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DOI

[10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.03.004)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

International Journal of Educational Development

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van de Kuilen, H. S., Kosar-Altinyelken, H., Voogt, J. M., & Nzabairwa, W. (2019). Policy adoption of learner-centred pedagogy in Rwanda: A case study of its rationale and transfer mechanisms. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 67, 64-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.03.004>

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Policy adoption of learner-centred pedagogy in Rwanda: A case study of its rationale and transfer mechanisms



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Rwanda
Learner-centred pedagogy
Education policy transfer
Policy adoption
Curriculum reform
Competence-based education

ABSTRACT

This study explores why and how learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) as a policy has been adopted in Rwanda, despite ample evidence of the failure of LCP in developing countries. The case of Rwanda, as a late adopter, shows that at this stage of pedagogy diffusion the influence of global mechanisms and actors has been amplified. This study draws upon interviews with key stakeholders and relevant documents during the 2011–2016 period. The transfer process is examined by analysing the rationale offered and mechanisms deployed by the Rwandan government and aid agencies.

1. Introduction

Learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) has become a global pedagogy or ‘best practice’ (Schweisfurth, 2011). Originating in the West, in recent decades it travelled to other parts of the world, including to sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), often as part of a wider education reform such as the new thematic curriculum in Uganda (Altinyelken, 2010b) or the introduction of outcome-based education in post-apartheid South Africa (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008). Rwanda can be perceived as a ‘late adopter’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006); a country that adopts a certain global policy at a time when the reform has already gone global. At this stage reforms are often being contested in their country of origin. At the time Rwanda adopted LCP, this pedagogy had been already contested in other developing countries as well (Schweisfurth, 2011).

In fact, the implementation of LCP in developing countries is ‘riddled with stories of failure grand and small’ (Schweisfurth, 2011, p. 425). The implementation results strongly contrast the high expectations of LCP in policy documents where it is often presented as a panacea for various societal and educational problems. This highlights the gap between policy and practice. There are three main reasons to explain this gap. First there is the nature of the educational reform itself. The speed and complexity of the change, in a language that is not always comprehensible to teachers, hinders actual implementation at classroom level (Schweisfurth, 2013). Second, in developing countries, lack of resources, including teacher capacity, is rather the rule than the exception (Vavrus et al., 2011). Third, social-cultural beliefs about

relations, knowledge and knowledge production require a paradigm shift that is not easily made (Tabulawa, 2013).

Earlier adopters showed different rationales for the adoption of LCP. In Namibia, for example, there was a common belief that LCP would contribute to democratization. After independence from South Africa in 1990, the government instantly overhauled the apartheid system; educational reforms included the adoption of LCP as a means to improve access to, equity, quality and democracy of education. The government sought the support of donors and educational advisors, many of whom had a big influence on the reforms (O’Sullivan, 2001). Another example is the introduction of a thematic curriculum in Uganda in 2007. The rationale was quality-driven: the current educational system had low achievement in literacy and numeracy, a high dropout rate and was inefficient. Like in Namibia, international donors, in this case USAID and the Aga Khan foundation, supported the adoption of LCP in the thematic curriculum (Altinyelken, 2012).

The case of Rwanda is of interest for two intertwined reasons. First, by studying late adoption when a pedagogy has already gone global, one is actually studying global policy diffusion and global reforms. Rwanda, as a late adopter, might thus give insight into the effects of globalization on a transfer process (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). The focus of this study is the policy transfer process; hence it does not include the actual implementation at classroom level. Furthermore, Rwanda is of interest because of the intense and tense relationship between global and local actors. At the one side there are many foreign aid agencies that want to have an imprint on education, whilst on the other side

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2019.03.004>

Received 3 July 2018; Received in revised form 8 March 2019; Accepted 18 March 2019

Available online 06 April 2019

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there is the government's wish for full ownership and alleviation of aid dependency (Gatete, 2016). The omnipresence of aid agencies stems from the Rwandan genocide (in 1994) and its aftermath. The genocide left the country and the education system in ruins; this urgent situation combined with feelings of guilt - the international community stood and watched too long in 1994 - led to the enormous influx of aid agencies, making Rwanda a 'donor darling' of the West. Almost 25 years after the genocide, a period in which Rwanda has shown tremendous economic and social progress (IMF, 2017), the country wants to reduce its aid dependency (MINECOFIN, 2016; MINEDUC, 2017).

