Learner-centred education (LCE) has been a recurrent theme in many national education policies in the global South, and has had wide donor support through aid programmes and smaller projects and localised innovations. However, the history of the implementation of LCE in different contexts is riddled with stories of failures grand and small. In coming to understand how LCE has been conceived, researched, and reported in relation to developing country contexts, a good starting point is the International Journal of Educational Development (IJED), where a wide range of articles on this theme has been published over the years. In all, 72 relevant articles were identified among the issues available online, comprising a weighty body of evidence concerning the nature and implementation of LCE. The vast majority are studies exploring the issues – and problems – of implementation of LCE-based programmes in particular settings. Emerging from these investigations is a variety of explanations for this perennial challenge: problems with the nature of reform and its implementation; barriers of material and human resources; interactions of divergent cultures; and the all-important questions of power and agency in the process. After a descriptive breakdown of the 72 articles, each of these implementation issues is explored in turn. The article considers the implications of this for future initiatives, research and scholarship in this area. The begged questions are: why do the same problems recur repeatedly, and how do we move beyond the normative ‘shoulds’ and the practical ‘can’ts’?
comprise a weighty body of evidence concerning the nature and implementation of LCE. We will consider the implications of this for future initiatives, research and scholarship in this area. The begged questions are: why do the same problems recur repeatedly, and how do we move beyond the normative ‘shoulds’ and the practical ‘can’ts’?

These are issues near to this author personally, as a teacher and a researcher. As a well-meaning young teacher in the 1980s and early 1990s, I practised variations of LCE in a number of international contexts, and attempted to influence others to do the same, as a mentor and a teacher educator. Later, research projects on the introduction of LCE in post-apartheid South Africa and post-Communist Russia (Schweisfurth, 2002a,b) and in The Gambia (Schweisfurth, 2002a,b, 2008), noted the patterns of implementation difficulty, even in contexts where people were ostensibly keen to use learner-centred pedagogies. And in more recent studies of international higher education students as pedagogical border-crossers (Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Gu et al., 2009), we have analysed the marked contrast in teaching environments experienced by international students studying in the UK, unaccustomed to LCE, as they navigate initial cognitive dissonance and eventual adaptation and pleasure in new ways of learning. Some of these experiences and studies have very occasionally made me query the foundations of LCE, but more profoundly, all of them have raised questions about where and how it is best implemented. The studies surveyed here reinforce these questions.

1. The articles

As the reference list will indicate, not all of the articles addressed questions of LCE directly; however, they were all relevant to the theme. Few therefore define LCE explicitly or concisely. The articles do share a concern for the pedagogical assessment, or curricular implications of change away from ‘teacher centred’, ‘didactic’, ‘frontal’, ‘chalk and talk’ teaching focused on rote learning. Some of the studies based in schools refer to ‘child-centred learning’ (a very close but slightly different tradition), while others refer more generally to ‘constructivist’ or ‘progressivist’ principles or other related but more specific terms in local use, such as ‘outcomes-based education’ (OBE), as found in South Africa. Few of the article titles signal immediately the LCE connection, which is one of the challenges in reviewing the literature in this field.1

The articles examined represented all the developing regions of the world, and include some middle income countries and impoverished groups in more developed areas (e.g. First Nations Canadians – Pence et al., 1993). The list below details the number of articles focusing on different countries or regions2:

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<th>Country/region and number of articles</th>
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1 It also makes it possible that I have overlooked some relevant articles—for which, if this is the case, I apologise.
2 Some articles focused on regions, while others on one or more national or local situations. Articles taking a broad international or issues-based (e.g. humanitarian contexts as in Aguilar and Retamal, 2009) perspective are not included in this list.

We can see a distinct concentration of interest in South Africa—this is a particularly well-researched country in general, due to the relatively high national research capacity, and a further explanatory factor is the importance of LCE to the post-apartheid educational agenda.

