Changing pedagogy: A comparative analysis of reform efforts in Uganda and Turkey

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Pedagogical Renewal in sub-Saharan Africa:
the case of Uganda

ABSTRACT[3]

There has been an unprecedented interest in reforming pedagogical practices in sub-Saharan Africa in the past two decades. The reform efforts are often characterised by a move away from teacher-centred instruction to CCP. Uganda has been no exception to this trend as the new curriculum adopted the principles of CCP and efforts were made to popularise and institutionalise the reformed pedagogies in primary schools. Based on fieldwork conducted in selected schools in Kampala, this chapter seeks to explore teachers' views on CCP, their classroom practices, and the perceived challenges in implementing CCP. The chapter suggests that the implementation of CCP in Ugandan classrooms has not occurred in the ways intended by policymakers and offers some explanations for the discrepancy between policy and practice. It also raises questions with regard to the appropriateness of CCP as the most suitable pedagogy in African classrooms.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, there have been numerous initiatives to reform pedagogical practices in sub-Saharan Africa as a means to improve education quality. In the majority of African classrooms, pedagogical practices are described as authoritarian, teacher-dominated and lecture-driven. Evidence suggests that this type of teaching merely fosters rote learning and does not support development of conceptual learning, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Dembele, 2005). The reform efforts often emphasised a move away from teacher-centred instruction to child-centred pedagogy (CCP). The international development agencies have been influential in the diffusion of CCP across the continent, as many have advised CCP as a prescription through educational projects and consultancies they funded (Tabulawa, 2003). Although substantial resources have been invested in pedagogical renewal, recent studies show that teaching and learning in African classrooms continues to be characterised by traditional, teacher-dominated instruction

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[3] The chapter is based on:

(O'Sullivan, 2002; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Research also shows that some teachers have undertaken substantial changes and revised their practices, contributing to improved education quality in their schools (Anderson, 2002; Farrell, 2002).

Uganda has followed the lead of many other African countries and adopted the principles of CCP in their new curriculum for primary schools. The so-called Thematic Curriculum has been recently developed and, after a one-year pilot phase, was launched nationwide in February 2007. Based on fieldwork conducted in Uganda, this chapter seeks to investigate the emergence of CCP in Ugandan primary schools and examine the patterns of practice in response to reforms introduced by the Thematic Curriculum. Before engaging in a debate on the case of Uganda, the chapter will first outline the extent of the diffusion of CCP in sub-Saharan Africa and describe different views on the rationale of such widespread adherence. Then, the chapter will elaborate on the outcomes of pedagogical reforms by referring to various countries as examples. These two sections will be followed by a descriptive background on Ugandan education system and the introduction of CCP in primary schools. The last parts of the chapter will present the findings of the fieldwork in Kampala by focusing on three issues: teachers' views on CCP, their classroom practices, and the perceived challenges in implementing CCP.

2. Diffusion of CCP in sub-Saharan Africa

Recent studies on pedagogical renewal and teacher development in sub-Saharan Africa have shown that traditional teaching practices persist in classrooms. These practices are often described as teacher-centred, lecture-driven, rigid and authoritarian. Students have a passive role in this pedagogy; their activities are limited to memorising facts and reciting them to the teacher (Dembele & Miaro-II, 2003; Pontefract & Hardman, 2005). There is a general understanding on the part of various education actors, policymakers, educationalists, teachers and parents that traditional teaching does not facilitate student learning, and is largely responsible for low levels of education quality on the continent. Such practices do not encourage spontaneity or taking initiative on the part of students, and restrict critical and creative thinking (O'Sullivan, 2004). As the low educational outcomes of such teaching methods have become apparent and new analytical skills are increasingly being demanded, many African countries have adopted reforms of teaching and learning based on constructivist principles. These new

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paradigms include active learning, problem-solving, learner-centred and discovery approaches, whereby students not only acquire information but also do something active with it. By way of analysing and using such information, students are expected to create more profound understanding and new knowledge (Leu, 2005).

The discourse on child-centeredness has developed over many years, yet its origins are rooted in the works of Jean Piaget (1896–1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and John Dewey (1859–1952). Both Vygotsky and Piaget support the notion that individuals construct knowledge; however, nature (individual) and nurture (social context) are viewed differently in this process. According to the Piagetian perspective, individuals construct a personal reality based on previous knowledge and new experiences. Therefore, knowledge is an interaction between the environment and the individual. For Vygotsky, learning is an interactive and constructive activity in which both society and individuals play essential roles. In other words, knowledge is constructed as a result of social interactions and then internalised by the individuals. Both perspectives highlight the importance of peer interaction and cooperation in promoting children's learning (Dockett & Perry, 1996). Dewey viewed education as a powerful agent of societal transformation. He considers democracy as one of the central goals of education. According to his Progressive Theory, learning is experiencing, hence, his education model emphasises individualised learning based on active engagement, discovery and empirical problem solving (Dewey, 1998).

Although these understandings provide a theoretical foundation for child-centred instruction, there is no prescribed format for education practices. In general, child-centred principles are typically in contrast to the teacher-centred instruction model. A shift from traditional teaching to child-centred teaching assumes changes in four areas: a fundamental change in views on the nature of knowledge, pupils and their role, teachers and their role, and classroom organisation in general. In child-centred approaches – since learning is viewed as a natural and constructive process – the most productive learning experiences are considered to take place when learning is relevant and meaningful to children. Their engagement with learning and assuming responsibility in the process are deemed crucial. Teachers need to provide supportive learning opportunities that are appropriate and challenging for children. For this reason, teachers need to know their pupils well and identify their potential so that they can successfully support their existing capacities.

At the same time, within the child-centred model, children are given opportunities to draw on their own experiences and interpretations of the learning process. It also aims to modify teacher-student relationships by defining the teacher's role in the classroom as that of motivating, facilitating and structuring chidren's own discovery and search for knowledge. In general, child-centred approaches are considered to be more participatory and democratic. Furthermore, the physical arrangement of the classroom is organised in a way that allows for working together. Some of the observable measures of this model include more or equal student speaking and asking questions, more individual and moderately sized group instruction, varied instructional materials, and evidence of student choice and organisation of content (Cuban, 1983; Schuh, 2004).

