

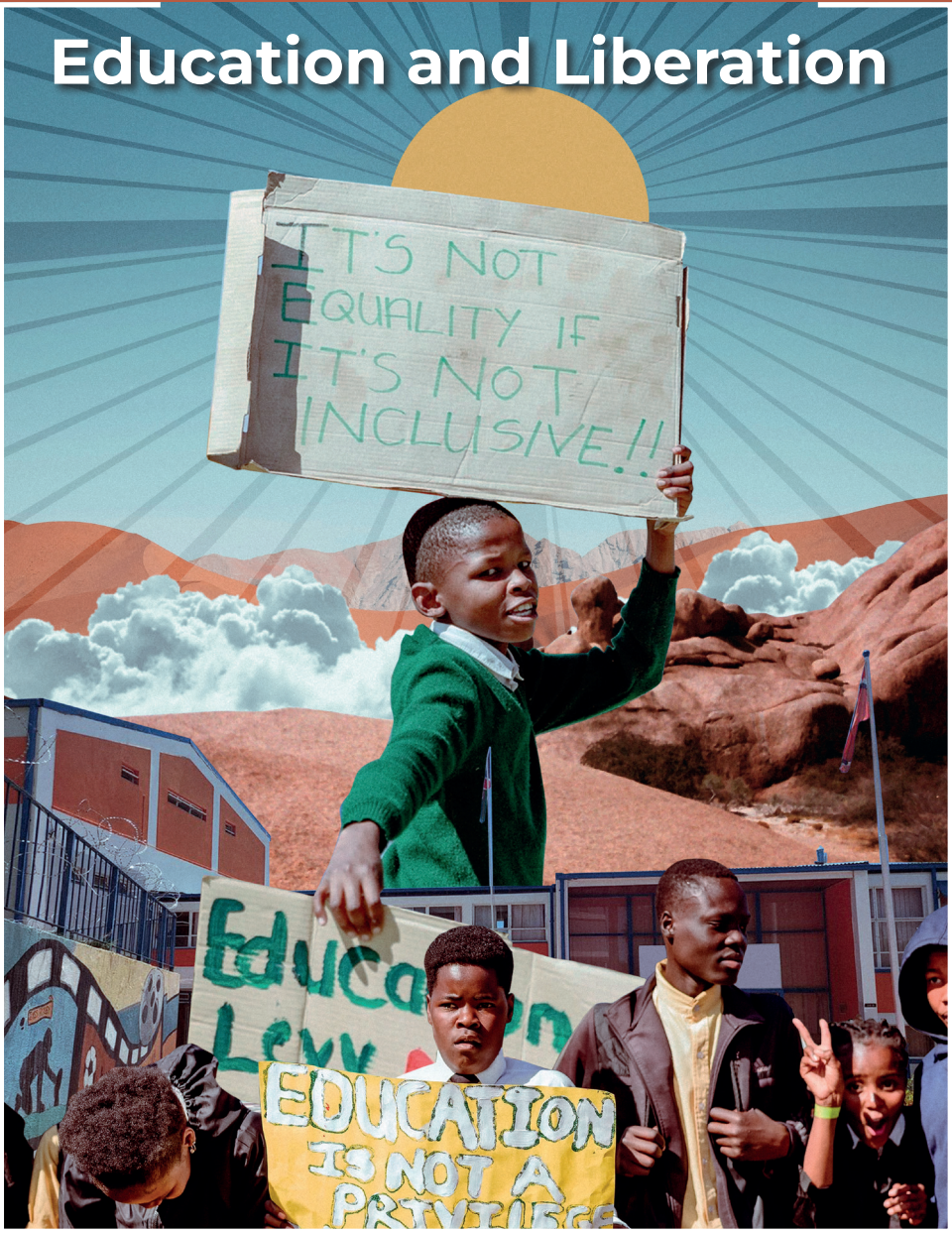
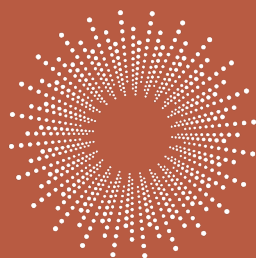


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Epistemological Access at the Institutions of Teacher Education

Fares Amweenye, Sakaria M. Ipinge & Elizabeth Ngololo

Abstract:

Constructivist epistemology has been adopted to underpin the Namibian education system at all levels of schooling since independence in 1990. This article explores how constructivist pedagogy is accessed and applied in teacher education by locating the understanding and position accorded to it in informing teaching-learning, and the resource grounds committed to enable its application.

Drawing on English language education students' lived academic experiences of its implementation, the study used a qualitative case study through interviews in order to determine its accessibility.

Bernstein's theory of pedagogical discourse and practice offered a framework for analysing the application and outcomes of the study. At the



Namibia adopted learner-centred education after Independence. This photo was taken at the Otjivero Primary School. Source: Dirk Haarmann

description level, the study unearthed a move towards constructivist learning and its basic perspectives, through which individual students could be said to be better grounded in it by becoming active participants in the instructional process. There appeared to be weakly framed rules over selection, sequence, pace and evaluative criteria which could be understood to be placing students on centre stage, and signified educators as learning mediators. Contrary to that, the implementation level turned didactical practices into educator-centeredness, dislodging students from the centre of education to the edge, where passivity and behaviourism are perpetuated. While this could be interpreted as displaying teacher educators' empowerment in the pedagogical encounter, they too are incapacitated in terms of instructional methods aligned with constructivism.

While there appears to be a high level of student enrolment, and therefore a high level of physical access to education, the study found epistemological access to be less prioritised, or not explicitly advocated. This was further constrained by the contextual factors not being made into the enabling grounds that are necessary for epistemology's effective application. As implied, a need exists to reconsider the state of theorising within teacher education and revamp the current position through concerted efforts to address the constraining contexts impacting accessibility.

