaching styles that are shaped by social and cultural interactions. Experience, culture, and personality of teachers go wherever teachers go including their classrooms. The expectations that teachers hold for teaching and learning are grounded in their cultural beliefs. Teachers continually express their culture (Kennedy, Zion & Kozleski, 2005). Culturally responsive teachers can build prosperous learning environments in which students and teachers build a richer and deeper understanding of themselves and each other. Understanding of the teachers' cultural background and connecting to students in the classroom creates a rich learning environment whereby the teacher and students value each other (Ghanney, Antwi, & Ali, 2017).

Teaching serves as an artifact of culture change. We start with students, their cultural knowledge and our cultural knowledge. Every act of teaching involves teaching across cultures and differences, from institutional culture, classroom cultures, and the digital culture, to visible or invisible vultures. Teaching is a cultural artifact because it is a product of a human activity that enables us to reproduce, modify or change the culture at any given time (Ikpeze, 2015). At any time in the learning process, students are involved in three distinct and interlocking cultural contexts such as: The visible cultural context of the teacher-managed activity routines and rules; The largely hidden but powerful cultural context of peer relationships and interactions; The personal cultural context of beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge that individual students bring into the classroom from their family (Nuthall, 2005 as cited in Ikpeze, 2015).

The following activities as presented by Ghanney, Antwi, and Ali (2017) can deepen teacher understanding of how culture influences practice as a teacher. They include activities in which the teacher: Learn about your history, heritage, community, family, and culture. Write about your celebrations, traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices. Talk to friends and family, share stories, and listen to the stories of others' life experiences. Reflect on the things you value in your life including significant artifacts, customs, and family events. Embark on a reading program, be purposeful about the topics and authors that you select for reading. Other activities are: Try to choose authors who represent cultures that vary from your own. Join or start a reading club that engages readers from multiple backgrounds. List some characteristics of your culture. Consider your communication style and other cultural norms. List the things that you do in your classroom that come from your cultural perspective. Check your list with a teaching colleague. How are your lists different and similar?

This article supports cultural ideas since they influence practices in the classrooms. Scholars have been advocated that culture has an impact on various practices operating inside and outside the schools/classrooms. In a study by Meng (2009), Chinese and American educators found that native culture greatly influences teachers' knowledge of teaching and students' learning. Also, Medin and Bang (2014) avowed that "culture is everywhere in our schools and classrooms, it influences everything about student learning including how children see themselves in relation to nature" (p.64). Therefore, to be successful in efforts to transform and improve educational practices and performance then cultural attributes are indispensable. Before the implementation of the learner centered approach educators are supposed to think about the culture. This is to perceive that educational reforms towards a learner centered approach should put an emphasis on cultural attributes. There should be an appropriate organization or connection that allows learner centered practices carried out effectively in the new learning environment.

Furthermore, the conceptualization of the concept of pedagogy is said to be connected to teaching practices and culture. In this regard, Alexander (2000) reported teaching practices and culture to come together as pedagogy. Therefore, there is no way research could exclude culture from classroom studies. This is confirmed by the studies in various cultural contexts to show similar and different trends of practices. The trend is caused by the culture influences classroom practices performed by students and teachers in their everyday life. In showing the importance of culture, Schweisfurth (2013) affirmed that pedagogy incorporates cultural processes that develop attitudes, perceptions, understanding, and teaching practices. Therefore, to be successful in the efforts of education stakeholders to improve teaching practices and performance, researchers must put into consideration the cultural attributes.

Despite good intentions to improve the education systems, the reports in different countries revealed that there are many obstacles to the transnational transfer of policies, practices, and approaches. Cobern (1996) observed the trend to adopt educational programs in science education caused confusion and controversy in many countries. Schweisfurth (2011) explained one of the reasons for bewilderment is the cultural assumptions of the learner centered approach which disagreed with the local contexts. Other programs were misunderstood and badly implemented (Hughes & Urasa, 1997). Moreover, Alexander (2000) admitted that the process of transferring educational programs from one country to another is effective. However, it encounters the problem of focusing a little on cultural matters. This scenario makes the process of transferring or borrowing educational policies, practices, and approaches as the temptation. It fails to comply with the cultural attributes in the recipient nations.