As well as representing a wide geographical spread, the articles reported on learner-centred pedagogical practices introduced into classrooms or other learning environments through a range of strategies. National educational reform, such as that introduced in South Africa post-apartheid (e.g. Nakabugo and Siebörger, 2001 and Harley et al., 2000), Poland post-Communism (Vulliamy and Webb, 1996) or in Uganda in 2000 (Altinyelken, 2010) or Turkey in 2005 (Aksit, 2007), is the predominant mode. It carries with it particular risks due to its top-down, imposed nature – rhetoric-reality gulfs appear to ensue when teachers feel obliged to be seen to use unfamiliar LCE practices in classrooms. There were also examples of more locally-conceived and implemented innovations, such as those reported from a teachers’ college in Tanzania (Vavrus, 2009) and science classrooms in Kenya (Ndirangu et al., 2003). However, both the national reforms and the local innovations point to wider global forces at work.

The research in these articles also ranges in its focus from preschool (e.g. Mthabwa and Rao, 2010) through primary (e.g. Dyr, 1996) and secondary schooling (e.g. Layne et al., 2008), to colleges and universities (e.g. Kanu, 2005) and non-formal adult education (e.g. Aikman, 1998). A sustained focus throughout these articles, not surprisingly, has been on teacher education as preparation for any of these phases, and analyses of how teachers can be developed in pre-service and in-service modes (e.g. Flanagan, 1992).

The subject area focus varied but the teaching of languages and science received particular attention. The study of language featured a number of issues including two specific and relevant ones: language of instruction and communicative language teaching. For example, Altinyelken (2010) notes that teachers working in English as a second language struggle to avoid frontal teaching, in part because of their lack of skills in the language of
instruction. They feel the need to control classroom talk, in order to stay within their comfort zones. Meanwhile, Moi in 1994 evaluates an in-service teacher education project encouraging active use of aural–oral skills in Brunei Darussalam, as a dimension of communicative language teaching. Science as a subject area also features prominently, due to the perceived importance of experiments and experiential learning in science, and the resources and capacity issues that this creates. So, for example, we have Tsai’s (2001) article on the construction design model for teaching science, and the use of internet technology in Taiwan, and George and Lubben’s (2002) piece on the creation of context-based materials for the teaching of science in Trinidad and Tobago, to make the curriculum more meaningful for learners.

The researchers have used a full range of methodologies in exploring these questions. Most of the research is small scale and qualitative, based on interviews or occasionally questionnaires, and observations of classrooms, sometimes in an ethnographic mode. O’Sullivan (2006) makes a particularly impassioned plea for classroom observation as a means for professionals of all kinds to understand what teachers actually do; relying on what teachers say they do is not adequate when there is motivation for self-protection or when teachers lack depth of understanding of definitions and expectations. Innovative approaches include the use of metaphor to understand teachers’ views of themselves and of teaching (Saban, 2004); ‘backwards mapping’ of policy to trace practice back to its distant and distorted origins (Dyer, 1994a); historical investigations (London, 2003); action research (Walker, 1994); oral histories (Paige et al., 2008); video recordings of classroom practice as a reflexive tool (Stoffels, 2005); and longitudinal case studies (Khamis and Sammons, 2007). Complementing the mainly small-scale studies are examples of larger-scale surveys and quantitative methodologies (e.g. Daun, 1997). There were some examples of mixed-methods, such as Gu’s (2005) article on Chinese teachers’ attitudes to communicative language teaching. Among the articles there are also regional reviews of policy (Jansen, 1989; Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008), and the MUSTER project (Multi-Site Teacher Education Research Project) brought together a number of studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to inform the debate on teacher education, with important messages emerging about the challenge of LCE (Stuart and Lewin, 2002). Finally, there is a handful of papers which explore LCE at a conceptual level (e.g. Thomas, 1997) or offer a normative view on its desirability or appropriateness, such as Mayo’s position paper on Freire’s contribution (1995) or Hickling-Hudson’s (2002) analysis of World Bank policy.