Keywords: constructivism, epistemology, epistemological access, formal access, social justice education, classification, framing

Introduction

Tapping into the academic experiences and views of student teachers at a teacher education campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM) in 2023, the study explores the state of the constructivist epistemology and how it is accessed (or not). An epistemology always plays a pivotal role in any teacher education programme, informing, amongst others, the knowledge perspectives prospective teachers should be equipped with, and the teaching methods necessary to facilitate teaching-learning, as well as the assessment approaches for judging the exit learning outcomes. Thus, epistemology is a fundamental belief system upon which decisions of educational significance are centred; it further sheds light on the education that is envisioned, particularly the desirable competencies for preparing future teachers, and the kind of citizenry or labour force a country wishes to have for its future in the quest for meeting socioeconomic development goals.

As countries worldwide have adopted particular epistemologies to underlie their educational systems, likewise Namibia at independence, as a part of her education reform

process, embraced constructivism popularly referred to as learner-centred education (LCE) to underpin educational practices (Ministry of Education & Culture [MEC], 1993). LCE was first initiated at the former colleges of education which in early 2011 were merged with the University of Namibia (UNAM). Since then, how constructivist education has fared requires our closer attention as little or no research has been conducted into this issue. Are students continuing to be trained with the underlying epistemology and equipped to apply it after graduation? Or broadly, is constructivism accessible as a pedagogical approach for preparing prospective teachers for classroom teaching?

This investigation is appropriate in the realm of education for social justice. In the context of educational reform, constructivism has been focused on attaining the goals of education for all: access, equity, quality and democracy (MEC, 1993). Similarly, the field of social justice education is aligned with similar issues, such as pursuing the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (Bell, 1997; Picower, 2012). Social justice education envisions a just society that features the equal distribution of resources and opportunities, and in which all members are physically and

psychologically safe and secure (ibid.) consistent with the goals of education for all. In school, social justice education implies delivering education that enables students to develop their full potentials and capacities and to capably interact with others (Bell, 1997). Social justice education seems directly related to a critical version of constructivism that probes the issues of equity, access, power, inclusivity, participation, liberation and empowerment, and would hastily critique how students are taught, including the issue of a curriculum philosophy's relevance and application (Picower, 2012; Bell, 1997). These are examined since their practices can be oppressive (restrictive), particularly within a belief that "practice is always shaped by theory, whether formal or informal, tacit or expressed. ... Theory and practice are intertwining parts of the interactive and historical process" (Bell, 1997, p.4). Hence, this article is designed to unearth the interrelated issues of programme epistemology, the position accorded to it to steer educational practices, and the degree to which it is accessed or not.

Epistemology and the concept of educational access

Epistemology, in the study of educational philosophy, deals with the nature, origin and human limits of knowing, and raises questions of

knowledge development. It is often regarded as *the theory of knowledge* for its focus on this very endeavour (Cobern, 1993, p.2). As stated above, it serves as a fundamental belief system upon which instructional practices and decisions are based. The teachers' theoretical views about how students learn would influence how they would teach, i.e., the methodological choices (Prawat 1992). The adopted epistemology impacts interrelated aspects such as the essence of quality education in the country's education sector and its objectives; the teaching approaches necessary to mediate the envisioned education; and the positions and roles various education partners assume in the education context and the social relationships to prevail amongst them. Epistemology further suggests the sort of educational leadership to be exercised to enhance envisaged learning, and what assessment orientation to adopt to determine the achievement of learning outcomes. An education system and its curricula are considered effective if their epistemological base is accessed, i.e., if students are fully acquainted with its theoretical knowledge and practices.

Conversely, access to an epistemology can be sensed in the teaching-learning process by viewing the perspectives or outcomes advocated and practiced. In Namibia, the goal of access implies according all students equal

opportunities to succeed by expanding and availing sufficient resources, facilities and amenities necessary for their academic growth and development. It bears a commitment to equitably provide quality education to all, regardless of their background or cognitive ability, and to undo the social inequality and imbalances of the colonial past (MEC, 1993). This addresses students' constitutional rights to education and is found to gain momentum with the formulation and embracing of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, with specific reference to universal primary education or universal basic education (Nakabugo, 2008; Vavrus et al., 2011).

There are two dimensions of access: formal and epistemological. Formal access can be attained by increasing the number of the educational institutions to ensure there are enough classrooms to accommodate most students. The institutions are located where they are most needed and are adequately stocked with resources and facilities, with sufficient qualified teachers being produced to staff them (MEC, 1993). In this regard, access outwardly seeks to ensure that basic schools are staffed by well-grounded teachers who are able to carry out the entrusted tasks, so that quality education is delivered. Hence, the access goal is intertwined with pursuing quality education delivery, since competent professional teachers,

armed with adequate educational resources, are expected to carry out effective teaching. This demonstrates the physical dimension of access that ensures that a higher proportion of the student population is enrolled in the schools and is satisfied by meeting the resource needs of the institutions (Morrow, 2007).

At the second level, access to education “means more than simply physical access to schooling or placing more learners into schools” (Nyambe, 2008, p.24). This leads to the second meaning and dimension of access, namely epistemological access, which is present when the curriculum and its educational objectives in practice, rather than in theory, are attained, or the intended learning is practically accessible. Epistemological access is about “the concept of teaching” or “the expected education” (Morrow, 2007, p.18, 19) and is oftentimes denoted as theoretical or philosophical access. This access underlies what the institutions of learning are concerned with: “it is the business of the institutions of learning and teaching ... it is what the game is about” (Morrow, 2007, p.2). And thus, teaching must be seen as a practice of enabling epistemological access (Morrow, 2007, p.2).