In the past two decades, African countries have shown an unprecedented interest in modifying instructional practices and CCP is regarded as an 'effective antidote to the prevalence of teacher-centred didactic classroom practices' (O'Sullivan, 2004, p. 585). Therefore, across the continent, pedagogical renewal has mainly included attempts to move away from teacher-dominated teaching practices to child-centred, activity oriented pedagogy (Storeng, 2001; Anderson, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2002; Nykiel-Herbert, 2004). The adoption of CCP is often accompanied by changes in the official curriculum (enhancing the focus on competencies rather than content), and with shifts in assessment policy (increasing the significance of continuous assessment as opposed to examinations) (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Such reforms are considered essential to stimulate and reinforce the use of CCP in classrooms.

By the late twentieth century, CCP has been diffused across sub-Saharan Africa. As Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008, p. 3) note: 'It is one of the most pervasive educational ideas in the contemporary sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere.' Currently, curricular reforms in many African countries emphasise CCP as the official pedagogy in schools. Examples include Botswana, South Africa, Namibia, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Some authors emphasise the traditional mechanisms of policy borrowing and policy learning, and argue that CCP has become popular in sub-Saharan Africa as new pedagogical ideas spilled over from the USA and Europe to the continent. This has particularly resulted from development import by sub-Saharan African countries, development export on the part of the Western world, and increased international communication (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). CCP has long been established in the Western education systems and is considered a Western 'best practice' (Carney, 2008a) in many countries. It

enjoys an almost hegemonic position with its 'justified', 'admirable' and 'inspiring' educational ideas. According to Nykiel-Herbert (2004), CCP has become increasingly preferred in developing countries which are making the transition to democracy. The pedagogy is highly appealing in such countries because it carries the promise of intellectual liberation from traditional approaches that are considered oppressive.

Moreover, CCP became popular since it was viewed as being more progressive, effective in improving learning achievements, and valuable for preparing children and youth for the world of work. It was widely recognised that when it comes to effective functioning in the work environment and the capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing economic environment, general competencies (such as imagination, creativity, adaptability, problem solving and innovation), attitudes (such as self-discipline, tolerance and teamwork) and interpersonal skills (such as assertiveness and conflict resolution) are critical (Hoppers, 1996). In this context, CCP was perceived as far superior in stimulating and reinforcing such desirable general competencies, attitudes and skills, and educating the youth for the increasingly competitive global 'knowledge economy'. Some other views on the issue highlight the role of international aid agencies, which have indeed played a very influential role in diffusion of CCP in sub-Saharan Africa and in other low-income countries. These authors question aid agencies' interest in diffusing CCP and draw attention to a hidden agenda. Guthrie (1990, p. 222) argues that CCP aims to inculcate 'affective, moral and philosophical values about desirable psycho-sociological traits for individuals and for society'. It reflects the norms of a liberal Western sub-culture and represents a process of Westernisation with its political and economic connotations. Yet, aid agencies disguise it as 'better' teaching.

Likewise, Tabulawa (2003) argues that although aid agencies express their interest and preference for CCP in terms of its perceived effectiveness in improving learning outcomes, in essence its efficacy lies in its political and ideological nature. In other words, CCP is promoted by international donor agencies for ideological purposes rather than for realising educational or pedagogical objectives. The author supports his argument by pointing out that aid agencies have become explicitly concerned with pedagogy since the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989 and demonstrated an extraordinary interest for CCP in the years following. Before this period, aid agencies displayed an apparent lack of interest in pedagogical issues since education was viewed in technicist terms. However, in the 1980s and 1990s, with the ascendancy of neoliberalism as a development paradigm, political democratisation has been

increasingly viewed as a prerequisite for economic development. As education assumed a central role in the democratisation project, CCP has become a natural choice for aid agencies due to its democratic tendencies and its perceived role in stimulating democratic social relations in classrooms and schools. Hence, Tabulawa argues that 'the pedagogy is an ideological outlook; a worldview intended to develop a preferred kind of society and people. It is in this sense that it should be seen as representing a process of Westernisation disguised as quality and effective teaching' (Tabulawa, 2003, p.7). This view is shared by Carney (2008a, p. 40) as he suggests that:

> [CCP can] be viewed as part of an 'international agenda' aimed at improving educational systems in ways that might support the spread of advanced capitalism and global democracy… such pedagogical reform is a form of cultural imperialism where key forces in the West (e.g. states, multi and bilateral lending and development agencies) attempt to change subjectivities in the 'south' via seemingly political neutral technical interventions.

These accounts echo postcolonial approaches and highlight the continuing impact of colonial encounter in formerly colonised countries, regions and people (Crossley & Tikly, 2004). Chisholm and Leyendecker give credit to the significance of these arguments, yet they believe that they only partially explain the favourable reception of CCP in sub-Saharan Africa. According to these authors, CCP was positively viewed in African countries, because 'they were not entirely new ideas and were ambiguous enough to be seen as key vehicles for achieving not so much educational, as economic, social and political goals' (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008, p. 2).

3. Outcomes of reform initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa

Regardless of the intention of those advocating CCP, there is considerable research evidence which demonstrates that pedagogical practices are resistant to reform, partly because pedagogy is complex, vast and multidimensional (Spillane, 1999). The experiences in sub-Saharan Africa also confirm that changing classroom instruction is indeed an arduous and long process. Although some authors report successful cases where teachers have modified their practices and adopted more 'progressive' teaching methods (Farrell, 2002), many others argue that the idea of CCP has not taken root in classrooms (Akyeampong et al., 2006; Chisholm, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2004), or that results are inconclusive (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004; UNESCO, 2005).

Within the context of sub-Saharan Africa, Farrell identifies a few cases of alternative models or programmes of education, including the Multi-grade Program in Zambia, the Convergent Pedagogy Program in Mali, the Community Schools Initiative in Zambia, and the Community Schools Program of UNICEF in Egypt. He reports that all these programmes have adopted child-centred, rather than teacher-driven pedagogy, and focused on active rather than passive learning. These programmes emphasized peer tutoring whereby older or faster-learning children assist and teach younger or slower-learning children. These programmes also encouraged pupils to take responsibility for their learning. Through carefully developed self-guided learning materials, children could study alone or in small groups at their own pace. In these schools, the focus has been much less on 'teaching' and much more on 'learning'. According to Farrell, these programmes demonstrate that child-centred, active pedagogy 'works'. He asserts that 'It can be done, and where done, it generally produces remarkable learning gains among even the poorest and most "disadvantaged" children' (Farrell, 2002, p. 256).