Studies on policy (or pedagogy) transfer can be largely grouped into two categories. The first group looks in a normative way at this process, and the main question they address is 'Which practices are the best and should therefore be adopted?' The second group uses an analytical lens and tries to understand questions such as 'Whose practices are considered best and why?' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 154). This study uses the analytical lens, seeking to understand the ongoing borrowing of LCP whilst the implementation results- or policy practice gap - warn against its adoption. By doing so, this study contributes to the debate about policy diffusion and LCP as a travelling policy. The analysis focuses on the rationale offered and the transfer mechanisms deployed by aid agencies and the Rwandan government. The following two research questions are central to the analysis in this article: 1) What was the rationale for the adoption of LCP in Rwandan education system? and 2) Which globalisation mechanisms of education policy transfer were used in this process?

The results of this case study are drawn from interviews with key stakeholders involved in the transfer of LCP to Rwanda and a review of relevant documents. The article is organized as follows: it starts with a brief overview of Rwandan education after 1994, followed by a review of theories related to the rationale for and globalisation mechanisms of educational transfer. After a description of the method and sample, the findings are presented. Finally, the article concludes by identifying global transfer features that may explain the persistent status of LCP as 'best practice'.

2. Contextual background

Initially, during the first post-genocide years, the government literally had to rebuild the education system. An inclusive education open to both ethnic groups (Hutu and Tutsi) became a priority. The government thereby broke with the colonial and postcolonial educational periods, during which Hutu and Tutsi, respectively, were excluded. The post-genocide curriculum strongly emphasized one national identity and left no room for even mentioning the names of the ethnic groups (Williams, 2016).

After the genocide large numbers of aid agencies entered the country, all wanting to contribute to the recovery of this devastated country and to the much-needed education reforms. The British Department for International Development (DfID), United States Agency of International Development (USAID) and UNICEF have been the major contributors to the education sector (Williams, 2016). In line with the ambitions of the Government of Rwanda (GoR), these donors supported EFA. The rationale differed, though; while the GoR saw this as a means for national unity and reconciliation, the donors did so because of their commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Hayman, 2007).

The focus on EFA yielded positive enrolment results: overall attendance at primary schools increased from 62.5% of eligible students in 1990 to 88.2% in 2012 and to 97.7% in 2016 (Abbott et al., 2015; MINEDUC, 2017). At the same time, this success seriously jeopardized the quality of education. Reports and articles about educational quality showed an alarming picture. For instance, an evaluation report about literary and numeracy skills in primary schools, conducted in 2011, showed that only 21% of primary 6 pupils reached a reading speed of 60 or more words per minute, whilst according US standards, a child

with a reading speed of less than 80 words per minute is considered at risk as far as further schooling (USAID, 2014). An evaluation report of DfID's programmes also raised concerns, stating that the quality of education in Rwanda:

...is so low that it seriously detracts from the development impact of DfID's educational assistance. To achieve near-universal primary enrolment but with a large majority of pupils failing to attain basic levels of literacy or numeracy is not, in our view, a successful development result. (ICAI, 2012, p. 22)

From the government's perspective, though, getting children into the classroom was the first step, which had to be followed by improvements in quality, because 'there can be no quality without access' (Williams, 2016, p. 3).

There were several causes for the poor educational quality. First, as in many sub-Saharan countries, higher enrolment put pressure on educational quality due to a higher teacher-pupil ratio, lack of resources and insufficient supply of teachers. Second, different from most other African countries, in 2010 the GoR pushed the expansion of 6-year basic education to 12 years, leading to an even bigger shortage of qualified teachers (Hayman, 2007). Third, in order to stimulate economic regional integration with Anglophone neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, the GoR decided in 2009 to change the language of instruction from French to English. The decision was made and communicated overnight and the system had no time to respond. A study by the British Council, conducted three years after this switch, showed that 99.5% of primary teachers were at the beginner or elementary level in English (Williams, 2016).

Quality of education became a priority in 2013 when the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) acting through the Rwanda Education Board (REB) began a curriculum revision for primary and secondary education. The rises in enrolment provided room for quality improvement. Education now had to support the country's ambition to become a middle-income country in 2020 and an upper middle-income country by 2035. This ambition required a highly skilled labour force (MINECOFIN, 2000, 2016). The revision process started in June of 2013. Less than two years later, in April of 2015, REB presented the new curriculum to the wider public. The implementation started in February of 2016, with the start of the new school year. There was no pilot test prior to the implementation. The new curriculum is competence-based and explicitly promotes LCP as the preferred pedagogy. Competence-based Education (CBE) is defined in the new curriculum as being opposed to knowledge-based education, with a focus on application of knowledge rather than definition of content. The competences, which include knowledge, skills, attitude and values, are evaluated against set standards. Learner-centred teaching and learning activities should replace the traditional teaching practices. Learner-centred is understood as an approach that addresses learners' individual needs and background with active teaching methods that encourages learners to construct knowledge individually or in groups (REB, 2015b).