In a university setting, epistemological access is the kind of access preoccupied with equipping students with the

kinds of things universities teach and distribute, both theoretically and practically. The *Towards Education for All* policy (MEC, 1993, p. 34) states: “We must also acknowledge schools themselves can be barriers to learning. Rote memorisation and repetition can stifle curiosity.” Thus, an inquiry into epistemological access to education assesses if the teaching practices in question enabled the expected learning, including the interpretation of quality education (Vavrus et al., 2011). In the context of this study, it means whether constructivism actually occurs.

According to Morrow (2007), the two dimensions are intertwined, and impact each other. An achievement in formal access can influence attainment at the level of epistemological access. A well-resourced setting tends to offer teaching that corresponds with an informing theory, which can lead to the successful attainment of the curriculum, and fosters sufficient epistemological accessibility. However, a non-conducive environment with meagre resources, large class sizes and a high student-to-teacher ratio leads to inferior education. In the context of higher education, the provision of quality education is sacrificed if classes are too large, resulting in standards being lowered. Thus, the two forms of access can be “in direct conflict with each other, [since] the more we satisfy the former, the less we can satisfy the

latter ... to pursue the former is to betray the latter” (Morrow, 2007, p.19). This situation arises when governments become more concerned with and committed to physical access to schooling, while insufficient attention is paid to whether the expected education actually occurs.

The epistemological perspectives of constructivist education

Derived from the works of educational psychologists and theorists such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget and Levy Vygotsky, constructivist learning is, firstly, an active process in which students learn by constructing new ideas and building new schemas based upon their background knowledge and life experiences (Vavrus et al., 2011). Learning is impacted by the cultural, economic and social contexts of the learner’s lives, and plays a vital role in dictating the sorts of information students learn and the cognitive processes they use to build and use schemas (Cobern, 1993; Windschitl, 1999; Pagan, 2006).

The contextual elements thus serve as the point of departure into new learning. The process features closer social collaboration, cooperation, interchange and reflection, and as students interact with one another and with teachers, they develop new ideas, creating a universe of discourse,

a common frame of reference in which communication takes place (Cobern, 1993, Windschitl, 1999). “Students are knowing beings who construct knowledge that is personally meaningful as opposed to the empty containers to be filled with knowledge constructed by others” (Cobern, 1993, p.2). Learning involves mediating conceptual understanding and the creation of meaning from multiple schools of thoughts and perspectives (Windschitl, 1999).

Secondly, constructivism places students at the centre of education where they assume a much more active role. This perspective posits a high student activity level, and corresponding instructional methods should reflect this level (Pagan, 2006). It calls for active participation, deeper engagement, and discussion amongst learners over issues arising from the lesson. Pagan (2006) alluded to serious class discussions that involve students talking about the subject and arriving at their own conclusions. The responses do not matter as much as the ways in which they arrived at and defended. The discussions, as an engagement effort, should promote deep and scientific reasoning rather than a simple, mundane exchange between the educators and students. Herein students recognise problems, formulate hypotheses, construct mental models, research and test their hypothesis, adjust their

mental models and reach conclusions with minimal guidance from educators. The application and synthesis, problem solving, analytical and critical-independent reasoning, student argumentation and evaluation are the skills nourished. The implied skills symbolise the meaning of the quality education and its standards that the country seeks in its education system (Vavrus et al., 2011). Placing students at the centre of education demands a lot more from the educator, beyond integrating their prior knowledge and life experience into the curriculum. It suggests considering their intellectual abilities, needs and interests to determine content, organisation and progression of the teaching-learning processes in contrast to teaching predetermined by the requirements of syllabus/curriculum and performance in examinations (MEC, 1993).

Thirdly, the educator is a mediator of learning who acts at the interface between curriculum and students to bring the two together in a way that is meaningful for the students (Cobern, 1993). An educator creates appropriate conditions that are indispensable for learning facilitation, and is regarded as an enabler or a scaffolder who provides leadership that assists students to develop effective course goals and work together to accomplish them (Pagan, 2006). The educator keeps students on track,

guiding and monitoring them towards the accomplishment of course goals. The educator thus selects instructional approaches and strategies that are in line with the pedagogy's viewpoints. Furthermore, constructivism calls for a flexible educator with adequate subject content knowledge, and understanding of and familiarity with the principles underlying the topics of study, and the variety of ways in which these principles can be explored. There is thus a greater demand on teachers' pedagogical skills. Windschitl (1999) uses terminology such as 'scaffolding', 'modelling', 'coaching', 'guiding' and 'advising' to describe an educator's range of instructional skills.

Fourthly, since assessment is integrated within the teaching-learning process, it plays a new role that is different from that played in traditional, behaviouristically informed education. Constructivism advocates diverse types and tools of assessment that allow students to demonstrate what they know, and that connect with rigorous criteria of excellence (Windschitl, 1999). The sets of criteria are negotiated and agreed upon with the students for them to understand the purposes of learning. Students produce journals, research reports, physical models or performance in the forms of plays, debates, dances or other artistic representations (Windschitl, 1999). The assessment is grounded in the conceptual framework

that *assessment and instruction are inseparable* (Gipps, 1996; Shepard, 2000; Wilmot, 2001), and its activities reflect the expected processes and abilities: “Good assessment models the real learning activities that we wish students to engage with and [the] teacher to teach” (Gipps, 1996, p.11). Hence being integrated with instruction, assessment is “moved into the middle of the teaching and learning process instead of being postponed as only the end-point of instruction” (Shepard, 2000, p.10).

Lastly, assessment pursues *higher order skills* or *higher-level activities*, and the emphasis is on devising more open-ended performance activities that challenge students to reason critically, to solve complex problems, and to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts (MEC, 1993; Gipps, 1996; Shepard, 2000). These norms/values are antithetical to the externally set examination practices as the only measure of student progress, and are distant from the traditional assessment practices linked to the recall of disconnected bits of information or rote learning which enforces *shallow learning*, instead of *deep learning* (Gipps, 1996).