Conversely, several other studies in sub-Saharan Africa reveal that although CCP is increasingly promoted by policymakers, there is little sign of it in the classrooms. Therefore, there is a substantial gap between policy and practice (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). In Ethiopia, for instance, government policies and implementation strategies encourage child-centred, active pedagogy, cooperative learning and the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Yet, there is ample evidence that teacher-dominated pedagogy is the norm in the vast majority of Ethiopian primary schools. Little application of active learning methods is made (Serbessa, 2006). Tanzania's education policy also recommends CCP; however, studies have shown that teaching styles continue to be teacher-dominated and based on rote learning. The main learning method of pupils is to answer teacher questions individually or in chorus (Osaki & Agu, 2002). Also, in Namibia, interviews with teachers suggested that they were familiar with CCP and the majority of the teachers claimed that they were implementing CCP in their classrooms. However, lesson observations did not substantiate teachers' accounts as they have demonstrated that teachers were indeed not implementing CCP (O'Sullivan, 2004). Likewise, the rhetoric of child-centred learning is strong in Gambia and South Africa, but teaching practices are characterised by traditional teaching (Jessop & Penny 1998).

These case studies seem to suggest that prescriptive instructional behaviour is so deeply embedded in the professional culture that even if child-centred approaches are initially embraced, they disappear with time and

are replaced by traditional instructional behaviour (Akyeampong et al., 2006). Furthermore, Nykiel-Herbert (2004) draws attention to the dangers of CCP when it is practised by teachers who lack the necessary conceptual knowledge and practical skills. The author believes that CCP can turn into a 'dangerous weapon' as demonstrated by the case of South Africa. In similar fashion to many other African countries, South African teachers were mainly left to themselves to construct the knowledge of the new pedagogical paradigm. However, in the process of translating CCP from training course notes or curriculum documents into classroom practice, the conceptual and pedagogical meaning of the CCP became altered beyond recognition, like a message in the popular children's game 'telephone'.

Having laid out some of the core issues related to the introduction and implementation of CCP in sub-Saharan Africa, the next section will explore the case of Uganda, illustrating what new insights can be brought to the discussion.

4. The case of Uganda

Following independence from British colonial rule in 1962, Uganda was immersed in state failure, political violence and civil war for more than two decades. The education system could not escape the devastating impact of the conflict. Prior to the mid-1980s, budgetary allocations to the sector dropped to less than 1 percent of GDP, only 50 percent of children were able to go to school and over 90 percent of educational costs were paid directly by parents. Furthermore, in the majority of schools, infrastructure had been either destroyed or severely damaged; textbooks, teacher manuals and other supplementary materials were in short supply and teachers were underpaid, untrained and highly demoralised (ADEA, 2005). Consequently, the conflict adversely affected the education system by restraining access, exacerbating equity concerns and reducing education quality.

In 1986, the army of the National Resistance Movement achieved victory and Museveni assumed leadership. In the following period, particularly starting from the mid-1990s, Uganda initiated wide-ranging, ambitious educational reform programmes to revitalise the education sector, encompassing reforms in teacher training, curriculum development, supply of instructional materials, and language policy. Since its early years of political independence, Uganda has recognised education as a powerful tool for social and economic development and transformation. More specifically, education has been considered critical for the achievement of national unity, democracy

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and social justice for all citizens (Higgins & Rwanyange, 2005). Likewise, in the past decade, education has been increasingly seen as an important sector in national development; it has been identified as a key component of human capital quality and an essential ingredient for sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. The education sector has also been linked directly to a multi-sectoral Poverty Eradication and Action Plan, and the role of education in strengthening civil institutions, building a democratic society, empowering women and protecting environment has been underscored (MFPED, 2004).

4.1. Concerns over education quality and pedagogical practices

Since the UPE programme was initiated in 1997, there has been a steady increase in enrolment figures at primary level; for instance, although 2.6 million students were enrolled in 1996, the figure reached 7.2 million in 2006 (Mbabazi, 2007), extending to a net enrolment ratio of 95 percent in 2005 (MOES, 2008). Although these improvements have been largely applauded, a number of studies questioned the quality of education and the sustainability of the gains. Indeed, there are a number of weaknesses and challenges evident in the system, such as poor student performance, frequent student absenteeism, and high dropout and repetition rates. For example, as a result of high dropout rates, only 22 percent of the 1997 P1 cohort was progressing through to P7 in 2003. Besides, the UNEB annual tests have identified alarmingly low levels of achievement in Literacy and Mathematics. The 2005 report (UNEB, 2005), for instance, revealed that only 38 percent of the P3 pupils and 30 percent of the P6 pupils reached the minimum competency level in Literacy. Results for Numeracy were equally depressing since only 14 percent of P3 pupils and 33 percent of P6 pupils could attain minimum competency levels.

Poor teaching practices were reported by several studies and these were largely considered responsible for low levels of education quality in Uganda. Ineffective teaching and learning practices included poor planning, the non-participatory nature of classroom work, and the use of inappropriate methodology in the instructional process. Furthermore, lack of displays, under-utilisation of instructional time, and an approach to instruction that is over-authoritarian, teacher-centred, mechanical and unduly repetitive were reported. Other issues that concerned education stakeholders in relation to pedagogy included over-concentration on recall of information, non-use or under-use of teaching aids and textbooks, preponderance of lower-order questioning, viewing students as imbibers of information, and not catering for different needs (ESA, 2004; Heneveld et al., 2006; UNEB, 2003).