2. Implementation barriers

2.1. The nature of educational reform and change: expectations and implementations

The challenge of implementing LCE has been labelled a ‘paradigm shift’ (e.g. Tabulawa, 1997; Nakabugo and Siebörger, 2001) and its failure has been described metaphorically as ‘tissue rejection’ (Harley et al., 2000). Yet, LCE is often seen as a policy panacea (Sripakash, 2010). The powers it is assumed to have are many, and within these articles we find the introduction of LCE being proposed as a solution to a myriad of problems. At the levels of the classroom and the education system, these include: a narrow examination-focused orientation in teaching (e.g. Dello-Iacovo, 2009, in China); the irrelevance of existing content to learners’ own lives (e.g. George and Lubben, 2002, in Trinidad); and the need for the inclusion of all learners (Layne et al., 2008, in Trinidad and Barbados). However, the expectations of LCE’s positive influence extend far beyond education, and reform discourses indicate hope that it will address such broad and intractable issues as poverty (e.g. Brock, 2009 on China); elitism (O’Sullivan, 2004 on Namibia); and the need for a democratic political culture (Harber, 2006 on The Gambia). This is arguably too great a set of expectations for any single change, let alone one that faces considerable implementation barriers.

As a reform or innovation, LCE is not unique in terms of implementation challenges.

Policy sociology has shown that policy and curriculum implementation does not follow the predictable path of formulation–adoption–implementation–reformulation... (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008: 196)

However, there is evidence in these articles that LCE is a particularly demanding change, because of the profound shifts required in teacher–learner power relations, and due to the nature of teacher professional learning. Teachers’ attitudes and practice are, as we will see below, shaped by multiple complex factors ranging from their cultural contexts, their own learning experiences, pre- and in-service training, and on-the-job experiences. Where teacher meets change, we find a number of barriers, including the speed and complexity of the change, and the strategies used to support and monitor the process.

The issue of the expected speed of implementation is virtually universal, and research has shown this to be problematic in contexts of all kinds, including China (Brock, 2009), India (Dyer, 1994b), and all over Sub-Saharan Africa (Jansen, 1989). Policy rhetoric and implementation plans consistently belie the magnitude of the task at hand, and the Realpolitik of governments’ desire to be making visible, positive, modern changes drives policy forward at a pace which practice cannot match (Jansen, 1989; Dello-Iacovo, 2009).

As well as having unrealistic expectations regarding the ease of implementation, the language and complexity of policy cause further difficulties. If the goals are large and lofty, they are also at times incomprehensible. For example, in South Africa, the average teacher was not able to demonstrate comprehension of the demands of OBE (Todd and Mason, 2005) and in Namibia, teachers had conceptual and practical misunderstandings (O’Sullivan, 2004). Furthermore, policy language is not always consistent, and even contradicts itself in setting out expectations (e.g. Rowell, 1995, again on Namibia). What hope for teachers under these circumstances?

A great deal of hope is invested in various modes of training and support for teachers (as we will see below) – but this is in itself often inadequate or inappropriate, as this body of research indicates.

2.2. Practical and material constraints: resources as the barrier

Classroom realities in developing country contexts evidently create challenges for LCE. The ideal–typical LCE classroom as envisaged in the doctrine of progressivists based in the rich minority world is far from the lived experience of most teachers and learners in the South, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). A majority of the articles at least mention material and practical concerns as factors in the issue of implementation gaps, and Jansen’s 1989 review of curriculum reform in SSA points to these ‘technical’ issues as a major barrier. Not all stakeholders, however, willingly acknowledge the effects of these:

The ‘pedagogic’ orientation towards the quality of education does not give much emphasis either to physical inputs or to their ‘effects’, but rather sees teaching skills, patterns of school organisation and curricular content as the essential components of ‘quality’. One does not encounter statements of this...
position so much in the literature as informally, among specialists in curriculum and teacher method, and among some non-specialists. At its worst this position involves the facile assertion that some of the best teachers are gurus sitting under trees and that good education has nothing to do with books, classrooms or equipment (Urwick and Junaidu, 1991: 20).

Urwick and Junaidu observed the importance of textbooks and furniture in making collaborative pupil work possible in large classrooms. While some ‘experts’ may be less convinced, teachers, in interviews from many of these studies, are particularly exercised about resource constraints (e.g. Jessop and Penny, 1998, where the language of physical resources dominated among both South African and Gambian teachers). The key concerns are infrastructure, class size, teaching materials, and teacher capacity.

