

TOWARDS CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALISED PEDAGOGIES IN AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogy is a complex phenomenon and efforts to reform it in African schools have more often led to more continuities and unintended consequences than wholesale change. This article explores how global norms of good pedagogy have travelled and considers the tensions between these and local practice. It calls for contextualised pedagogies that are responsive to local cultures and resource realities, but within a shared framework of evidence-based practice and children's rights.

Keywords: pedagogy, travelling policies, culturally appropriate teaching

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy is a complex and important topic and one that receives insufficient attention in research, in the detail of policy, and in the framing of practice. Alexander defines it as a combination of 'the performance of teaching along with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it' (Alexander 2000: 540). This combination opens up the possibility of contradictions and competing imperatives, as what teachers do is rarely a perfect reflection of what they are trying to do. In addition, understandings of quality teaching and learning constitute an excellent example of tensions between global frameworks and local cultural and resource realities. On the one hand, an increasingly coherent and powerful global discourse about education quality is setting a pedagogical agenda, however obliquely. On the other hand, culture and resources are powerful drivers for practice, which is local in its manifestations. In sub-Saharan Africa, these resource realities are extreme in many cases, and both local cultures and classroom cultures are themselves overlaid with traditional, colonial and contemporary influences and variations (Tabulawa 2009). Teachers' actions and beliefs shape the learning outcomes and ultimately the lives of learners, and yet the complexities of pedagogy in African settings make it a moving target to study and a shape-shifting phenomenon to attempt to change.

In this article, I will explore some of these tensions between normative views of good pedagogy and the lived and aspirational worlds of classrooms in Africa. Based on my own work on learner-centred education in developing countries (Schweisfurth 2011, Schweisfurth 2013a, Schweisfurth 2013b), I will illustrate how this example

of a travelling policy interfaces with local realities and what some of the unintended consequences can be. These irresolvable tensions between the global and the local lead inevitably to calls both for guiding frameworks with universal principles and for contextualised pedagogies. Given these contradictions and the need to find a way to live with them, the article will then turn to the question of how a combination of global framework and local interpretation might be defined and operationalised, and by whom. The article draws on an eclectic range of my own and others' empirical and conceptual work on pedagogy in developing countries, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, and is exploratory rather than prescriptive in its vision of culturally contextualised pedagogy for African schools. I am not calling for a continent-wide African pedagogy – even if this could be reasonably defined in this vast and diverse continent – but there are a number of broad patterns that emerge and that demand further contextualisation in individual settings. They also have implications across the region.

ASPIRATIONS

In this global age, policies travel, and education policies, including those that advocate particular pedagogical approaches, are no exception. In the case of pedagogy, the forces that make policies move and agendas converge include a combination of bottom-up and top-down pressures and aspirations (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008).

At national and local levels, there is a perfectly reasonable desire for improved development outcomes both for individuals and for the nation. In terms of pedagogy, at least three different 'narratives' fuel these desires and advocacy for particular pedagogical approaches (Schweisfurth 2013b) in their promising links to development. Firstly, there is the belief that improved classroom practice will lead to improved cognitive and learning outcomes. In the case of learner-centred pedagogy, this relates to the constructivist model of teaching and learning, which focuses on learners' engagement and pattern formation in the quest for more effective learning. More effective learning by individuals will, it is argued, reap development benefits for everyone. Secondly, some pedagogies are believed to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes that contribute to democratic citizenship and therefore democratic societies, through, for example, experiences of critical questioning and egalitarian relationships in class. A third narrative, increasingly popular in policy terms, is about preparation of learners for the knowledge economy. The desired outcomes are those aptitudes and skills that relate to his mode of economic production: independence, an inquiring mind and skills in research. These are also often linked to learner-centred approaches, which encourage independent learning and transferable skills rather than the acquisition of facts that decay over time.

All these narratives have some foundation in theory and evidence but this is mixed and occasionally contradictory: much of the faith in these narratives is based on ideology or on assumed relationships between particular pedagogies and learner outcomes. That is not to say that they are not true, but I emphasise again that these are narratives rather than truths and more research evidence is needed. However, ideology can be at least

as important as evidence. The evidence regarding different pedagogical strategies and better test results is mixed and depends a great deal on how the pedagogy is implemented, what the tests are assessing, and how motivated the learners are to succeed on them, but choice of classroom strategies by individual teachers is as likely to be based on beliefs as logic. On another level, the emancipatory narrative, for example, has a foundation in the ideology that human freedoms, and the development of capabilities and human rights are inherently good things and developmental in themselves. Regardless of the evidence base, this ideology demands that classrooms are run in more democratic ways – not only to ensure appropriate outcomes but in order to respect the rights of learners in the process.