Suggestions for improving the adoption and implementation of the learner centered approach

This article supports cultural matters as crucial because students and teachers follow a particular culture to perform practices under the learner centered approach. Therefore, to implement successfully the learner centered practices, several strategies need to be applied. In this regard, cultural and contextual differences have to be put into consideration. Neglecting these differences might be the reason causing poor implementation of the learner centered approach. In connection to that Schweisfurth (2011) compiled 72 articles which have been providing the reports concerning the nature and implementation of the learner centered education. The scholar observed the failure of the initiative. It might be caused by the factors related to social, economical, political, technological and cultural. This view indicates that the foregoing factors are essential and thus have to be improved accordingly.

The education system guiding the educational provision needs to find ways of dealing with the problems and challenges that militate against effective curriculum implementation and specifically the execution of the learner centered approach. Problems and challenges such as financial constraints, lack of supportive infrastructures, lack of equipment's and materials, lack of quality and quantity of teachers and poor working conditions have to be addressed, worked upon, solved, and improved successfully. In general, the ministry of education, educational agencies, organizations, and stakeholders should be organized well to accomplish the effective curriculum implementation. This is to say that, the learner centered approach should be applied and employed successfully in the classrooms in the educational institutions.

Another aspect of improvement should focus on the concept of transnational transfer of policies and practices. This initiative involves the learner centered approach and other educational aspects borrowed from abroad. In this regard, Hughes and Urasa (1997) suggested feasibility studies be done to determine whether the foreign policies and practices have to be adopted smoothly in the receiving country. They should determine whether there are conditions similar to those from the originating country that are necessary for success in the recipient country. Similarly, Zheng (2012) provided the view that before transferring the educational program, it has to be examined if it could be adapted or integrated into the receiving country effortlessly. Meng (2009) stated factors used to support the successful adoption and implementation of the transnational transfer of these programs. They include familiarity with the ideas and practices that accompany new programs.

Also, educators should use a model that guides the proper transfer and borrowing of educational programs from foreign countries. This model reminds educators of the complexities happening in the transfer and borrowing process which most of the time has been simplified by politicians. They just visit a foreign nation and return with the program which might be effective in a different context. Scholars wanted stakeholders to be vigilant in this process. They criticize the process of adopting blindly the education system from abroad because each nation has its educational flora (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). The model of educational transfer and borrowing provided essential stages for carrying out these activities successfully. They included four stages such as cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and indigenization/internalization (Phillips & Ochs, 2004, pp.778-779; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008, pp.96-97).

The preceding model seeks to provide an analytical model for an examination of the processes of educational policy/practice/approach borrowing and the context of education reform. It helps recipient nations to adopt a foreign program that has already been evaluated thoroughly. The model demonstrates a proper solution in different national and cultural contexts. Thus, educational stakeholders have to orient and familiarize themselves with this model. They should understand it clearly; it is the only way for successful borrowing, adopting and implementation of the foreign educational programs. Moreover, the easy of worldwide travel and access to information from other countries allow for the exchange of ideas and the copying of what some consider being better practices as seen in another place. There are many reasons why a country/system/school should borrow educational policies and practices from others. It includes among others to improve education at home, to remain competitive in the world, to gain a better understanding of society.

This article perceives the preceding model as fundamental since it guides researchers and educational stakeholders on the primary stages and thus alerts to transfer or borrow policies/ practices/approaches reasonably. It provides a logical model for examining the preceding educational aspects borrowing and the context of education reform. This article perceives that educators in several national and cultural contexts lack the knowledge identified in the above model. It is the reason that the transferring or borrowing of these aspects has been conducted without a comprehensive analysis of how it will work in the new context. This trend might be the reason causing poor policy/practice/approach adoption as well as its implementation. This is to clarify that the learner centered approach has been affected in this way.

2. Conclusion

Learner centered approach is one of the most popular and promising approach that has been establishing and applying in various educational contexts. The characteristics guiding this approach have discovered to improve the teaching, learning, and performance of the students. The approach enhances the learning process and improves the students' understanding. It develops students' knowledge, skills, and competences that enable them to succeed appropriately. The execution of the learner centered approach has been reported to encounter various challenges, misconceptions and cultural influences that affect its implementation. By referring to the foregoing situation, all educational stakeholders are advised to create and develop strategies and techniques that will provide a supportive and effective environment for the implementation of the learner centered approach. The education system should be improved successfully and achieve educational objectives. In connection to that, the educational stakeholders have to modify their thinking, beliefs, and practices to improve the educational provision.

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