What we know about working conditions in developing country classrooms makes these concerns wholly believable. A multitude of studies point to the contradictions between policy rhetoric and teacher education discourse on the one hand, and lived teacher realities on the other. However, the capacity of the teachers themselves is frequently cited as an equally problematic barrier, and this interacts with the realities of their working circumstances. A key finding from one survey is that teachers with more training and less crowded classrooms more often believe that pupils should be asked questions and become more active participants in class (Fuller and Kapakasa, 1991: 119), showing the intersection of training, resources, and teacher beliefs. Sometimes the discourse is rather more accusatory, with ‘teacher quality’ (Dello-Iacovo, 2009) being problematised in some discourses, for example.

The question of what constitutes adequate training is crucial. Teachers muddle along in some contexts with only their commitment to guide them, and no in-service offerings to develop capacity (e.g. Koosimile, 2005, on Botswana). The problem is demonstrated in some studies to be a lack of preparation in teacher education for the specific challenges of LCE teaching methodology — e.g. Chapman et al. (2005) — or Central Asia. Teacher education is itself rarely learner-centred, and so does not provide suitable models upon which fledgling teachers can base their practice (e.g. Haser and Star, 2009 on Turkey). Some studies indicate that training is too theoretical (e.g. Altinyelken, 2010; Westbrook et al., 2009), or too insubstantial either in content or time (e.g. Vavrui, 2009; Tatto, 1991). In terms of ‘what works’, it does appear that sustained and joined-up support for teachers — i.e. not just pre-service training or one-off in-service sessions — is helpful, for example in the form of intensive mentoring (Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008); mixed mode combinations of on-site, distance and workshop provision (Paige et al., 2008) or continuous in-service support working together with inspection regimes (Brock, 2009). However, these are of course very resource- and capacity-intensive, demanding a critical mass of skilled trainers and mentors with the time and official permission to undertake this role, and ‘joined-up thinking’ across the sector: all perennially absent. However, there is also strong evidence that even where initial or in-service teacher education is supportive of LCE, if this later contrasts with classroom, local mentoring and inspection regime realities, and the demands of centralised curricula and examinations, once teachers are in classrooms, the impact of training in LCE methods diminishes over time (e.g. Westbrook et al. (2005) in Pakistan; Mustafa and Cullingford (2008) in Jordan; Mohammad and Harlech-Jones (2008) in Pakistan; Haser and Star (2009) in Turkey; and Thair and Treagust (2003) in Indonesia).

In addition to the question of training, other contextual factors play into this question of teacher capacity. The questions of who becomes a teacher, and why, are essential, as there is evidence that, in many developing country contexts, teaching is not a first-choice occupation and large numbers of candidates enter teacher training because their academic credentials do not qualify them for other, more desirable programmes (see, for example, Coultas and Lewin’s (2002) study of four countries). This shapes the extent of their commitment to effective pedagogy in general and to the challenging changes posed by LCE specifically. Cultural factors also shape how teaching and teacher–learner relationships are understood, as we will see below. Even where teachers are well-trained and committed, local institutional cultures and resource realities often conflict with this, creating the tendency to recidivism described above.

2.3. The question of culture: identities, relationships, definitions

In Warwick et al’s study of five innovations in Pakistan, they deem the ‘first lesson’ to be ‘the first need for explicit attention to culture during project design and implementation’ (Warwick et al., 1992: 306). Cultural socialisation — and Kanu (2005) argues, ‘influences how learners mediate and negotiate phenomena such as curriculum, communication patterns, instructional approaches and other situational factors in the classroom’ (Kanu, 2005: 496). Organisations also have their own cultures, and some institutions are inevitably more culture-bound than others, regardless of the national context, as in the case of Koranic schools (e.g. Eise mon and Wasit, 1987).

