

Current Status and Problems of Learner-centered Lessons in Malawi

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Abstract

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All was held in Thailand, and Education for All (EFA) was adopted. Since then, global efforts have been made to provide basic education to all children. In response to these global efforts, several countries in sub-Saharan Africa have implemented free primary education since the mid-1990s. As a result, enrollment in primary education has increased dramatically, and currently, the emphasis is on expanding the "quantity" of education. However, state policies resulted in a rapid increase in the number of learners, and that rather caused a decline in the quality of education. The result is that learners are not getting even the basic skills they need to succeed. This situation is particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa compared to other regions. In Malawi, which is located in this region of sub-Saharan Africa, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology reformed the primary teacher education curriculum from teacher-centered to learner-centered in 2008 to improve the quality of primary education; however, most classes are still teacher-led (e.g. Chiphiko & Shawa, 2014). There are some studies that approached such problems. For example, Metto and Makewa (2014) sought to uncover the factors that hindered the learner-centered approach. Nonaka (2014) tried to find existing conditions and challenges of learner-centered lesson in mathematics at basic education level in Zambia. In this study, the authors aim to identify the current status and challenges of learner-centered classes in Malawi.

One of the authors has been volunteering at an elementary school in Malawi with Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) since August 2021. She serves as a math teacher in a rural elementary school to improve the quality of education; hence, she monitored the classes of local teachers for six months and conducted some activities with local teachers to enhance the learner-centered approach.

One of the authors works in a public elementary school with about 3,000 children in northern Malawi. There are about 50 teachers and staff. Here, students in grades one through eight are learning. There are not enough desks and chairs, and there is no electricity in the classrooms. At times there are more than 100 learners in the classrooms. There are few practical classes and only a few learners have textbooks. The only things available in class are blackboard and chalk; there is only one teacher for every 100 students. Because there are too many learners and not enough classrooms, the school divides the students into morning and afternoon classes. Local teachers spend approximately three hours a day teaching classes in this situation. One of the authors taught sixth-grade math every day, and also observed social studies and religion classes at the same grade level every day. She also accepted questions from her students whenever they had any questions about her classes. She interviewed a local teacher who is working with her. In the interview, the teacher said that she prefers classes in which learners explain and express their thoughts, rather than teachers only explaining. The author also participated in an opportunity to observe an educational trainee's class. He was teaching a class with group activities and learner opinions reflected in the class. All of the above showed that some teachers understand that learner-centered classes are the better way to teach. In reality, however, most classes

are teacher-led. Because the teachers themselves have been in teacher-led classes, most teachers have not experienced what learner-centered classes are really like. Therefore, they do not understand what kind of classes can be learner-centered, and they do not understand how to do it. In addition, teachers do not have the time or space to prepare for classes. For this reason, most teachers teach classes without preparation. Therefore, one of authors repeatedly demonstrated classes that would allow more learners to participate. The only learners who spoke up in the lessons were those who understood quickly. Therefore, she created many opportunities for more learners to speak up in classes. She also felt that the textbooks were too difficult for the learners. Hence, she started with examples that were appropriate for their level and tried to increase the number of learners who could participate in the lessons. She also tried to stay close to the learners as much as possible to monitor their progress and directly taught those who did not understand. As a result, learners began to ask questions and raise their hands to speak. The local teachers, seeing her classes, have also begun to gradually change, such as increasing the time for one-on-one tutoring.

The current educational situation in Malawi is very hard. It is difficult to conduct learner-centered classes as is done in Japan. Classes in which learners discuss and present their ideas to each other are difficult here. However, even without something special, the authors believe it is possible to create classes in which learners participate by devising new teaching methods and utilizing what is available here. They are receptive to the ideas of our volunteers from abroad. They are willing to accept and try to utilize what is good. It is true that there are only a few things that can be used in class, but some teachers are trying to improve their classes by using the things that are available to them. And the learners are very proactive and active in learning in such an educational situation. By considering what is the best learning style for the learners and how to make the learning process fit the circumstances of each country, the authors believe that they can make classes learner-centered in Malawi. The authors would like to continue working with local teachers to create classes that allow learners to learn more independently.

Keywords: Teacher-centered, Learner-centered, Mathematics Education, Sub-Saharan Africa

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