The foregoing are thus some of the key principles of constructivist epistemology, and are crucial in analysing how it is practiced in the classroom.

Research methodology

An interpretive worldview was selected to lead the study. It is defined as “systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (Neuman, 2011, pp. 101–102). This worldview attempts to establish an empathetic understanding of the everyday lived experiences of people in specific historical settings (Neuman, 2011). The social human action is studied since it reveals personal motives that shape a person’s internal feelings and guide decisions to act in particular ways (Neuman, 2011). It is further based on the view that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspectives of those enmeshed within it; hence understanding is inseparable from the human condition (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Interpretivism asserts *understanding, interpretation* and *social meaning*, in that meaning is constructed via the interaction between humans, or between humans and objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

We then viewed the subjective meanings and understandings students constructed and assigned them to the implementation of an epistemology based on their personal academic experiences using interactive semi-

structured face-to-face interviews. These tools constituted the means by which we immersed ourselves in the field of objects and participants.

A case study typology was selected as an appropriate choice for this research, for it is naturally linked to the interpretive worldview concerning establishing meaning and understanding of the situation. A case study is an inquiry that investigates the singular, the particular and the unique contemporary phenomenon (Rule & John, 2015, p.3). It seeks an in-depth analysis of a contemporary real-life problem bounded by specific contexts of time and place from multiple sources of data, using a variety of methods to arrive at a rich description and the complexities surrounding it (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Its findings may not be generalised to other situations unless they share close characteristics. However, on the view that the particular encapsulates the universal, the particularity of the case has the potential to reveal a universal truth: the *One* is present in the *one*, and may be recognised through careful and sensitive research that can reveal essential truths about the human condition (Rule & John, 2015). Thus, according to Rule and John (2015, p. 3) an epistemology of generating universal truths and insights from the particular arises from the ontology of a case study. Therefore, while the case is a study of particularisation more than

generalisation, it has the potential to produce exemplary knowledge which requires the exercise of contextual discernment as to its local applicability (Rule & John, 2015). Embracing this stance, this study's findings will have the potential to reflect what may also exist at other teacher education institutions, and not only what transpires in the researched setting.

Bernstein's Theory of Pedagogical Discourse and Practice: An Analytical Framework for Curriculum Application

Basil Bernstein's theory of pedagogical discourse and practices dwells on how curriculum knowledge is transmitted by viewing the dynamics of its various curricular contents and student-teacher relationships, using the concepts of classification and framing. Classification is the degree of boundaries among different subject areas of knowledge within a curriculum. A strong classification suggests clear or rigid boundaries between subjects, whereas a weak classification presents blurred or integrated boundaries. A strong classification is evident in a traditional curriculum where subjects are taught in isolation, while a weak classification appears in a more interdisciplinary approach, where subjects are integrated.

Contrarily, framing is concerned with the transmission of curriculum

knowledge through pedagogical practices (Hoadley, 2012). Thus, in the schooling context, framing refers to the degree of control teachers and students exercise over the selection, sequencing, pacing, evaluative criteria and hierarchical rules of the knowledge transferred and received in the pedagogical relationship (ibid.). A strong framing implies a higher degree of control exerted by the teacher, while a weak framing implies more student freedom and choice over what is learned. On the accounts of Hoadley (2012) and Bernstein (1996), *selection* entails deciding on valid knowledge to be taught; who selects the learning contents, which contents are selected and in whose interests. Relatedly, *sequence* is deciding about the organisation in which knowledge is presented and the logic behind such order. *Pacing* is the rate of expected acquisition of learning and who decides it. The *evaluation* involves deciding what counts as relevant knowledge and is sought through assessment. The *hierarchical rules* pinpoint to the kind of social relations maintained in the classroom between teacher and students regarding control and authority (Bernstein, 1996). Is the teacher more dominant, more controlling and authoritarian, or do the students interact more freely and relate more personally to the teacher? A strong framing indicates a dominant teacher who asserts more control and authoritarian rule over the learning

aspects, whereas a weak framing signifies greater student freedom, rights and flexibility. A weakly framed pedagogy corresponds with an integrated type of curriculum (a constructivist one), while a strong one with a collection curriculum corresponds with a behaviourist one.

The classification and framing rules can be *visible* or *invisible*. *Visible* indicates strong classification and strong framing, whereas *invisible* implies weak classification and weak framing. The rules also point to whether the curriculum is a *collection* or *integrated*, with each fostering a different kind of classification and framing regarding organisation and transmission of learning (Bernstein, 1996; Hoadley, 2012). A collection curriculum's contents stand in a *closed relation* to one another, being clearly bounded, and lean towards maximal teacher control (Bernstein, 2002), and thus being teacher-centred. Teaching tends to be rigid, differentiating and hierarchical in character, and within prescribed limits, the teacher can go their own way, relying on stricter teacher authority and control. This curriculum type is also examination-driven, with stress on a strong mastery of content, and is fixed in terms of interpretation and delivery (Bernstein, 2002).

The contents of the *integrated curriculum* stand in an *open relation* to

one another. It is un-fixed in terms of timeframe and contents, and various content units are all-encompassing and subordinate to some ideas that reduce their isolation. The relation of different set of contents is also informed by more general principles rather than principles drawn from the particular subjects being taught (Bernstein, 2002). It is likely to bring about a pedagogy that emphasises *ways of knowing* rather than *states of knowledge*. The integrated curriculum resonates with a constructivism that enhances reasoning and reinforces cooperative kinds of teaching and interactive “horizontal relationships” between educators and students (Bernstein, 2002, p. 104; Hoadley, 2012). In terms of authority and control, it fosters students’ status, freedom and rights in learning, offering a considerable degree of flexibility, and responds to their emerging educational needs.