What is it about some cultures that affects LCE buy-in and implementation? Using Hofstede’s often-criticised but ultimately useful framework (Hofstede, 2003), many of the research contexts of these articles might be broadly categorised as ‘high power distance’ and ‘collectivist’. The culturally appropriate distance between authorities and teachers, and between teachers and learners, which is locally deemed to be respectful, is often cited as an issue. Where teachers are expected to obey authorities such as trainers or inspectors, if they are unable or unwilling to implement prescribed policy, rhetoric-reality gulfs are likely to ensue, as they are more likely to feign intention and success. In terms of teacher–student interactions, teacher-centred pedagogy is a fallback position where they are expected to be in control, and learners are expected to be obedient and not to question their authority (e.g. O’Sullivan, 2004; Dyer et al., 2004). In collectivist cultures, LCE’s focus on the needs and interests of individual learners conflicts with a cultural tendency for a class to work as a unit (e.g. Omokhodion, 1989; Kanu, 2005). Ninnes’ description of Melanesian culture is close to how other authors have conceptualised the relationships found in many of these research contexts.

The respect with which Melanesian students listen to their elders therefore represents a key area of congruence between traditional culture and classroom learning...

...students perceive the adoption of a humble attitude as an appropriate way of maintaining the relationships... (Ninnes, 1995; 19)

Such authority distance and the quest for group coherence and conformity are also manifested in concerns about discipline (Dull, 2004), and authoritarian attitudes including the use of corporal punishment (e.g. Tafo, 2004), and extend more broadly into questions of teacher identity and professional culture (Barrett, 2008; Jessop and Penny, 1998; Akyeampompong and Stephens, 2002). Students, too, readily assume the roles dictated by habit and culture (Fink and Arnove, 1991; Stoffels, 2005; Pro phet, 1995).

Other culturally shaped values regarding education impact on teachers and beyond. In a stratified society where some groups are perceived culturally to have more educational potential than others, teachers may have low expectations of individual students’ ability to manage their own learning, if they are from unfavoured...
groups (e.g. Dyer, 1996, on India). This therefore affects LCE implementation as well as individual students’ attainment. Teachers and parents are also likely to hold strong views on the role and nature of assessment, resisting or not understanding practices which go beyond summative examinations (e.g. Pryor and Lubisi, 2002).

Tabulawa’s often-cited 1997 article on Botswana makes a strong case for the importance of social context, and signals the challenge posed by the ‘paradigm shift’ in policy to LCE.

I have identified banking education as the paradigmatic location of teachers in Botswana schools. To propose that they shift from a banking education pedagogical paradigm to a learner-centred one is necessarily a proposal that they fundamentally change their views of the nature of knowledge, of the learner and his/her role, and of classroom organisation in general. But this also necessarily calls for the disintegration of the reigning paradigm, thus of the practitioner’s taken-for-granted classroom world. For the practitioners (ie teachers and students) such an experience might be anomic since it might lead to the disruption of the existing cognitive order, leading to a deskilling effect. The result of this might be the practitioners’ rejection or subversion of the proposed pedagogical innovation. (Tabulawa, 1997: 192)

Tabulawa looks back to missionary and colonial education as contributing to the current paradigm, but he also points to Tswana social structure, including child-rearing practices, as resonating with the historical imported practices to create a coalition of virtually intractable authoritarianism reflected in teachers’ discourse.

This leads to the question of how far LCE is ultimately a ‘Western’ paradigm. We see calls for local innovations as a preferred alternative (e.g. Wright, 1994 on African drama in Sierra Leone), and calls for ‘Africanisation’ in other texts (e.g. Lillis, 1983; Jansen, 1989). We also see explicit reactions by learners against LCE in some contexts, citing cultural and post-colonial perspectives. For example, Gu (2005) notes resistance to ideas perceived as ‘Western’ among her in-service language teacher respondents, as does David (2004) among his students in Eritrea:

It was salutary to be reminded by our own students that our presence might be perceived as anything but benign, and that the ‘modern’, yet alien, ideas that we brought could be at odds with the cultures that make Eritrea distinctive. (David, 2004: 439)