With the choice of CBE and LCP, Rwanda followed its neighbouring countries. Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya also adopted a competence-based curriculum with LCP as the favoured classroom pedagogy. Tanzania was the first to introduce CBE in secondary education (in 2005), followed by Uganda (in primary education in 2007, in secondary education in 2017) and Kenya (in primary education in 2016) (Altinyelken, 2010a; Hardman et al., 2009; NCDC, 2013; Tanzania Institute of Education, 2010; UNESCO - IBE, 2017; Vavrus and Bartlett, 2012). Their rationales referred to national needs and international demands. The national needs differed; in Uganda, for instance, there was the inefficiency of the system and concerns about low educational quality, whilst in Kenya the new curriculum had to overcome social ills such as drug abuse and corruption. What these countries, including Rwanda, have in common is the ambition to prepare their youth for the current labour market.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Learner-centred pedagogy

It is not easy to define LCP because of the plethora of associated terms, such as inquiry-based learning or progressive education, and the many definitions users have for this pedagogy (Schweisfurth, 2013). There are nevertheless two approaches to unpacking the meaning of LCP. The first one is through contrasting it with what LCP is opposed to, namely, traditional teacher-led education. LCP is based on the learning theory of constructivism and teacher-led education is based on behaviourism (Vavrus et al., 2011). Starting with the latter, the roots of behaviourist learning psychology lie in positivism and assume that knowledge is objective and lies outside the knower. Translated to teaching this means that teachers ‘deliver’ knowledge to students who receive it as unquestionable. Learners are empty vessels to be filled. This is what Freire (2009) calls the ‘banking’ concept of education, where student receive, file and store knowledge like deposits in a bank. The teacher is viewed as the expert and steers the teaching and learning process. LCP, on the other hand, finds its roots in constructivism, a guiding philosophy that assumes that knowledge emerges through interactions, enabling learners to create new knowledge that interacts with their prior knowledge and experiences. In a classroom setting this means that teachers create conditions for students to discover and actively construct knowledge, including higher order thinking and metacognitive skills (Schuh, 2003; Duffy and Cunningham, 1996).

The second approach to unpacking LCP is through presenting this pedagogy on a continuum from less to more learner-centred. The scales for the continuum are: 1) technique: from frontal ‘chalk and talk’ to independent and group inquiry; 2) classroom relationships: from authoritarian to democratic; 3) learner motivation: from extrinsic to intrinsic; 4) nature of knowledge: from fixed to fluid; 5) curriculum: from fixed to negotiated and; 6) teacher role: from solely authoritative to facilitator of learning (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Tabulawa (2013) takes a more radical stance and states that learner-centred and teacher centred education are diametrically opposed to each other. The difference is not mere technical, but rather value based. For teachers to make their teaching learner-centred, they have to undergo a paradigm shift, because the two approaches – or paradigms – have incompatible perceptions about knowledge, knowledge construction and evaluation.

3.2. Education policy transfer

Education policy transfer can be defined as ‘the movement of educational ideas, institutions or practices across national borders’ (Beech, 2006, p. 2). Initially, education ideas or policies moved from one national setting to another. This can be considered as a transnational transfer. During later stages, when more nations have adopted that certain reform, the traces of the transnational borrowing seem to disappear and the new ideas or practices have become global reforms or international standards (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Marsh and Sharman, 2009). At this stage, one can speak of diffusion rather than transfer.

According to the analytical framework, developed by Philips and Ochs (2003), education policy transfer has four phases. The first phase is cross-national attraction; here the key question is *why* and *how* foreign or global policies or ideas are borrowed. The second phase is decision and consists of a variety of measures through which governments or other agencies start a certain reform. The third phase is implementation and looks at the way policies are locally interpreted, re-defined, modified and implemented. The last phase is internalization or indigenisation and here one examines the impact of policy transfer on existing structures, policies and practices.

Regarding the transfer of LCP, Schweisfurth’s review of 72 studies on LCP confirms the status of this pedagogy as a travelling and global policy (Schweisfurth, 2011). Countries adopt LCP, because they regard

it as a panacea for a myriad of educational and social problems. In another publication Schweisfurth (2013) distinguished three main rationales to justify to the adoption of LCP. First, there is the ‘cognitive justification’; the primary concern here is the effectiveness of learning, with the assumption that this increases when people have more control over their learning and when constructivism is taken as a guiding principle. The second justification is ‘emancipation’, which is grounded on the idea that LCP contributes to the freedom of individuals and democratic citizenship. The third is the ‘preparatory’ justification, which focuses on preparation for a global and knowledge-based society. This rationale is economy-driven and wants learners to become flexible and creative employees who can adapt to the ever-changing needs of the labour market.