This framework was used to examine a number of aspects relating to epistemology and its perspectives: what occupies the centre of education; the student-educator interactions; whether how the epistemology is practised suggests an open or closed system or fixed agenda views of curriculum, and if the nature of learning is cyclical, with intersecting foci and related webs of multiple meanings that enable students to explore the myriad of connections (Prawat, 1992; Doll, 1993). It also examines whether educators structure

the instructional discourses in an interactive approach in which planning is a conjoint activity between them and the students, and how educators have been responsive to the students’ search for meaning (Doll, 1993). It looks at whether planning of learning is developmental, taking advantage of the unexpected and geared towards the need for individuality, or if the curriculum has become solely pre-determined, pre-planned, pre-defined, fostering reductionist learning (Cornbleth, 1987).

The State of a Constructivist Learning in Theory and Practice: The Findings

Interviews with 11 students were used to generate data. The interview questions were divided into four categories: questions requiring students to identify a particular epistemology advocated in their training; their understanding of the epistemology and its meaning; the instructional methods used to mediate learning, including assessment approaches used and modelled into them; and educational resources availed for their learning. The responses to the questions would subsequently assist in locating an epistemology underlying the programme, the grounds established to enable its application; the status/priority accorded it in informing practices, and the kind of access suggested.

The pedagogy of education in teacher education

Students were requested to indicate the official theory advocated and informing their learning of the English modules over their four-year stay at the campus, and which must be applied in Namibian schools. The individual students cited divergent theories, rather than a single, common theory. There were those who made passing reference to LCE or constructivism, but some seemed to confuse LCE with other educational philosophies they had encountered, such as positivism, idealism, cognitivism, pragmatism and thematic approach as the pedagogies guiding the teaching of the English curriculum. Others mentioned LCE as teaching based on subject-syllabus content and objectives or prediction. Thus, some students faced a challenge in distinguishing LCE/constructivism from the educational philosophies mentioned above. Others claimed LCE and TCE (teacher-centred education) to be the legitimate approaches.

At an individual level, students failed to offer a full description of what LCE is, providing only the little gist of it. Regardless of the theory, however, each student responded, and even when they misunderstood LCE, when probed and prompted further, despite some answers missing the point, most tended to suggest at least an unstable grip of perspectives closely corresponding

with a social constructivist approach. But as indicated, this came about when the students were prompted, and not all students could immediately describe the elements of LCE. Students appeared to possess general knowledge and an understanding, though unstable, of LCE/constructivism at an elementary level, suggesting the potential for growth and further development. Students also appeared to have LCE backgrounds from their high schools, but could not relate much of it from the education reform process context in which it has been embedded. They also indicated that they were not directly taught about LCE, but had touched on some of its points in their education journeys. Therefore, regardless of the pedagogy each student initially mentioned, when probed further their answers would reference LCE, though with little detail, suggesting a narrow or shallow level of understanding. This tends to suggest that constructivism has not been unequivocally advocated or embraced.

Students' understanding of an informing LCE epistemology

The second set of questions looked into students' conceptual understanding of LCE through their descriptions of its basic tenets. In summary, they described LCE as an approach in which learners "must be considered not as empty vessels ...

but as people with minds, people who can think”. LCE takes place when “the learners are the most participating in the discussions, participating in the classroom activities ... being at the centre of learning”.

[Learners are] the ones spearheading the process instead of the teacher telling them what to do. They are prompted by themselves, have courage to do things by themselves and then the teacher comes in to correct a few things here and there but not from the point of reprimanding when telling what you did here is wrong. ...is when they take charge of their own learning. (Informant A)

Informant A described LCE as a theory that recognises learners’ knowledge and understanding acquired prior to entering school, and continued:

... Learners are responsible for their own learning and ... ask questions, ... predict about the things ... a teacher is the facilitator, [who] encourages learners to engage in collaborative activities, to help one another, give own ideas, work in pairs/groups to their own knowledge ... [a teacher] gives knowledge to the learners.

According to Informant B, learners are the ones who are supposed to be

learning, and not the teacher: “The teacher facilitates, learners learn more when they are involved instead of when just told what to do.”

[LCE takes] the needs of learners into consideration and ... knowledge background and ... making the learners to collaborate with each other during the lessons. ... Those techniques that are used for learning should consider what learners know and not what they do not know ... Assessment that they are setting should include ... what learners know in the lessons. (Informant C)

[LCE is] the learning that takes place in class ... mostly based on learners ... learners are at the centre of learning. And this actually means that learners are free to express their feelings in the classroom ... give their opinions on certain topics ... And their learning would become more easy... and fun to them ... They would be taking place in the learning process rather than the teacher going in front of the class and teach. (Informant D)

[LCE is] education ... based on what learners know from the environment where learners are growing. They have to know those things. When you are teaching, you have to come up with the priorities of the learners. What is that learners really know?

...You have to look at their ages. Whatever you have to teach, you have to make sure that it is based on the learners. You cannot teach someone the things like at the university but you are teaching it like at the primary school level. So, you have to look at the ages of the learners and ... use materials that are appropriate. ...you also have to move from the simple method or what the learners know to the more difficult... Look at what the learners know to some of the things for the learners, from the simple ways to the more difficult. You have also to look at the culture ... because sometimes you cannot just do whatever since you are working with the learners and maybe somewhere somehow you are devaluating or devaluing their culture. So, you have to learn their culture first, when you are teaching them you are working hand in hand with their culture. (Informant E)

One of the things that differentiates pragmatism from others like teacher-centred education is that pragmatism involves all aspects like learners and teachers. It involves them together whereby the teacher and learners have to interact with one another. ...learn from one another ... do things together. That differentiates pragmatism. It is mostly different from other theories of education because there

is learning together of teachers and learners. (Informant F)

But why was the theory introduced?