These same narratives, which fuel pedagogical change within countries, are also drivers for movement of policy and, potentially, increasing homogeneity in terms of policy (and, aspirationally at least, practice). International agreements and international agencies of various kinds all reinforce the goals embedded in the narratives above. They also variously give them quasi-legal standing, global credibility, or support in the form of frameworks and advice or resources.

There are implications for pedagogy, for example, within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), to which almost all countries in the UN are signatories, including almost all African nations. Among the relevant articles are: Article 12, which refers to the right of each child to express their views freely in matters affecting them, Article 13, which refers to the right of freedom of access to information and expression, and Article 29, which celebrates the individuality of each child. Article 28 – rather boldly and with an unelaborated and unsubstantiated prescription – encourages international collaboration with developing countries in pursuit of ‘modern teaching methods’. The status of these articles creates pressures, at least at the level of discourse, to move pedagogy in more learner-centred directions. un agencies including Unesco and Unicef help to reinforce the importance of the UNCRC and create programmes which roll out its messages and support pedagogies which respect these rights. These include Unesco’s Associated Schools Project Network and Unicef’s Child-Friendly and Rights Respecting Schools. Unesco also has a role in the Education for All (EFA) movement, through the Dakar Framework, the Millennium Development Goals, and the annual Global Monitoring Report. While access to schooling has dominated the EFA agenda, pedagogy is embedded through the emphasis on quality, although the detail is often left to interpretation.

Additionally, a number of international non-governmental organisations and aid agencies are influential in supporting particular models of pedagogy, and therefore help to reinforce particular norms of practice or encourage change in particular directions. The International Network of Education in Emergencies, for example, lists child-centred pedagogies as a minimum standard for education in emergency and post-emergency contexts, while ActionAid’s REFLECT programme, aimed at adult learners, adopts emancipatory pedagogies based on the philosophy and practice of Paulo Freire.

At the interface of these bottom-up desires and top-down pressures, we find governments feeling pressures to be seen to be modernising pedagogies, both for the international donor community and to meet the aspirations of their own citizens. This helps to explain why in sub-Saharan Africa there has been a proliferation of national curriculum reforms with learner-centred, child-centred or outcomes-based education at their heart (Chisholm and Leyendecker 2009), all of which have profound implications for pedagogy even if policy does not engage with the implications or the challenges of their implementation.

REALITIES AND CONTRADICTIONS

There is a yawning gap, however, between these travelling and increasingly globalised norms of pedagogy, the aspirations of policy and citizens, and the reality of most learners' experiences of schooling in Africa. Profiles of classroom practice in sub-Saharan African countries bear remarkable similarities to one another. Broad descriptions, for example, from country profiles from a study of science, maths and ICT (SMICT 2005; Chisholm and Leyendecker 2009) reveal the preponderance of 'teacher-centred', 'frontal', 'chalk and talk', 'read-regurgitate-recite cycle' and 'content-driven' strategies. A baseline study from Kenya (Hardman *et al.* 2009) noted commonalities across 102 videotaped lessons, which may resonate with observations in many classrooms:

- Lessons were dominated by lecturing punctuated by question-and-answer routine, pupils copying from the chalkboard, written exercises and teachers marking pupils' work.
- The vast majority of questions were 'closed' (i.e. calling for a single response or offering facts) as opposed to 'open' (i.e. calling for more than one answer): open-ended questions accounted for only 2 per cent of the total.
- Pupil questions were rare, making up 1 per cent of the questioning exchanges.
- Boys were nearly twice as likely to be asked a question by the teacher than girls.
- Over a third of pupil responses were given by choral response.
- Paired/group work was observed in only 3 per cent of lessons.
- 96 per cent of lessons used a traditional classroom layout with desks set out in rows facing the chalkboard (Hardman *et al.* 2009: 69).

Despite the UNCRC and legislation across many countries banning forms of corporal punishment, these are also factors in many classrooms and are a part of the pedagogical landscape (Harber 2006).

In other words, the observable reality of classroom pedagogy rarely aligns with either the rights-based, or cognition-based, or preparation-based arguments, and is often not aligned with policy proclamations either. Analyses of the gaps between policy

prescriptions or suggestions for pedagogical change, and the resilience of pedagogical continuities, have proliferated in recent years. A large number of single-country studies, plus meta-analyses that note common threads between them, have been published. As I have surveyed these elsewhere (Schweisfurth 2011; Schweisfurth 2013), I will not document these threads in detail here. The sheer enormity of the challenge of change has been underestimated, it is argued, and Tabulawa (2013) posits it as a ‘paradigm shift’. While being over-optimistic about the ease of implementation, policy is also accused of being contradictory in many cases – for example, by allowing the co-existence of high-stakes examinations with prescriptions for more open, flexible and learner-responsive pedagogies. When the test is life or death, teachers will teach to the test and students and parents will demand that they do. The discourse around pedagogy – policy or otherwise – is notoriously slippery, and understandings of terms such as learner-centred, outcomes-based or child-centred vary hugely, opening up space for slippage and misinterpretation (Schweisfurth 2013; Nykiel Herbert 2004), and these varying interpretations are not restricted to developing country contexts. Global norms in themselves are not consistent, with a range of agencies attempting to promote learner-centred approaches through reflective practice and the professionalization of teachers, while others argue for more scripted lessons and tightly framed goals for learning.