This article encompasses the first phase and looks at the rationale and the mechanisms of the transfer of LCP to Rwanda.

3.3. Rationale

There are several theories that address the question *why* countries adopt pedagogies from abroad. *Modernist* theorists argue that countries voluntarily adopt foreign pedagogies simply because they are better (Anderson-Levitt, 2008). This is intensified through technological innovations such as the internet and the emergence of a more semantic construction of global education with terms such as ‘global development trends’ and ‘world models’ (Schriewer, 2003).

Three different schools have criticized the modernization perspective, stating that there is more at hand than the existence of best practices or world models. The first critique comes from *world-system* theorists. They argue that education is converging because a certain approach benefits those countries and institutions that possess, through aid agencies, the power to enforce a policy transfer to less powerful countries or institutions. Policies move from the ‘haves’ to the ‘have nots’ or from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere (Perry and Tor, 2008). A representative of this school is Tabulawa (2003). He analysed educational change in southern Africa (Namibia, Botswana and South Africa) and concluded that the transfer of LCP to those countries was enforced and facilitated by aid agencies because this pedagogy would support the spread of democratisation and capitalist ideology.

Modernization theory is also refuted by *world-culture* (or neo-institutionalism) theorists. They assert that culture, in the sense of ideology, drives nations to borrow new ideas. This happens not necessarily because the ideas are better, but because under the influence of global forces and international discourse they are *perceived* as such. A striking example is the borrowing and implementation of inquiry-based teaching in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and the assumption that such a pedagogical approach is a prerequisite for the acquisition of inquiry skills as a learning outcome (Guthrie, 2012). This is, for instance, strongly disputed by Kirschner et al. (2006) who argue that such a pedagogy conflicts with knowledge about human cognitive nature and that guided instruction yields better learning outcomes, including inquiry skills.

The third critique to the modernist view comes from *post-colonial* theorists. These scholars agree with *world-system* and *world-culture* theorists, confirming that new ideas or technologies flow from the developed to the developing world, from the rich to the poor. They include however the active role and agency of the receiving countries; actors in the recipient countries have to power to reject or adapt borrowed ideas to their local context, creating creole or blend practices (Altinyelken, 2010a; Anderson-Levitt, 2008). Even in contexts of asymmetrical power relations, there is room for negotiations between indigenous and new pedagogies (Rizvi et al., 2006). Another tendency that fits within this post-colonial perspective is the emersion of bottom up initiatives to preserve indigenous culture as a reaction to foreign formal education (May and Aikman, 2003).

According to Steiner-Khamsi (2006), there is also a political and

economic dimension involved in the borrowing and lending process. Countries are receptive to foreign influence if this suits their political agenda, especially in times of political unrest when borrowing can have a 'salutary effect on domestic policy conflict' (p. 671). In the case of low-income countries, she also underlines the economic dimension. Most of these countries depend on external aid and transfer often occurs when grants or loans made available to implement a certain policy or pedagogy.

3.4. Mechanism

Looking into the question *how* pedagogies are being transferred, there seems to be a common pattern: 1) a local problem is identified; 2) solutions are sought in foreign educational systems; 3) a 'tested' institution or educational practice that 'works best' or is perceived as such is emulated and implemented in a new context (Beech, 2006; Philips and Ochs, 2003).

The identification of a local problem is what Philips and Ochs (2003; 2004) call an 'impulse' or a precondition for borrowing. They distinguish eight impulses: 1) creeping internal dissatisfaction (students, inspectors, etc.); 2) systematic collapse (inadequacy of (parts of) the education system); 3) negative external evaluation; 4) economic change/competition; 5) political change; 6) new national or international configurations (global tendencies, international alliances); 7) innovation in knowledge and skills and; 8) political change (Philips and Ochs, 2003). The impulses can thus originate from within, but can also be enforced by external or global forces.