4.2. Introduction of CCP in Uganda

Similar to many other sub-Saharan African countries, Uganda also embraced CCP as the antidote to traditional teaching. A number of international development organisations have been influential in this process, such as Aga Khan Foundation and the USAID. In the early 1990s, Aga Khan Foundation introduced CCP to Ugandan primary schools through the Kampala School Improvement Project. The aim of the project was to promote and institutionalise the adoption of child-centred teaching methods and resources. The pedagogical approach emphasized activity-based learning through greater student-participation during lessons and group discussions (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). In the following period, the Foundation implemented two more projects, The Enhancement of Universal Primary Education in Kampala, and The Enhancement of Universal Primary Education and Community in Kampala. The last project was initiated in 2005 and would continue till the end of 2009. The essential activities of this project are the same, yet it strives to do more by working through the system personnel, such as inspectors and teacher trainers, to ensure the sustainability of CCP at classrooms beyond the project period. The Aga Khan Foundation has been at the forefront of pedagogical renewal and popularising CCP in primary schools in Uganda as well as in some other East African countries.

Furthermore, in October 2002, USAID initiated a six-year programme that aimed at improving teacher effectiveness. An important component of the programme addressed pedagogy by introducing a teaching and learning methodology that sought to increase interactions within classrooms, and to facilitate learning through cooperation. Cooperative learning also encourages pupils to conduct research on various topics and make group presentations. Cooperative learning was introduced into government-aided schools in 29 districts and to eight of the eleven core Primary Teacher Colleges that are responsible for pre-service teacher training (UPHOLD, 2006). The programme is said to be very influential in policymaking circles, and has influenced the pedagogical approach in the last curriculum review process, which resulted in the development of the Thematic Curriculum in 2006.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) has adopted some of the principles of CCP in Curriculum 2000, and recommended teachers to group children and encourage their participation in classroom activities. Nevertheless, classroom observations conducted by the Ministry itself have revealed that the policy has made little impact at classroom level, and that

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teachers continue to employ didactic, authoritarian teaching styles. The widely acclaimed Thematic Curriculum also adopts CCP and considers pupils to be the centre of the teaching and learning processes within classrooms. The new curriculum is based on three main principles (NCDC, 2006a):

1. Rapid development of literacy, numeracy and life skills at lower primary;
2. The treatment of concepts holistically, under themes of immediate meaning and relevance to the learner; and,
3. The presentation of learning experiences in languages in which the learners are already proficient.

4.3. CCP in the Thematic Curriculum

By child-centred, the new curriculum particularly refers to the following:

1. Children should have a chance to interact with each other and with the teacher during the lesson;
2. Class activities should be organised so that children learn by doing. They should be able to move around from time to time, and to use their hands;
3. Activities should be organised around a variety of learning materials, and children should be able to handle the materials;
4. Children should have an opportunity, from time to time, to have influence in the direction that the lesson (or day) takes. Allow the lesson to reflect the interests, abilities and concerns of the children (NCDC, 2006b, p. 3).

The recommended pedagogical approach focuses on the child's activities rather than the activities of teachers. It encourages the participation and performance of children, including those with special needs. Rather than being passive receivers and doing only what they are told, children are expected to be active participants in their learning by way of exploring, observing, experimenting, and practising. It suggests activities that are enjoyable for children, such as songs, games, acting and drawing. The teachers are encouraged to organise a variety of activities that keep all children involved. It recommends that in any lesson there should be at least three of the following activities: teacher speaking, children writing, children working in pairs, children making something, a child coming before the class to the front, everyone answering questions, and so on. Teachers are encouraged to think of other more appropriate and creative ways of enhancing children's participation in their learning. Furthermore, the new curriculum

aims at providing children with a rich and varied literate environment. For this purpose, use of a range of learning resources is recommended, including flash cards, sentence cards, wall charts, work cards, simple readers (both factual and story-based), and the children's own written work (NCDC, 2006a).

Group or pair work is advocated by the Thematic Curriculum as it is considered to provide opportunities for children to learn cooperatively, to direct their own learning rather than depending on the teacher all the time, and to allow for a variety of learning experiences and styles. Activities that are considered to be group work include shared reading, role-play, group investigation, debate, presentation, and discussion. Teachers are advised to use group work to motivate children to learn, to encourage children to talk to each other, to give children confidence, to promote cooperative learning and personal development, to improve and practise speaking and listening skills, to ensure that anything children write, say or do has an audience, and to share scarce materials. Groups can be arranged according to ability or can also be mixed. Ability groups are recommended when the teacher intends to give differential tasks to children according to their abilities. Use of ability groups is promoted as long as teachers can give these different materials and provide additional attention to weaker pupils. When all children are doing the same activity, mixed groups are to be used (NCDC, 2006b). Then, it is assumed that the more capable children can act as group leaders and help the other children. This is considered particularly useful during shared reading activities.

5. Description of the research

The data were collected during fieldwork between June and July 2007 in Uganda. The government aided (public) schools which piloted the Thematic Curriculum in Kampala were visited for this study. There were eight of them in Kampala, and all agreed to participate in this research. The pilot schools were chosen by the District Inspectorate of Schools, however, the criteria were provided by the NCDC. In school selection, NCDC considered aspects such as geographical location, socio-economic background of pupils, and head teachers' commitment to the Thematic Curriculum. The smallest school in the sample had around 500 students and the biggest had more than 2,000. The pupils mainly came from poor and middle-income families. Their ethnic background was mixed, yet in their schools students from the conflict-affected northern and eastern regions were in majority.

During school visits, I first contacted the head teacher and/or deputy head teacher responsible for the infant section (refers to lower primary education from P1 to P4). I explained the purpose of the research to school management as a doctoral study on the implementation of CCP in Ugandan primary schools. During these meetings, I explained the independent nature of the study and emphasized the anonymity of the respondents. Afterwards, I was introduced to the classroom teachers by deputy head teachers and their collaboration was sought. I also stressed confidentiality before teacher interviews by explaining that the information gathered from them would not be discussed with others (including other teachers, school management, and Ministry officials) and the findings would not be presented in ways that allowed identification of the respondents. Such an explicit commitment seemed crucial for facilitating the honesty of the responses. Indeed, during some interviews further confirmation of confidentiality was sought by some teachers. Besides, my position as an 'outsider', someone from a distant, foreign country seemed to aid open discussions. Some teachers remarked that 'I can tell you such things; you are not from here and you will leave soon'.