On the practical side, teachers point to the challenges of large classes and a lack of appropriate teaching resources as impediments to desired shifts. Among the other key factors that also function as barriers to implementation of pedagogical change at the classroom level are lack of appropriate training for teachers (for example in terms of the time allowed, or in terms of modelling desired pedagogical strategies through the training), and poor cultural fit. For example, in cultures where adult-child relationships are power distant (Hofstede 2003) pedagogy tends to reflect this, and to expect changes to teacher-pupil relationships and power balances is effectively to demand cultural change. In combination, these factors, interacting with student and parental motivations and valuing of education, become fossilised and interdependent over long periods of mutual reinforcement. Ultimately, they work together to create what Hufton and Elliott (2000) have called a ‘pedagogical nexus’, which is highly resistant to change and is much more powerful than policy in determining the lived experience of classrooms.

These persistent dysjunctures between policy discourse and lived experience are one reason that a number of researchers have called for the contextualisation of pedagogy so that expectations are in harmony with local cultural and resource realities, and so that good local practice is not judged unfairly against inappropriate norms from outside. The implied ‘either-or’ dichotomy between teacher-centred and learner-centred practice denies the possibility of fusions and the selective use of a varied menu of pedagogical possibilities. Detailed observations of practice in African contexts point to evidence of responsive pedagogical approaches that are learner-centred if seen in context. Examples include Croft’s (2002) observations of how Malawian teachers use music to draw children into a lesson and encourage participation; Barrett’s (2007) analysis of Tanzanian teachers’ varied repertoire of practice in response to the needs

of different groups of students; and the adaptation of imported learning materials on education for democracy into learning settings in Gambia (Schweisfurth 2002). These demonstrate the thriving existence of what Vavrus (2009), from her intensive work in Tanzania over a long period, calls ‘contingent constructivism’: the use of appropriate modes and levels of learner-centred practice that fit the situation and the capacities of teachers. So, one way to get through the impasse of this policy-practice gap is to make policy more responsive to practice and the cultural and resource realities that shape it. The assumption is that attempts to improve and shape classroom practice will not fall into the traps of unrealistic expectations, misinterpretations, and intentional or unintentional resistance if these attempts are responsive to the more subtle workings of longstanding locally understood and locally experienced methods and teacher-student relationships, as well as to the limitations of large classes and shortages of resources.

There are other reasons as well for contextualising pedagogy. Sternberg (2007) uses the concept of ‘successful intelligence’ to analyse learning in different contexts and to argue for a broader understanding of what learning means and how teaching interacts with culture in shaping it. His conclusions militate against the wholesale transfer or importation of pedagogical practices or even learning materials. Some of his key observations are:

- The very act of assessing cognitive and educational performance affects that performance differentially across cultures.
- Individuals in different cultures may think about concepts and problems in different ways.
- Behaviour that is viewed as smart in one culture may be viewed as not so smart or even stupid in another.
- Students do better on assessments when the material on which they are assessed is familiar and meaningful to them.
- Children may develop contextually important skills at the expense of academic ones. So they may have developed adaptive skills that matter in their environment, but that teachers do not view as part of ‘intelligence’ (or as an important part of learning).
- When children are taught in culturally appropriate ways, their achievement increases (Sternberg 2007: 6–16).

These observations have a number of important implications for the contextualisation of pedagogy: assessment means different things to learners in different contexts; meaning is made differently; behaviours are judged in divergent ways; learners need to be personally familiar with assessed materials and so it needs to be set within their lived worlds; learning is much broader than narrow understandings of curriculum and pedagogy suggest; and, perhaps most importantly, some forms of pedagogy may be more culturally appropriate in some contexts than they are in others, and if we want

learners to achieve well, pedagogy needs to be adapted accordingly.

There is also the question of cultural rights. Some who query the appropriateness of global models of good pedagogy for all cultural contexts do so within a post-colonial frame. The argument is that imported notions of good practice are not only unsuitable in terms of learning experiences and outcomes, but are fuelled by global hegemonies that should be questioned and potentially resisted. The packaging of pedagogical norms and the influence used by actors on the global stage to promote them in African settings are seen as a form of neo-colonialism. Influences may be subtle and a question of soft power rather than conspiracy, and those promoting pedagogical convergences may be well-intentioned, and even emancipatory in their goals. However, this post-colonial framework suggests that even these good intentions are misguided from a global justice point of view. Tabulawa, for example, points to neo-liberal influences such as those exercised by the World Bank as major drivers for the import of learner-centred pedagogies to African contexts and Botswana in particular (Tabulawa 2003 and 2009).