[Theory] was introduced to help learners to participate in the teaching and learning process, not only the teacher, to participate in the activities, to indicate their prior knowledge of the content they have been taught and to express their feelings on how they are being taught in the class and to let [them] acquire basic skills. (Informant E)

The students' responses cumulatively defined LCE/constructivism in terms of participation, collaboration, and free expressions in which learners and their needs are at the centre of education. Learners are valued as opposed to empty containers, studying and being responsible for their own learning, with their prior learning and background knowledge being points of departure into new learning. They emphasised the transition from the known to the unknown, and the importance of encouragement to enquire and consideration being given to the ages and cultures of learners. The teacher is seen as a facilitator who uses assessment that enhances positive achievement and group knowledge, and who understands group/pair work as being an instructional method for facilitating interactive learning. Their descriptions are consistent with

an LCE-based understanding of the roles of students and teachers, which is very positive indication. The responses exclude the views such as learning with understanding and meaning making, problem solving and critical reasoning, reflection, student-teacher relations in the power-control context, and less touched-upon issues. Overall, the answers illustrate that students have fair, if incomplete, general knowledge and understanding of the informing LCE epistemology that forms a basis for further development.

Lesson facilitation: Teaching methods and strategies modelled

The next category of questions solicited views based on their observations on the instructional methods and strategies educators use to facilitate learning. Whenever asked to mention the general teaching methods that they were taught, students often appeared to be hesitant and uncertain. The students mentioned asking questions and soliciting comments, PowerPoint presentations, individual/pair/group work, group assignments and research, group lesson plans, participation, memorisation and collaboration, student presentations, teacher presentations, inductive and deductive methods, collaborative learning methods, active methods, micro-teaching/lesson presentation, LCE and teacher-centred

education, storytelling, posters with pictures, the use of textbooks or slides, role play, quizzes and puzzles, discussions, demonstrations, lectures, and mapping.

Lecturing through question-answer techniques and group work emerged as the dominant teaching methods. Though only one student explicitly mentioned lecturing, it was implied by question-and-answer techniques being used for learning and to elicit responses and comments from students. This was seen to be a means of investigating students' prior knowledge and experiences for the purposes of new learning, and of strengthening participation. But active participation could not take place as claimed: "The class size does not really allow us to participate in a class; only a few can participate because we are many" (Informant A).

They try their best to involve us, but again the number of the students. But in as much as they want to participate, they could ask questions but none would answer it. None would want to answer; everyone thinks it is a big group, why should I answer? They did really try to make it learner-centred but the student number has made it hard" (Informant G).

The larger class size was a challenge for active student participation and

interactive learning, and also restricted closer student-educator interactions, so that many students remained unknown to their lecturers:

You find that you can go through the whole of four years at the university, and your lecturer would never know your name because you are too many and also because you are discouraged to engage because you are too many. The thing is when less people are in your class you are able to talk. But where there are more people in the room, you shy away from voicing your opinions. (Informant G).

The students also referred to PowerPoint presentations since most of the lessons at the campus are presented electronically, with lecturers using such presentations. Lecturers supported active participation through the question-and-answer method by posing numerous questions to elicit responses on what students had been taught. The *demonstration method* was also used, as Informant F indicated, but the rest of students were unaware of this method.

The second preferred method appeared to be *group work*. The group method is used in various ways, as emerged from the responses. It extended to outside learning activities, assignments, presentations, research

projects and lesson planning or micro-teaching through which students share their contributions. To reiterate, it features efforts to foster cooperative and interactive learning among the students. It can also be regarded as a mechanism for coping with larger classes and mitigating educators' marking heavy loads. However, its effectiveness and efficiency were questioned. Lecturers would set group activities, "but sometimes not all of us really participate in the groups, for example you can get a group assignment of 10 people, but only five people contribute" (Informant A).

Some students just let others do the activities, they do not participate. They just let others do the activities for them ... you do not want to be seen as bad [so] we just also include them in the assignments, sometimes we [write their names on the scripts]. (Informant B)

There is not much *pair* or *individual work*. The individual work is rarely used except when writing tests. This context of its utilisation cannot be considered an instructional method since it does not involve actual teaching. The *discussion method* seems to refer to small group discussions when students work in teams, rather than the whole class being involved in a discussion. Again, discussions could not succeed due to the large classes.

The students' responses also revealed knowledge gaps, and some students did not know what teaching methods are. They were confused regarding what constitutes a teaching method, a teaching strategy, and communication tools, for example whether prior learning or the thematic approach are teaching methods or strategies. Some could not distinguish teaching methods from teaching approaches and overreaching pedagogical approaches: LCE, teacher-centred education, cooperative approach, participation, collaboration, memorisation, active method, and mapping were all regarded by some as methods of teaching. Some students also mentioned inductive and deductive methods, among others, but other students did not understand these terms at all.

The students' responses did not mention methods that are more applicable to English teaching, such as *debates, dialogues, whole class discussions, role playing, guest speakers, narration, interviews, storytelling and drama*. Thus, there is a severe lack of generic didactics applicable to the teaching of English. No students (except Informant F) had a full understanding of *lecturing*, which is frequently used at institutions of higher learning as a teaching method. Reference was also made by Informant H to *quizzes, puzzles, posters with pictures and use of textbooks or slides* as teaching methods,

which implied incomplete knowledge of what constitutes a method. The responses did not reveal students being actively engaged in extensive and intensive tasks that require critical and analytical investigation and interpretation, like reading texts/articles/literature and making presentations or writing about they have read. In practice, they thus do not reveal cyclical, non-linear, open and interactional learning in which students are deeply engaged in establishing even multiple meanings of learning topics, which is incompatible with the basic principles of constructivist education.