Solutions or 'best practices' are found in 'reference countries' such as Finland or Singapore. These countries perform well in international studies that compare pupil performance, of which OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is likely the most influential. Referring to those countries has become a powerful tool to justify borrowing. 'Best practices' are often promoted by a network of academics, consultants or think tanks acting as intermediaries. They assume that educational systems are directly commensurable, thereby neglecting specific contextual factors. Instead, there is strong belief in the scientific and evidence-based character of the international rankings (Auld and Morris, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

New pedagogies cross borders via various mechanisms. Dale's (1999) typology is a useful framework for the identification of these. He distinguishes traditional mechanisms (borrowing and learning) from globalization mechanisms (harmonization, dissemination, standardization, installing interdependence and imposition). The main difference between these two types is the source of initiation. Borrowing and learning are initiated by a single nation, whilst globalisation mechanisms originate from a supranational body. The working of the mechanisms is described on the basis of several dimensions: the *scope* of the mechanism, the *locus of viability*, the *mode of power*, the *initiating source* and the *nature of the parties to the exchange*. The first global mechanism is harmonization, which is best exemplified by the European Union. Collaboration between member countries encompasses multiple policies that are agreed upon collectively. Dissemination, the second mechanism, is evident, for instance, in the OECD's attempt to develop international indicators for education systems. Through agenda and goal setting, the OECD exerts influence over member countries. While harmonization is initiated by the member states themselves, dissemination originates from an external body. The third mechanism, standardization, derives from constructed and propagated worldwide models, also stemming from supranational entities, but with a less assertive and smaller range of power. The fourth mechanism is installing interdependence, a mechanism that relates to policies and issues that extend beyond the scope of a nation state, such as the environment or peace. The last global mechanism is imposition, whereby recipient countries are compelled to accept certain policies, without a learning or cooperation aspect, like the requirements that come along with World Bank loans (Dale, 1999).

National financial shortages not only lead to imposition, but also enable other nations and aid agencies to exert influence over recipient countries' policies through direct budgetary support. Swedlund (2013), for instance, examined the effects of budgetary support in Rwanda and Tanzania. She concluded that this financial support led not only to more collaboration, but also to more influence for the donors in three different ways. First there was voice amplification through joining up of big and smaller donors. Second, sector support provided the donors a seat at the (decision making) table. Lastly, donors got a 'license to ask'. Instead of setting conditions as in the old style of official development assistance (ODA), budgetary support gave donors the opportunity to ask questions and even to intervene in the targeted or related sectors (Swedlund, 2013).

There are various actors who play a role in the transfer process. To get more insight into their roles and their effects on the success or failure of transfer, Dolowitz and Marsh posed the following questions: 1) Why do actors engage in policy transfer?; 2) Who are the key actors involved in the policy transfer process? (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Other scholars have given some answers to these questions. Beech (2006) and Rappleye (2006) stated that with globalisation new actors other than the traditional national borrower or lender have entered the arena. Global actors do not belong to a specific nation state, but instead represent the voice of the global discourse and can be perceived as a neutral third force or actor. Those actors are, for instance, transnational corporations, think tanks, supra-national governmental organizations, NGOs and consultants. The voice of these global actors is also increasingly heard in agenda setting and via the spread of rankings, reports and the intertwining of loans or grants and education reform (Auld and Morris, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

4. Sample and method

This study follows a case study approach since it aims at answering the questions *why* and *how* LCP has been adopted in Rwanda. It examines the transfer of LCP in the period 2011–2016.

This article draws upon interviews with representatives of international non-governmental aid agencies and governmental institutions. Interviewees were selected because they took part in the transfer of LCP or because of their influential position in the education sector. Nearly all actors involved in education are member of the Rwanda Education NGO Coordination Platform (RENCP). One of the aims of RENCP is to align activities of aid agencies with each other and the Rwandan government. Via this platform the main researcher contacted relevant organisations which on their turn could redirect to other institutions or agencies. The small country size enables government and aid agencies to work closely together, which facilitated the selection and contact.

The Rwandan government, through the Ministry of Education, department of Science Technology and Research allocated a research permit to the researcher. Any research conducted in Rwanda should be carried out with a national affiliated institution, in this case the University of Rwanda. The nature and subject of the research did not require additional ethical scrutiny. The permit explicitly requested selected national institutions to provide support and access to relevant documents. International participants fall beyond the scope of the permit. They were approached individually and informed about the purpose. All the selected organisations were willing to cooperate and made ample time available.

The interviews are complemented with a document review. Documents were selected if they contained information about general education reforms or more specifically about the transfer or use of LCP. All aid agencies without hesitation shared their documentation, which included training manuals, and annual and project reports. Governmental institutions shared most documents through their websites. If this was not the case, the researcher could retrieve selected documents via the national education platform or from members of working groups (Table 1).

Table 1
Overview sample.