Given these calls for contextualisation and evidence of its importance, why is policy regarding pedagogy not more contextualised, and why do many other actors such as teacher educators continue to promote convergence to global norms? The answer lies partly in the hegemonies alluded to above, and the combination of bottom-up and top-down pressures for modernisation and therefore pedagogies considered to be more modern. The fact that these are difficult to define and shifting in interpretation might have created space for contextualisation, and for indigenous pedagogies to thrive. However, the power of the discourses of modernity, the influences of international agencies, and difficulties of capacity have generally not encouraged or facilitated use of this space. There is also, as Tabulawa notes (2009), a confluence of traditional norms of adult-child relationships with colonial legacies, and so it is not necessarily easy to judge what is truly indigenous in the multi-layered realities of classroom life in Africa. Formal schooling is, after all, originally an imported and to some extent imposed structure. And as prismatic society theory (Riggs 1964) suggests, many Africans as individuals are accustomed to living with the contradictions of layers of tradition and modernity, and have adapted remarkably to these competing imperatives and co-existing contrasting worlds. Pedagogy prescriptions are perhaps another example of this fragmentation and another source of daily contradictions that teachers and learners navigate as best they can.

TOWARDS CULTURALLY CONTEXTUALISED PEDAGOGIES

At this moment in time, we are at a critical juncture in development directions: 2014–2015 is the end of the Millennium Development Goals era and a new context of co-operation across development agencies to identify new shared goals. I am concerned that the calls for contextualisation may not be fully heeded by those who shape global governance decisions. Measurement of learning is becoming increasingly standardised. Research methodologies such as systematic reviews and randomised control trials have

space for contextualisation but the preferred outcome is inevitably a decontextualised ‘silver bullet’ solution, which can be universally applied to meet common learning goals. Again, I am certainly not suggesting that improved learning across the board is a sinister agenda – who does not want better learning outcomes for all children? However, the route there is complex, and the discourse shift to ‘learning’ instead of ‘teaching’ once again obscures pedagogy and reinforces what Alexander has described as ‘a vacuum into which are sucked a plethora of claims about what constitutes “best practice” (Alexander 2008: 2).

What would a culturally contextualised pedagogy look like, and how might it be developed? The definition of pedagogy set out by Alexander in 2000, which opened this article, emphasises both act and intention in teaching. This reminds us that understanding what a contextualised pedagogy might mean is not simply a case of observing what is happening and replicating it. It is also a case of understanding what teachers are trying to do, and why. I would argue that it is also important to capture children’s views and aspirations – their voices have been widely neglected in the literature on pedagogy in developing countries generally and in African countries specifically.

In a recent book (Schweisfurth 2013b), I attempt to set out a framework of ‘minimum standards’ for pedagogy, which is broadly but not prescriptively learner-centred. It draws on the research evidence regarding pedagogy that nurtures learning. It does so within a framework of human and child rights, as in my view these are not negotiable. In this I am not alone; the African Charter of Children’s Rights (Organisation for African Unity, entered into force in 1999) sets a salient example, celebrating and promoting respect for local cultural practices while setting a demanding rights agenda. The concept of this minimum standards framework is that within this very broad agenda – promotion of learning while respecting rights – each standard can be adapted to a national or even individual learning context in order to build on the benefits of contextualisation, both for learning and for facilitating meaningful change. The framework includes the following principles: learner engagement; mutual respect between teachers and students; building on learners’ existing knowledge; dialogue; curricular (and linguistic) relevance; the development of skills such as critical thinking; and assessment that aligns with these principles. In practice, each might look different in different contexts. For example, relationships of mutual respect might still be relatively formal rather than overtly egalitarian and unstructured. I welcome questioning of this list, as part of a process of refinement in the light of others’ experiences and understanding of aspirations. I also welcome a deeper understanding of how these or their refinements might vary between contexts, and how this might be made possible. Informed outsiders may have a facilitating role in developing these understandings, but the agenda will need to be set by cultural insiders.

The arguments for contextually sensitive pedagogies are building, as is the evidence of the need for them. However, it is as yet not a fully tested mantra. Teasing apart the global and the local and finding ways of drawing on the best of both will be a long and challenging process. However, I would argue that the process itself is a very meaningful

one and a requisite step towards the establishment of culturally contextualised pedagogy as well as the building of capacity and ownership in African learning settings.

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