Placing students at the centre of teaching and learning

Placing students at the centre of education is another key constructivist principle that involves creating sensible opportunities for students to actively interact and engage in knowledge creation (Prawat, 1992). It implies considering students' life experiences, views, needs, interests, and pace of learning to determine content, organisation, and progression of the teaching-learning process, including individual attention (Kristensen, 1999; Storeng, 2002). At this juncture, we examine active participation in learning, learning with understanding and meaning, responsibility for and ownership of learning, and development of problem-solving skills and critical, independent reasoning

abilities. As before, active participation was sought through class presentations and lecturers asking questions, probing their prior knowledge. Some students linked critical thinking to being expected to act independently and solve problems, for example when doing assignments or managing their own study timetables. The responses revealed simplistic, shallow and narrow levels and means by which the core skills are developed, and not any deeper involvement or exploration.

Another way of examining the centre of education is to focus on the *student and learning content dichotomy*. Is it the students or the learning content that occupies the centre? The students found the content being more emphasised than they themselves. For Informant B, focusing on content is appropriate since they would be required to apply subject matter knowledge in their own teaching, and she therefore regarded it as being important. Informant D observed: “there is not much [that is] at the centre since lecturers come to classes and do more of lecturer-centered teaching. Classes only feature student-centered education when students are doing micro-teaching.”

So, as a result of time constraints, most of the lessons were more lecturer-centred, and placing students at the centre would not have allowed for adequate coverage of the modules’

contents. According to Informant B: “... when we are in English lectures, it is more on the lecturers. They go in front, they present their lessons, and the lecturer is out and we proceed the next day until December. It is mostly teacher-centred.” These responses illustrate the linear as opposed to cyclical nature of learning, and indicate highly lecturer-driven learning.

Learning with conceptual understanding and meaning making meets a similar fate:

Lecturers tried to promote understanding by explaining and, when assessing, by looking for understanding rather than focusing on things that are memorised ... most students use their own understanding regarding the subject content since lecturers offer at least 20% or 30% of the subject content and the students have to search for 70% ... meaning that students are not [taught well] ... the lecturer is only there to lecture; it is only to give instructions or [help] the students to see [Informant F]. According to [Informant H], they are not always told everything in the class. So, they have to go out and search for more information about the topic to understand. (Informant F)

Learning with understanding and meaning-making appears to

be contradicted by the assessment questions set being objective rather than subjective. The questions tend to be short answers, multiple choices, definitions, filling in, true-false, matching, etc. The students' view of teaching and examination is that they felt compelled to memorise for examinations so that they could "get the subject out of the way".

As indicated above, *active interaction* and *collaboration* is mostly assured through group activities, by extracting students' prior knowledge and doing presentations or micro-teaching in groups. Students planned and presented lessons as groups with each member responsible for a particular component of the lesson. This occurred when they had to respond to questions that were raised, or when they raised questions or offered comments. Group learning was also extended to assignments for which group members would be assigned the same marks. Since there were so many students, lecturers could not give more individualised assignments, except on occasion to pairs of students.

Another angle from which the centre of education can be viewed is by a looking into how *students' educational needs and interests* and *the need for individual attention* are addressed. Students stated that their needs and interests were considered particularly when the majority of them performed

poorly, for example following a test, when they would be given the opportunity to redo the work. What can be derived from students' views is that educators did make some attempt to meet students' educational needs and interests, but not to a substantial degree. Students could be assisted when they approached educators as a group as opposed to individually, but in most cases only when it concerned an assessment. According to Informant G, this was because student numbers were so high, and it was rare that students' educational needs would be individually addressed.

What about receiving *individual attention and assistance*? Informant B observed that all the lecturers have consultation hours, and if students have difficulties, they can approach the lecturer for help. As indicated above, it is more feasible to acquire group assistance than individual assistance. As mentioned, individual students do not communicate their educational problems to the lecturers except when it comes to assessment matters.

[Attention is not given to] individual needs, [but to] a group, to some extent; students do not communicate their problems to the lecturers, only if an assignment is difficult or not clear, they approach lecturers as a group ... students [are not] learning at their own

pace. Learning at one's own pace at the university is closer to a myth.
(Informant G)

So, helping students individually and offering assistance remains a challenge.

Resources

The delivery of the curriculum is often tied to the learning environment and its contents (Van Harmelen, 2001). We now briefly view the grounds of the foundation laid (or not laid) to enable constructivist learning, focusing on educational resources/facilities, class size, the student-to-educator ratio, timetabling, and other factors. Constructivism demands a rich environment with a variety of resource materials available. As shown above, students view class sizes as being too large, which results in overcrowding of the available learning spaces. Some students describe Hifikepunye Pohamba Campus as the largest satellite campus, accommodating over 3,000 students each year. There are times when classes experience venue clashes, as the venues are mistakenly allocated to different student class groups at the same time. Lecture halls are often full to capacity, with some students being left outside. Students have to share seats, or sit on the floor. They expressed the need for additional learning spaces. The limited space requires some lessons to be held in the evenings. Moving around in the

classrooms during lessons is also a challenge. Teacher educators might be there lecturing, but may fail to exercise tight control and management over the classes, especially with regard to the students sitting at the back, as they tend to do their own thing, use cell phones, and make a noise, thus making it difficult for anyone to concentrate. Ensuring regular class attendance is also difficult, and establishing closer interpersonal relationships and addressing students' educational needs is well nigh impossible. Thus, educators may find it difficult to ensure adequate supervision and monitoring of every student's learning trajectory.

In terms of theory application, there are far reaching implications, most notably that active engagement diminishes. Informant A noted that the overcrowded classes do not allow for active student participation: "For English classes, the class size does not really allow us to participate in a class, only a few can participate because we are too many." This situation has also led lecturers to focus more on their presentations rather than on students: "lecturers are only focusing on presentations, not like to interact with the students, to get what they do not understand and all those questions" (Informant I); "it is a problem; students are not well groomed, well coached" (Informant F).