Two data collection methods informed this study: semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. At the time this research was conducted, the Thematic Curriculum was implemented only at P1 (since February 2006) and at P2 (since February 2007). All available teachers who were teaching at P1 and P2 participated in this study. Except for one, all teachers were female. They had professional education and had many years of experience. Unlike the pupils, the teachers were dominantly Baganda, yet there were some from other regions also. In total 44 interviews were conducted at schools: 34 interviews were with teachers, four with deputy head teachers, and six with head teachers. The interviews were on one-to-one basis, and in some cases on a group basis. During interviews, teachers' and head teachers' views were recorded on CCP, perceived outcomes of the new approach, classroom practices, implementation problems, and responses received from pupils and parents.

Furthermore, lesson observations were conducted in all P1 and P2 classrooms. In total, 28 classrooms were observed. The duration of lesson observation varied, in some classrooms it was 30 minutes and in some, it extended to two hours. In schools where there were many streams at one grade (e.g. primary 1/A, 1/B or 1/C), lessons were observed in each classroom during a learning area which lasted approximately 30 minutes. In other cases, classroom observations continued for longer periods. This allowed me to study how teachers shifted from one learning area to another.

Lessons were observed in almost all learning areas, yet the majority were in English, Literacy and Mathematics. Teachers seemed to focus mainly on these areas, and they also appeared to prefer teaching these learning areas in the presence of the researcher, possibly due to the high importance attached to the achievement of literacy and numeracy. These learning areas also appeared in the curriculum more often than others. During observations, I was seated either in the front at the teacher's desk or at the back next to pupils. I also reviewed student work while they carried out written tasks or when they were engaged in 'free activity'. I used a checklist during classroom observations, which included items such as classroom organisation, teacher and student activities, the level of interaction between pupils and teachers, teacher feedback, classroom management, and atmosphere.

In the next section, the findings of the fieldwork will be presented in three parts. First, teacher views on CCP will be described by highlighting their predominantly positive appraisal of the new pedagogical approach and perceived outcomes on student performance and improvements in life skills. The second part will look at implementation patterns in classrooms by comparing teacher practices with teacher accounts and the reform policy. The last section will delineate obstacles in implementation of CCP from the perspectives of teachers, highlighting several challenges and concerns that are also identified in other sub-Saharan African countries.

6. Teacher views on CCP

Teachers' understanding of CCP was mainly dominated by grouping children and providing them with some tasks that needed to be completed cooperatively. The new curriculum added some new dimensions to this understanding as teachers also emphasised the importance of student participation in classroom activities and the use of learning and teaching aids. In other words, the pedagogy advocated by the new curriculum was interpreted as more student talk and activity within the classroom, use of aids, and grouping.

There was a high level of receptiveness to CCP as teachers generally appraised the pedagogical approach introduced by the Thematic Curriculum. However, they had serious concerns regarding their implementation due to limitations imposed by structural problems, such as overcrowded classrooms and lack of aids. According to teachers, the teaching and learning strategies recommended by the new curriculum had a number of positive aspects. They believed that it contributed to student participation in the classroom. Pupils

became much more involved in their learning and assumed more responsibilities in their learning process. This made learning much more enjoyable and interesting for children as they easily got bored when the teacher was talking all the time. Lessons were also more enjoyable because various learning aids were used in teaching, teachers organised activities for children, or they participated in demonstrations. Teachers argued that use of learning materials improved student learning since practical work or experimenting with concrete objects strengthened student memory. Teachers also noted that use of such materials made teaching enjoyable for them as well, and simplified their work. Student motivation and alertness were also reported to have improved because when pupils were more active in the classroom, they were more motivated to learn. Some even claimed that increased motivation led to improvements in attendance rate.

Furthermore, teachers believed that participatory pedagogies improved life-skills, which is identified by the new curriculum as a critical area, in addition to literacy and numeracy. The new curriculum defines life skills as 'the skills that help children to flourish within their social and physical environment and make the most of the environment to ensure a healthy and happy life' (NCDC, 2006b, p. 66). It identifies six life skills which occur in every theme within the curriculum: effective communication, critical thinking, decision-making, creative thinking, problem-solving and self-esteem. In addition, the curriculum recommends that the following life skills are given specific focus during certain activities or themes: interpersonal relationships, negotiation, coping with emotions, non-violent conflict resolution, assertiveness, friendship, and coping with stress (NCDC, 2006b).

In discussions relating to the development of life skills, teachers mainly emphasised self-esteem, assertiveness, confidence, and effective communication. They believed that these skills were strengthened by the relatively more participatory nature of teaching and learning. They claimed to give more space to pupils in the classroom, and noted that children talked more and had more opportunities to express themselves. In particular, the News and Story Hour gave such opportunities to children to express themselves, not only in English, but also in their own local languages. Teachers also argued that the new pedagogy improved interaction levels among pupils; hence their skills in forming friendships and maintaining good interpersonal relationships also developed.

Teachers' positive view on CCP also originated from their perception on the impact of the new curriculum on learning achievement. Some teachers

claimed that use of learning materials, group exercises, and increased student talk led to improvements in student achievement. Many observed significant improvements in literacy and numeracy levels since the implementation of the Thematic Curriculum. Yet, it was difficult to attribute these improvements to the pedagogical approach alone. Indeed, improvements in learning achievements were mainly attributed to the emphasis of the new curriculum on literacy and numeracy, and on content organisation.

7. Classroom practices

Although teachers demonstrated much enthusiasm for CCP during interviews and claimed to practice it within the limitations imposed by classroom realities, lesson observations only partly substantiated their accounts. This suggests that pedagogical reforms permeated classrooms to a lesser extent than alleged by teachers. Similar findings were recorded in some other studies (O'Sullivan, 2002; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), confirming that teacher self-report is a weak proxy in analysing the progress of reform policies in practice.