Other commentators (e.g. Croft, 2002) question whether definitions of LCE unnecessarily exclude practices found in the global South, where classroom interactions may look teacher-centred to an outsider, while actually being variations of LCE adapted to local cultural practices and resource realities. Despite these questions about its cultural appropriateness, and some resistance to its imposition as a ‘Western’ ideal, LCE is widely associated with an emancipatory vision of education (e.g. Hickling-Hudson, 2002). This raises some interesting questions and contradictions. What does a post-colonial perspective mean in the context of LCE – should it be rejected as a form of imperialism, or embraced as a potential liberator? By implication of some extreme arguments against LCE, culture is seen as fixed and sacred rather than changing and questionable. Such arguments have, in my experience (e.g. Schweisfurth, 2002a,b) been used in favour of practices including corporal punishment and the subjugation of women. These are of course not such distant memories, and are even contemporary realities, in much of the ‘West’, and yet are widely considered to be unacceptable and a breach of human rights. Can LCE shape cultural attitudes, or does it need to reflect cultural changes already taking hold?

Given that these articles span nearly a thirty-year period, the theme of culture has been recurrent. However, it is noteworthy that the nuance and theoretical sophistication with which classroom cultures are analysed do show development over this period. While in many of the articles from the 1980s there is a tendency to treat the classroom and its processes as something of a ‘black box’, we find more recent studies of teacher identity and classroom interactions informed by intensive observation and by theoretical frameworks such as Bernstein’s models of pedagogic practice (Bernstein (1990), as referenced by Sripakash (2010) and Barrett (2008)). These analyses help to lift the debate beyond learner-centred and teacher-centred dualities.

2.4. Power and agency

Who, and what drives change, or hinders it, and the power and agency that are exercised in the process are central to the likelihood of successful implementation. Indeed, analysis of these forces may well help to explain the recurrent phenomenon of LCE implementation failure.

Many authors point to the powerful role of donor agencies in shaping policy (e.g. Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008). Views of this role vary, with some commentators attributing greater influence and determination to the bearers of the aid agenda than others:

Some donors, DFID included, are also quite open about their agenda to influence the government – or in this case the Ministry of Education and Provincial Departments of Education – in their thinking about how to reform the rural education system in a pro-poor way. The emphasis is on the provision of soft skills and training, not hardware. Donors regard this as part of the agenda and believe such engagement has influence… (Brock, 2009: 455)

While there does not appear to be a ‘donor conspiracy’ to impose particular models of training, there are undoubtedly international influences. In this era of globalisation, people will naturally look outside their own country for new ideas. This cultural borrowing, however, may be constrained by the international donor network… (Paige et al., 2008).

Other influences are internal to a given context. Rarely, it seems, does policy on LCE reflect joined-up thinking which takes into consideration all parts of the education system. Inevitably, some aspects will expert more power over pedagogy than others, and teachers’ decision-making is informed by these influences. A recurrent theme is the backwash effect of high-stakes examinations (e.g. George and Lubben, 2002; Jansen, 1989). Where pupils’ life chances and the reputations of schools and teachers are determined by their examination results, and exams test learners’ ability to reproduce fixed bodies of knowledge, this will drive teacher practice, and parental and pupil expectations. Another ‘own goal’ is to have inspection regimes which do not evaluate LCE practice positively – inspectors in many contexts have considerable power to shape teachers’ practice. whatever competing imperatives there might be within the system (Harber, 2006; Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008).

The high expectations of policy would suggest that teachers are on the receiving end of drives for change, and that their roles are to implement the dictates of government. Yet, as Warwick et al. (1992) point out, no change is ‘teacherproof’, even if that were...
Siebörger's (2001) 'drift towards' new practices. Or, it may be about stages of implementation, where teachers and learners are direction? A compromise solution might be seen as being about contexts, or simply too challenging to implement, what is the conceived, 'pure' form, is either inappropriate to particular practical plan of action' (Brooke, 1982: 73). If LCE in its initially progressive teaching methodology as 'more a philosophy than a and far between. Interestingly, way back in 1982, Brooke described how policy is translated into practice:

Sub-Saharan Africa, point to 'convergence in the divergence' of the broad messages. Chisholm and Leyndecker (2008) referring to other contexts relevant to IJED.

These articles suggest that these realities extend beyond SSA to other contexts relevant to IJED.