	No of interviewees	Documents
Aid agency representatives (DfID, USAID/EDC, Help a Child, IEE, UNICEF, VSO, VVOB)	7	Annual reports (3) Operational plans (1) Training manuals (4) Project reports (3)
Education sector representatives	3	East African Community curriculum framework REB Curriculum Framework Education Sector Strategic Plan 2013/14-2017/18 Vision 2020 REB Teacher training manual

The interviews were conducted in the period from November, 2014 till May, 2017. The interviews took place at participants' offices and participants were informed about the aim of the study. The length of the interviews varied from 25 to 85 min. Except for a joint interview with two DfID representatives, interviews were on a one-to-one basis. All but two interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and covered the following topics: mapping of actors and their inter-relationships, their definition or understanding of LCP, the rationale for promoting LCP and the mechanism used. All interviews were conducted in English, except one interview with a Flemish organization (VVOB) that was conducted in Dutch. The processed notes for the two non-recorded interviews were sent back to the interviewees to check for omissions and errors.

The interviews were first transcribed fully, read and analysed together with the selected documents with the help of ATLAS-ti, using codes derived from preliminary readings. The first set of codes were defined by two members of the research team and sharpened at a later stage by the main researcher. The main codes were: definition, actors, rationale, mechanisms, power and influence, all derived from the theoretical framework. The main codes were broken down into sub-codes; for instance, the main code rationale contained the sub-codes impulses and justification, which were also sub-divided into sub codes such as preparatory (justification) and creeping internal dissatisfaction (impulse). The results of the analysis were summarized, shared and discussed with the other researchers. This discussion led to the emergence of four themes that structure the findings. The findings were subsequently presented and discussed with the Rwandan member of the research team who checked for contextual issues.

The main researcher herself was a Rwandan resident during the period of data collection. Besides conducting this research, she worked as an educational advisor and was a member of RENCP. This enabled her to get easy access to key stakeholders and documents and to create contextual sensitivity. Interviews with international and national participants were easier because the researcher was already familiar with the context and main players. In her role as educational advisor she visited a wide variety of schools in which teachers to various extents tried to implement LCP. However, she was never involved in the policy transfer process and thus, regarding this study, had the position of an outsider.

5. Findings

The transfer of LCP to Rwanda in the period 2011–2016 can be divided into two phases, partly overlapping each other. The first phase, which ran from 2011 till approximately 2015, concerned the pedagogical innovation projects of several aid agencies. Although during and prior to this period the GoR regularly mentioned educational quality as a matter of concern, their main focus continued to be on inclusive education. This changed around 2013 when the good enrolment results allowed the GoR to shift their attention to quality in the form of a national curriculum revision that included the adoption of LCP. This revision process is considered the second phase (2013–2016). The

findings represent the perspectives of two groups of actors: the aid agencies and the GoR plus its affiliated educational institutions.

5.1. Rationale

An examination of the rationale reflects the high national ambitions and Rwanda the prominent role of the many donors in the education sector. In order to achieve quickly the status of a middle-income country, Rwanda acknowledged the crucial role of education and the need for international support to achieve this ambition. Regarding rationale two main themes emerged: ambition and the economic dimension.

5.1.1. Ambitions

In the first phase, all aid agencies in the sample had the ambition to improve the quality of education through the promotion of LCP, therein referring to the cognitive justification.

If they can take this up and really implement it, it would be helpful and indeed improve education. And then I mean all the elements of active learning or learner-centred teaching. (Representative Help a Child)

According to one aid agency, at this stage MINEDUC was not ready to recognize the need for quality improvement.

But from the government perspective, we are not allowed to say, because in theory the teachers are expected to teach in a learner-centred way, because they graduated from a teacher training college. But we know the reality from the ground and we know that this is not the case. The reality is that teachers have pedagogical gaps. (Representative of Inspire, Educate and Empower (IEE) Rwanda)

In the second phase the government's priority moved from access and inclusive education to economic demands. The ambition to become a globally competitive knowledge-based economy - which requires a highly skilled labour force - made the government start to examine the current situation.

With the help of an international consultant we started looking at the gaps in the existing education system. Graduates and employers were interviewed and asked about the current performance of employees. The researchers showed that till then education focused on memorization only and that there was little or no room for hands-on skills. For example, in English, the subject was taught, but the learners were not able to communicate. (Representative REB)

The curriculum revision had to foresee this gap and to equip 'a critical mass of the population with knowledge, skills and attitude to be highly competitive in the global market' (REB, 2015a, p. 1). This situation 'necessitated the shift to competence-based curriculum to address the issue of lack of appropriate skills in the Rwandan education system' (REB, 2015a, p. iv).