It seems that the reformed practices were embraced unevenly among schools and classrooms. Some of the teachers seemed to have undertaken substantial changes, and practised various aspects of the new pedagogy, yet many others managed only modest, formalistic revisions. The were far fewer teachers in the first group and their teaching was primarily distinguished by the quality of their interaction with pupils, by their superior ability to engage children with the lesson, and by using a variety of teaching and learning approaches to stimulate and reinforce student learning. Furthermore, some aspects of the pedagogical reforms were more easily and readily adopted by teachers than others. For instance, almost all teachers revised seating arrangements and organised pupils in groups. Likewise, all teachers attempted to make greater use of teaching and learning aids during their lessons, though these were mostly in short supply. Yet, some other dimensions of the reform seemed to be ignored, such as facilitating interactions among pupils, allowing them to influence the direction of the lesson or the day, or organising meaningful group activities in mixed ability groups.

In general, teacher practices revealed a hybrid of traditional and reform-oriented practices, such as talking to the whole class from the front, extensive use of question and answer with the whole class, individual or group exercises, demonstrations, use of visual aids, practical activities, and field visits. Besides, several characteristics of structured learning were observed, including lesson planning, clear introduction of the objectives and

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themes of the lesson, making links with previous lessons, and use of formative assessment. Indeed, research evidence from various sub-Saharan African countries shows that many initiatives that claim to be child-centred incorporate some aspects of structured pedagogy. This further confirms that 'a polarized view of pedagogy fails to do justice to the educational values and teaching practices of many teachers working within contexts of scarcity' (Barrett, 2007, p. 274).

Lesson observations also revealed that reform policies were interpreted and practised differently from the ways intended by policymakers, and in some cases, they were only adopted in a formalistic fashion. Teachers' understandings of student participation and group work illustrate this point. As highlighted earlier, student participation in the classroom is highly praised by teachers and has almost become a buzz-word among them. Teachers often argued that pupils talked more in the classroom and there was more room for them to express themselves. This was facilitated mainly through two new learning areas, the News and Story Time. The curriculum advises teachers to start the day with these learning areas, during which children were expected to tell stories or news from their home or community. Although some teachers claimed that pupils also talked more in other learning areas, during classroom observations pupils were mainly observed as giving answers in chorus to teacher questions. Indeed, most of the lessons were dominated by questions, yet these were limited to basic information recall, or were aimed at checking whether the pupils were paying attention. Not a single pupil asked their teachers questions and there were few instances of teachers asking questions that required more than one or two-word answers.

In group work, a formalistic adoption of the policy was evident. The research findings reveal that, in various African countries, the change of seating arrangement in classrooms is the first and in some cases the only sign that the teachers are implementing CCP (Nykiel-Herbert, 2004). Likewise, in the majority of classrooms observed in this study, pupils were seated in groups. These groups, however, were often very large, ranging from 6 to 30, making it impossible to carry out meaningful group activities. Moreover, in some classrooms, seating arrangements enabled pupils to face their group members, yet in some others pupils were facing the blackboard or another group that was in the middle.

Although the official curriculum advises mixed ability groups, very few teachers preferred to have pupils in mixed ability groups since they believed that children can cooperate better if their achievement level is more or less the same. Some of these teachers have noticed that when high-

achievers were grouped with low-achievers, they were not challenged enough, and they also got distracted and performed worse over time. Yet, when they were seated with pupils who performed well, they were more motivated and inspired. Additionally, these teachers also realised over time that low achievers copied the exercises from high-achievers when they were in the same group. By doing so, even if they did not perform well, they hid among high-achieving pupils. A few teachers occasionally assigned high-achievers to help the low-achievers, particularly when they were busy and needed some help.

Teachers also believed that grouping children according to ability simplified their own work and helped them to work more effectively with pupils. They gave differentiated tasks to the groups according to their ability level. Otherwise, they noted, high-achievers would get bored and distract other children, or low-achievers would be challenged beyond their capacity. Some teachers also used grouping as a motivation mechanism. They openly announced the achievement level of the groups, and encouraged pupils to do better so that they would be promoted to the higher-ranking group. They believed this also provided an extra stimulus for children to work harder. Nevertheless, despite teachers' willingness to experiment with meaningful group activities, these were hardly observed in lessons. According to teachers, resource scarcity and overcrowding were the main explanatory factors for organising limited group activities. Consequently, grouping seemed to function mainly as a tool for clustering pupils according to their ability, thereby making it easier for teachers to identify the ability level of children and give them differentiated tasks. The opportunity to cooperate and learn from group members seemed limited, though not exceptional. Children were sometimes given exercises to be completed as a group in Mathematics, or they were given learning aids to discuss within the group.

8.   Perceived obstacles in implementing reformed pedagogies

Although implementation of CCP has proved to be highly context-specific, the challenges experienced by teachers in various African countries reveal certain similarities. Within the Ugandan context, teachers' pedagogical choices and 'successful' adoption of CCP seem to be circumscribed by, among others, inadequate teacher training, large class sizes, lack of adequate learning and teaching materials, instruction in English, unrealistic time-planning, low teacher morale, cultural appropriateness and the examination system.

8.1. Inadequate teacher training

Teachers who participated in this study had a training course of 7 or 10 days before they started to implement the new curriculum. During their training, they were taught about all aspects of the new curriculum. Except for a few teachers, all thought that training was too short, too hectic and hurried. Some also raised questions about the quality of training and about the lack of demonstrations on how CCP could be practised in a classroom context. Teachers reported that they were learning by improvising and practising on a daily basis. Indeed, P1 teachers who had been teaching the Thematic Curriculum for a second year were more convinced of its value, and they seemed more confident to teach it. Yet, more confusion, disillusion and apprehension were observed among P2 teachers who had been implementing it for only five months at the time of this research. Teachers also noted that during their own schooling and pre-service training, they were mainly exposed to traditional teaching methods; hence, they had little familiarity with the new, progressive pedagogical approaches.