The stories of unequivocal success in implementation are few and far between. Interestingly, way back in 1982, Brooke described progressive teaching methodology as 'more a philosophy than a practical plan of action' (Brooke, 1982: 73). If LCE in its initially conceived, 'pure' form, is either inappropriate to particular contexts, or simply too challenging to implement, what is the nature of compromise if it is desirable at least to move in this direction? A compromise solution might be seen as being about stages of implementation, where teachers and learners are working towards LCE as a long-term goal, as in Nakabugo and Siebőrger's (2001)'drift towards' new practices. Or, it may be about some essential differences attributable to a particular context and how LCE needs to be mediated to fit. We find among these articles calls for a more subtle approach both to LCE implementation and to the analysis of that implementation. Sripakash (2010), for example, records some child-centred practices in her observations of Indian classrooms, and Croft (2002) notes learner-centred aspects of local practice which might not, to the outsider, seem obvious examples of LCE. Vavrus (2009) calls for a more 'contingent constructivism'; O'Sullivan (2004) advocates the notion of pedagogy that is 'learning-centred' (i.e. using what works to help pupils to learn) rather than learner-centred; and similar conclusions were reached by Dyer et al. (2004). Such analyses help to take us beyond the crude binary codes of TCE versus LCE, or implementation success vs. failure. The concepts they generate are not only more realistic descriptively and prescriptively; they comprise new analytical tools for thinking about what we are trying to achieve in different contexts. They can also help to break the 'cycle of recrimination' (Al-Qahtani, 1995) – where teachers blame policy-makers and administrators for unsuitable policy and lack of support, and policy-makers blame teachers for not implementing it.

Teachers are not fundamentally different from learners. So why are so many LCE policies so often evidently implemented without regard for LCE principles? If we start by seeing teachers in changing contexts as individual learners, then message and medium need to be consistent. As we have seen above, at least partially successful implementation seems most likely in contexts where teachers are supported in a multi-stranded, sustained, joined-up manner, and are 'scaffolded' (Rowell, 1995) in learning the new practices so that these fit their own capacities and circumstances. Some authors point to reflective practice (e.g. Kanu, 1996) as the mediating tool for teachers in the transition, but this in itself is for some a new way of working that must be learnt.

The issue of effective implementation, of course, begs the question of whether LCE should be a policy or practice prescription at all, however watered-down or mediated. There is not a clear line between what is desirable and what is feasible, and even the more vociferous and politicised of pro-local commentators (e.g. Tabulawa, 1997) acknowledge that the effects of colonialism make it hard to determine what is truly a local form of pedagogy. There is not a great deal of proof that LCE can achieve the grand aims that its proponents claim, and the implementation difficulties make LCE as a long-term goal difficult to evaluate. We do, however, at the classroom level see some evidence of the alienating effects of its opposites in some contexts (e.g. Layne et al., 2008), and of positive learning outcomes from LCE in others (e.g. Khamsi and Sammons, 2007). In evaluating the evidence base for this innovation, it is noteworthy that often the researchers, change agents and authors of the articles are the same people. Even single projects sometimes have conflicting results in evaluation studies (e.g. Thair and Treagust, 2003), depending on who evaluates the outcomes, how, and when. Further studies and syntheses would be needed before we can discount 'Pygmalion' or other observer effects, methodological flaws or wishful thinking from this evidence base.

The forms of evidence needed are hotly contested. A systematic review of all the existing evidence would be very much in keeping with some agencies' current views of effective research, but great care would need to be taken to avoid the danger of decontextualisation, and bland statements of 'what works'. Given the centrality of such variables as culture and human capacity, it is important that we know where it works, and with whom, and how, as well as broad-brush generalisations about LCE and its implementation.

One of the most influential authors in this field, cited often in these texts, was aware of the importance of this contextualisation:

Freire is fully aware of the social and political constraints which may prevent a process, successful in one context, from being applied in another. (Mayo, 1995: 377)

What is largely missing, ironically, from this particular collection – and to a great extent the wider literature on this theme – is the voice of young learners in developing countries. What are their views on LCE, and on classroom life under attempts at its implementation? How can they be an active part of planning and implementation? These new research directions, in combination, would call not only for a banking of evidence, but perhaps a reconceptualisation of LCE itself, to move the debate beyond ready-made solutions, and all-too-predictable problems.