In sum, where aid agencies had the ambition to improve educational quality by itself through LCP, the GoR framed the new curriculum and

concomitant pedagogy mainly in terms of the preparatory justification. As *Schweisfurth (2013)* stated, these cognitive and preparatory narratives are used as justifications when hard evidence about causality is lacking. In Rwanda this is also the case, according to DfID's representatives. Where several aid agencies tried to 'teach' and 'inform' MINEDUC about the benefits of LCP, most organizations struggled to even come up with robust evidence of what worked and why. The suitability of LCP in developing countries was not questioned. According to UNICEF's representative this issue was not brought to the discussion table, though the curriculum revisers were aware of the implementation failure of LCP in Tanzania. In 2005, Tanzania revised its secondary education curriculum to be competence based, but due to a lack of implementation support this revision was perceived as a failure. Rwandan revisers therefore urged for integration of implementation issues right from the start and not after the curriculum had been designed (*REB, 2015a*).

5.1.2. The economic dimension

The Rwandan education sector can count on financial support from international donors through three channels. First, there is direct education sector support; second, there is support in the form of programmes run by aid agencies; and lastly, the Rwandan education sector receives technical assistance from experts paid by donors. The last is difficult to translate into exact numbers. In the period 2011–2016, the first two forms of financial support counted for an average of 26% of all education spending, of which, again on average, 40% was allocated to primary education. In absolute numbers, DfID, commissioned by MINEDUC, calculated from various sources that the average yearly official development assistance (ODA) in the same period was nearly 70 million USD. (*MINEDUC, 2017*).

Overall, the case of Rwanda confirms the general trend that the policy of pedagogy transfer to developing countries occurs when funds are made available (*Perry and Tor, 2008; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014*). In the first phase the transfer of LCP was mostly made possible due to the three main donors. DfID provided a fund of 16 million pounds called Innovation for Education (IfE) which enabled 26 selected organizations to test new ideas to improve the quality of education. This included three organizations who ran a programme explicitly promoting LCP, all with a limited geographical scope. The two other main players, USAID and UNICEF, both ran a nationwide programme. USAID promoted LCP through a numeracy and literacy programme. UNICEF provided a two-week training course to all teachers on active teaching methods and started an early childhood programme that also included LCP. These initiatives were reinforced through a national (in-service) school-based mentorship (SBM) programme. This programme was set up to give all primary and secondary teachers English language support, but it was soon recognized that most teachers also lacked pedagogical skills. In some case the mentors and aid agencies tried to collaborate with each other to overcome this gap. USAID, for instance, saw the SBM programme as an additional channel to implement their materials and approaches.

In the second phase MINEDUC, with the Rwandan Education Board (REB) as the executive agency, took the steering wheel. The funding for the curriculum revision, though, came from outside; upon request by MINEDUC, UNICEF financed the whole process and recruited and paid for two international consultants who guided the process. This is not to say that the many aid agencies were left aside; on the contrary. According to UNICEF, the whole curriculum review process was characterized as being highly consultative, incorporating the voices and stakes of donors and national educators, but with REB making the final decisions.

5.2. Mechanisms

An analysis of the mechanisms also means an identification of the actors or bodies involved in the transfer process. The traditional

distinction between lender (GoR) and borrower (aid agencies) seems to have faded, confirming *Beech (2006)* and *Rappleye's (2006)* observation that new global actors now play a (decisive) role in transfer process. For instance, the whole curriculum revision process, initiated by the GoR, was facilitated by two international consultants. The distinction between traditional and global mechanism did not hold up either; the Belgium organization VVOB used the traditional learning mechanism, but they tried to learn about a global pedagogy. The mechanisms nonetheless showed an intense interaction between the GoR and foreign and supranational influences, which is captured in two themes: 'international and regional influence' and 'close collaboration'.

5.2.1. International and regional influence

In the first phase, the three main donors with the help of the smaller aid agencies tried to inform MINEDUC and advocate for LCP. For instance, the DfID representatives felt it their responsibility to inform MINEDUC about successful interventions.

MINEDUC tends to take lessons learned from the project as a starting point for embedding these into new government policies and programmes. (DfID representatives)

All aid agencies mentioned the close and good collaboration with MINEDUC, but at the same time one aid agency showed his frustration that important decisions were made without consultation of the real experts.

The GoR listens to us, but sometimes it's difficult for them to process the feedback, due to lack of time. And in some cases, decisions are made without the consultation of technical experts. Those with influence are not always the ones with technical knowledge. (Representative VSO)

The most dominant actor in the first phase seemed to be UNICEF; this organisation had the means and position, more than the smaller aid agencies with less budget and influence at national level, to deploy not only the traditional learning mechanism, but also standardization (*Dale, 1999*) and strengthening of enabling structures (*Philips and Ochs, 2003*). The last means technical support for the governmental institutions responsible for the execution of policies and programs. Regarding standardization, UNICEF set, for instance, international standards for early childhood development centres and showcased these standards in model centres. Another example is the Whole School Development programme, which built upon an earlier form of standardization, that is, the child-friendly schools.