Such concerns are expressed in several other African countries where the Ministries of Education have embarked on introducing CCP in primary schools. Studies show that teachers' knowledge and understanding of CCP are limited; indeed many do not understand the meaning of these approaches. They also have problems in understanding a significant number of concepts in CCP, such as facilitate, analyse, and synthesise. Therefore, the way the Ministries of Education conceptualise CCP is viewed as unrealistic. Furthermore, CCP require highly qualified and experienced teachers. Yet, the majority of teachers in sub-Saharan Africa are either under-qualified or unqualified. Hence, implementation of CCP is beyond their professional capacity (O'Grady, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2004). Furthermore, teachers have been exposed to traditional teaching methods as students during their studies and during their pre-service and in-service training. Therefore, they tend to practise what they have experienced themselves (Jessop & Penny, 1998; Serbessa, 2006). Besides, even if several institutions responsible for teacher training advocate CCP, they hardly use and model these same methods, which contributes to perpetuation of traditional teaching approaches (Leu, 2005).

8.2. Large class sizes

CCP necessitates a specifically designed environment with adequate space, resources and small classes. Yet, these are also not available in the majority

of African classrooms, since they are mostly overcrowded (O'Sullivan, 2002; USAID, 2006). There was a general acknowledgement among teachers who took part in this study that the use of CCP is more challenging when teachers are working with large numbers of pupils. The class sizes in this study ranged from 30 to 108, yet the majority was around 70. Teachers unanimously commented that it was very difficult to teach such overcrowded classes. For instance, group work was emphasized by the new curriculum, and teachers were willing to experiment more with pair or group work; however, they admitted that they often failed to do group work because of the high number of pupils, limited space within the classroom restricting teacher and student movement, and arrangement of desks for group activities. Furthermore, the recommended teaching methods, such as increasing student participation, learning by doing and group work were considered time-consuming, therefore very difficult to apply in large classes.

Moreover, it was impossible to pay individual attention to 70 or 80 pupils in a classroom during a half-hour lesson. Therefore, it was also very challenging to follow pupils' progress and provide adequate feedback. Some teachers noted that just keeping things in order requires a lot of time and effort in such classrooms. As explained by one of the teachers: 'You look at one group; try to explain things while behind you there is another group which is throwing things to each other, or doing absurd things.'

8.3. Lack of adequate learning and teaching materials

As highlighted earlier, the new curriculum promotes use of learning aids. One teacher commented that 'Previously all we needed was a blackboard and chalk, now we need lots of other materials to teach'. In observed classrooms, almost all teachers used real objects or some other learning aids, such as wall-charts and name cards. Although teachers were happy to use learning aids, they complained that they did not have enough of them. Sometimes they asked children to bring real objects, such as beans or banana leaves. Yet, even this was problematic as some children could not bring such materials due to extreme poverty. Some printed materials were provided in limited amounts to teachers or not supplied at all. Materials were often expensive, yet the budget for such expenses was only a fraction of what was needed. Consequently, school budgets were further constrained. Storage was also a real problem in classrooms as there was not enough space or cupboards to store notebooks, books or any other materials. According to a study commissioned by the Ministry (Read & Enyutu, 2005) even if textbooks were provided by the

Ministry to schools, many schools did not use them since they did not have safe storage in classrooms.

8.4. Instruction in English

The majority of sub-Saharan African countries have adopted colonial languages as their official language and the language of instruction at schools. However, there is a growing trend to use vernacular languages at the lower levels of primary education, during which pupils receive language lessons as well, such as English or French. Similarly, English is the medium of instruction in the most parts of Ugandan education system. With the Thematic Curriculum, the Government has introduced the use of local languages as the language of instruction at lower levels (P1–P3). However, all schools in Kampala use English owing to the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the city.

Language directly relates to student participation in the classroom because when children are not fluent in the language they cannot freely talk or interact with their teachers and classmates. CCP calls for higher student participation, increased interactions between pupils and teachers, and among children through group work and discussions. Nevertheless, inadequate language competency limits pupils' opportunities for participating in classroom activities. In observed schools, some children were fluent in English yet others were introduced to the language for the first time when they came to school. Those who had been to nursery schools spoke better English, and those who came from other regions, especially from rural areas in the north or east, had the most difficulties. Teachers commented that such pupils were much quieter in the classroom and had learning difficulties. Teachers often used the local language, Luganda, when they needed to explain something in detail, or to give directions to pupils. Some of them also asked children to translate what they were saying into local languages for those pupils who understood neither English nor Luganda. Similar findings were also reported in Namibia. Storeng (2001) suggests that the introduction of English as the medium of instruction into a society where English is hardly spoken seems to deprive children of a language to construct meaning. The ability of Namibian students' to reason and participate in discussions is found to be directly related to their mastery of English.

8.5. Unrealistic time-planning

Time-planning within the new curriculum was considered unrealistic. Teachers were required to teach eight learning areas per day. Yet, they believed that the Thematic Curriculum took longer to teach. The recommended teaching methods required teachers to use learning aids, such as real objects, so they needed to demonstrate objects and provide explanations about them. Written exercises and drawings were also time consuming. Therefore, 30 minutes was often insufficient, especially for literacy and Mathematics. Teachers argued that hardly any teacher could manage to teach eight learning areas in a day. Instead, they shortened the time scheduled for some learning areas, or skipped them altogether. These were often learning areas that were considered less important, such as News, Physical Education, Music, Free Activity or Religious Education. Teachers ended up teaching four or five learning areas per day, emphasizing mostly Literacy, English and Mathematics. Consequently, there was less time allocated to News and Story time which gave more opportunities to children to express themselves in the classroom. Time pressure also adversely affected teachers' tendency to organise group activities, practical work, and discussions.

8.6. Low teacher morale

Teacher motivation is considered crucial for the successful implementation of the Thematic Curriculum and for improving the quality of education in general. The Thematic Curriculum makes further demands on teachers by asking them to engage children in learning more, and by being more innovative and creative in their teaching. Yet, the majority of teachers noted that teacher morale was alarmingly low. A number of reasons were discussed in this respect including low teacher salaries, lack of incentives, low social status of the teaching profession, and inadequate working conditions.

Low teacher salary was cited as the main cause of low teacher morale. Teacher salaries in Uganda are lower than the average teacher salary in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2007). Teachers unanimously noted that their salary was not sufficient to have a decent life, especially in urban areas. Financial problems seemed to occupy their minds constantly, and distracted their attention and concentration in classroom as well. Sometimes, their own children had to stay at home because they could not afford to pay their tuition

fees. Financial difficulties also seemed to interfere with their well-being and health. The account of one of the teachers illustrates this:

> This job requires people who teach lovingly, so that children would also love learning, get motivated, interested and enjoy schooling. But in order to do that you need to motivate teachers in the first place. When you are tortured here and there, how can you come and teach enthusiastically and lovingly… When my mind is busy and preoccupied with basic necessities of my own life, how can you expect me to perform well in the classroom?