The poor educational resource pool is another factor that negatively impacts the delivery of the desired goals of learning. There is general agreement among the respondents that educational resources and facilities are inadequate. Students revealed that they do not receive enough learning materials for all of them. They normally expect to be offered course outlines and study guides. However, the study guides produced by the university, while they may be helpful in some cases, are not always relevant and comprehensive regarding their contents. “The materials that are provided are also not relevant ... mostly because some information is omitted. Some of the things are not there” (Informant F).

The study guides are often given in a digital format rather than as hard copies. Students can access these on the UNAM portal when they have been uploaded. Accessibility can be a worrisome factor for those students struggling to secure government funding in order to buy their own laptops. Textbooks are not always prescribed, and even when they are, they may be unavailable at the campus bookshop. To cover the module contents, educators attempt to present notes as slides. The problem with notes in the form of slides is that they do not always reflect all the contents, and may assume information and knowledge which is lacking. Students thus feel forced to go the extra mile to look for

broader information on the learning topics: “They are just short points, they are not really explaining [the topic] ... you have to go out and search for more information” (Informant B). The resultant danger is that students can be left with shallow knowledge and understanding of the learning contents when well-written resources are absent. A single period lasts for 55 minutes, and that timetabling further stifles educators’ creativity and innovation in deciding about the what, how, why, and when of teaching.

Against the background of a tripling of the student population in recent years, the responses show the campus to be overpopulated because of the large classes and high student enrolment, not only in English modules, but across the curriculum. (The student population appears to have tripled over the course of some years.) This can be understood in the context of the high demand for tertiary education and the ongoing efforts to expand access to a greater proportion of the population. This situation culminates in overcrowded classrooms, and further results in a high student-to-educator ratio. Inevitably, this trend negatively impacts the educational environment. The shortage of resources also appears to be a question of budget constraint, as larger classes are not accompanied by an expanded base of educational materials or infrastructure. Over time, efforts to improve standards

and the provision of quality education seem to be suffocated. This cause-and-effect triangle breeds a situation where students do not feel well taken care of: “Yes, it is a problem; students are not well groomed, well coached” (Informant F). The outcome is that there is physical access to schooling, but epistemological access, together with its associated views, objectives and exit learning outcomes, is not realised. One must therefore concur with Informant F’s reflection that the campus might not have been transformed into a setting that is aligned with constructivism.

Conclusion

Constructivism’s key principles and Bernstein’s theory serve as a theoretical framework for analysing the data. In this context, there is uncertainty as to whether LCE/constructivism is adequately communicated and advocated to students to inform teacher education practice. Students’ confusing of it with other educational philosophies they encountered raises concerns. They also lacked information regarding its origin and purpose, other than subverting teacher dominance in the teaching-learning process, and they failed to link it to the educational reform process within which it was adopted. This portrays a LCE pedagogy that is under-prioritised and in a fading state. This is a bleak outlook, considering that the education institutions may witness an end to LCE, raising the question of

whether LCE was actually integrated into the university teacher education. However, students’ descriptions show a general knowledge and understanding of the epistemology and some of its key perspectives. Although this understanding appears elementary, unstable and inconclusive, it suggests that there is potential for further development. It also indicates that students have LCE backgrounds from their high schools, since they indicated that they rarely touched on it at during their tertiary studies.

The level and means of implementation of the theory is of grave concern. While students offered a fair description of it, educational practices show that its theoretical perspectives are not translated into action. Many of the ideas of constructivist learning are not practically realised. For instance, there is an absence of the constructivist element of meaningful learning, through which students should assume active roles of co-constructors of knowledge as opposed to passive recipients and consumers of the knowledge products of others. The notion of teaching-learning as a social product of collaborative effort did not emerge clearly. The students appear to be poorly equipped with higher order reasoning skills, since assessment tends to lean towards objectivity that fosters rote learning. The epistemological dimension of schooling therefore remains

practically inaccessible, as students are not adequately exposed to it, which is a further betrayal of the primary goals of education for social justice.

Like the students, the educators appear to be constrained by the contexts of scarce resources/facilities, large classes, limiting timetables, high student-to-educator ratios, and other inadequate amenities. As curriculum implementers, they are restricted in the instructional methods available to them, with options in the main being restricted to group work and lecturing. They could not satisfy the students' educational needs and interests, including for individual attention and assistance. Due to the large classes, educators risk losing control over class attendance and the effective use of assessment to supervise and enhance active student learning.

With regards to Bernstein's theory, practices reflect a teacher-dominated and pre-determined collection curriculum that is strongly framed and classified. However, it also reveals educators who are disempowered and losing authority over some crucial didactical aspects. As students are dislodged from the centre stage of education to the periphery, a mechanical view of education (behaviourism) takes hold, and the preoccupation with covering module contents, observing course objectives, and meeting

assessment-examination requirements occurs at the expense of an enabling learning context for students.

To overcome these challenges, we recommend that the university management team, and in particular its education structures, take stock of the current state of LCE in the teacher education curriculum in close collaboration with basic education partners, with the National Institute for Educational Development acting as the Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture's centre for curriculum development. This would be appropriate, since the university produces teachers for basic education at schools, and they may set standards that should be met by prospective professional teachers. It would be wise to pay attention to campus capacity relative to total enrolment, and the inadequacy of educational resources/infrastructure in the face of large classes, the high student-to-educator ratio, timetable constraints, and poor overall infrastructure condition, in order to establish whether they are currently in a state to create a learning environment in which education underpinned by constructivism could thrive. We further propose that closer attention be paid to the issue and place of theory in education, and would suggest that concerted efforts be made to foreground appropriate theory in education, as the attention currently

paid appears to be trivial. We are convinced that the failure to address the issue of constructivism/LCE may bring about its fading and eventually death in Namibia's education system, since the teacher education field bears co-responsibility for its sustainability.

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