8.7. Cultural appropriateness

The appropriateness of CCP to Ugandan culture did not come up as an issue in most of the teacher interviews, yet it was raised as a topic in some of the interviews held with other key informants in the education sector. CCP is trying to develop children's critical skills and seeking to encourage children to question adults, to analyse and to explore knowledge. Yet, in traditional Ugandan culture, children are brought up to respect adults and those in authority. Questioning or challenging them is not often considered appropriate behaviour. Indeed, in many African societies, the relationship between adult and child is one of respect and authority. Children are not encouraged to question; they are expected to be respectful, charming and smiling in the company of elders. Consequently, the expectations raised by CCP directly contradict with the cultural context of African societies (O'Sullivan, 2004; Serbessa, 2006), including that of Uganda. Similar conclusions were drawn elsewhere in Asian countries as well (Nguyen et al., 2006).

8.8. Examination system

In many African countries, the education system is examination oriented. Similarly, in Uganda, the PLE causes significant anxieties and stress for schools, pupils and parents as it determines who will be eligible for admission into the limited number of places available at secondary schools. As one official explained, the PLE is very high-stakes in Uganda: 'People are struggling to get into very few places. Politicians and parents put pressure on head teachers and teachers. They even threaten their jobs.' Such substantial pressure and expectations on pupils and schools have implications for the implementation of CCP as well because teaching and learning strategies that are perceived to have little impact on student achievement in national

examinations are unlikely to be fully implemented and sustained. Hopkins (2002) suggests that this is a particularly difficult challenge for CCP as it focuses on development of skills and competencies that are not assessed by national examinations.

9. Conclusion

There has been a growing homogenisation of educational discourse in sub-Saharan Africa since 1990 (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008), and CCP has featured as one of the most widely endorsed educational policies in these countries. However, at the level of practice, there appear to be many convergences as well as divergences as educational policies are adapted and re-contextualised through multiple processes (Dale, 1999; Phillips & Ochs, 2003). Often, during the implementation stage, educational policies were interpreted and practised in a different way than that envisaged by policymakers, resulting in considerable gaps between policy and practice.

Uganda has been no exception to this; the findings of the research demonstrate that implementation of CCP in classrooms has not occurred in the ways intended by policymakers. One of the factors that seem to explain this discrepancy is the tendency of educational policies to focus on educational, social and economic development goals to be achieved through the new pedagogy and less on what is feasible and realistic in the contexts of implementation, reflecting an incompatibility between goals and realities. In other words, the limited presence of CCP in Ugandan classrooms is not due to resistance by teachers or inadequate commitment to the reforms on their part. Lack of human and material resources, capacity shortages and shortcomings in curriculum design seem to provide better explanations for the discrepancy between policy and practice. There is no doubt that authoritarian, chalk-and-talk teaching methods need to be modified and replaced by more progressive teaching and learning pedagogies. For this to happen, not only is the identification of what needs to be changed required but also the identification of the conditions necessary for successful implementation, as well as adequate provision of these conditions. Overlooking such contextual realities and capacities will inevitably result in implementation failure.

However, despite this evidence one still wonders if the professional, material, and social realities can fully explain the inconclusive results achieved by the efforts to popularise CCP in sub-Saharan Africa. Tabulawa (1997; 1998) notes that less-than-desirable implementation outcomes are often rationalised in simplistic, technical terms such as lack of resources or

inadequate teacher training. Yet he believes the real explanations have to do with teachers' assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how it ought to be transmitted, their perceptions of pupils, and what they consider to be the goals of schooling. Chisholm and Leyendecker (2008, p. 9) also acknowledge that 'The existing knowledge and assumptions about schooling and teaching need to be taken into account in creating conditions in which new learning and translation into practice becomes an appealing and viable approach.'

Furthermore, research on CCP and other approaches that fall within the category of open-ended instruction has shown that their effectiveness is not yet established because learning outcomes are mixed or inconclusive. The majority of current programmes have been developed recently and only on a small scale. So far, the attempts to institutionalise such programmes, both in industrialised and developing countries have met with limited success. They seem to be inaccessible to ordinary teachers and they lack operational clarity, hence they are subject to a variety of interpretations (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004). The effectiveness of such programmes with children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds is particularly questioned (Dembele, 2005) as well as their appropriateness for teaching lower-order cognitive skills, especially basic literacy and numeracy skills (Heneveld & Craig, 1996).

These factors are often identified as challenges that need to be overcome for effective implementation (USAID, 2006). In some other cases, however, a number of structural or cultural issues were discussed in a framework to demonstrate that CCP is not the most appropriate pedagogy for sub-Saharan Africa (O'Sullivan, 2004; Serbessa, 2006) and would never be adopted effectively by teachers even if more financial and human resources were poured into such reforms (Guthrie, 1990; Tabulawa, 1998; 2004). Guthrie (1990) suggests that teacher-centred formalistic approaches are more suitable, particularly in the light of limited resources and teacher professional capacity.

Some other researchers suggest that a combination of structured teaching methods, direct instruction, guided practice, and independent learning are more appropriate for African schools (Gauthier & Dembele, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2004; Serbessa, 2006). Moreover, Tabulawa (2003) argues that sub-Saharan African countries need to invent alternative, culturally responsive pedagogies and resist colonising/domesticating pedagogies such as CCP. He believes that since teaching and learning are contextualised activities, there can be no justification for a universal and homogenising pedagogy. By treating CCP as a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and

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learning, pedagogies that are based on indigenous knowledge systems are marginalised and the potential of these alternative pedagogies has not been explored. Perhaps, more favourable outcomes could be attained if African policymakers and educationalists consider Tabulawa's suggestion seriously, and attempted to develop indigenous knowledge systems by recognising them as legitimate knowledge and looking at ways in which they and the Western knowledge system complement each other.