UNICEF launched the Whole School Development Programme (WSD) in 10 Child Friendly Schools to influence national systems by modelling effective teaching and learning practices.... Workshops on child-centred learning, school leadership and management, community engagement and inclusive education took place. (*UNICEF, 2014, p. 25*)

Support for enabling structures did not come only from UNICEF; USAID and DfID also supported the GoR and its institutions with technical expertise. In the case of USAID this was an integral part of their language and literacy programme.

One of the programme objectives is to improve ministry capacity and on request of MINEDUC we can put in a short-term technical advisor, depending on their needs. (Representative USAID project)

In the second phase there were two other transfer mechanisms. First there was the belief in 'best practices' fed by PISA rankings (*Auld and Morris, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014*). The GoR proved to be receptive to these rankings and the so-called reference countries, arguing that they wanted the best for their country's education. According to UNICEF, there was also a strong desire during the many sessions to aim for the best and a modern curriculum, not for something mediocre. REB thus undertook several field visits and conducted research to come to the

decision to follow the – according to them – worldwide move from a knowledge-based to a competence-based curriculum.

The growing influence of international comparisons such as the PISA test... has provided increasing incentives to countries around the world to adopt a competence-based approach....Japan responded to its unsatisfactory performance in the PISA tables in 2003 by adopting a competence-based curriculum and, as a result, has seen its league table position steadily improve and was ranked second in mathematics and first in both reading and science in 2012. (REB, 2015a, p. 4)

A second mechanism was regional harmonization. Rwanda is a member of the East African Community (EAC, 2014) and in 2014 the members drafted a common curriculum framework that prescribes LCP.

The proposed curriculum framework should take into account human rights and children's rights, life skills and values and practices. As a result, a learner-centred approach should be adopted to ensure that learners 'individual situations, needs, interests and abilities are integrated in the planning. (EAC, 2014, p. 17)

The call for the adoption of LCP thus came from several sources: foreign nations and donors, supranational bodies, as well as from the region. The multiple mechanisms combined with the lack of any critical note regarding the suitability of LCP in developing countries, seem to have made the adoption of this pedagogy inevitable.

5.2.2. Close collaboration

The Rwandan case was also characterized by close collaboration between aid agencies and MINEDUC. For instance, this is exemplified by the fact that when one speaks about the education sector, one talks about MINEDUC, UNICEF and DfID. This is not to say that the smaller aid agencies and the other big donor, USAID, have no influence. On the contrary, there are several working groups and taskforces organized around a specific area of education, for instance, early childhood education or teacher development. Quite a few of these groups, though, are chaired or co-chaired by one of the three big donors. Aid agencies in education are furthermore assembled in RENCP, the earlier mentioned national platform in which the members try to harmonize initiatives and that enables them to speak with one voice to the Ministry.

The transfer of LCP in the first phase reflected this close collaboration and led to reinforcement of initiatives, but also to conflicts. Reinforcement, for instance, happened through employment of the same international implementers by several organizations.

Three projects are being implemented with the help of our employees: early childhood education from UNICEF, the L3 project from USAID and our own project called INSPIRED. (Representative VSO)

Conflicting approaches led to some counter effects, though.

For example, in Bugesera district, we introduced our active learning approach, but Plan Rwanda was doing another project for DfID. They had iPads with already prepared lessons on it, a model lesson that teachers could deliver. That would not work with our methodology. (Representative Help a Child)

Not only conflicting approaches, but also the fact that there were so many agencies reaching out to schools bounced back on some occasions. On the question why the organization Help a Child achieved little at one teacher training college, the answer was:

They had like UNICEF, they had VSO, they had a number of NGOs that were working in the same school and apparently they were motivated (receiving money – Ed.) in some way. For us, we just came to train and we didn't give money or anything else. (Representative Help a Child)

In the second phase, as indicated before, REB took the lead, but

allowed aid agencies to influence the process and outcomes through the very consultative character of the curriculum revision process.

The curriculum framework has been developed taking into account feedback from various consultations with stakeholders ranging from learners, teachers and parents to the private sector organizations, local administration and policy makers. (REB, 2015a, p. 14)

According to UNICEF, aid agencies were represented during each phase of the curriculum revision and took advantage of this reform to promote their own agendas.

Many organizations took the opportunity to promote what they stood for, their niche, and this is reflected in the curriculum. For instance, several organizations promoted inclusive education, Never Again Rwanda promoted peace education, etc. Plus these organizations provided technical support. (Representative UNICEF)

The opportunity to join up and as such to influence the education sector (Swedlund, 2013) is made easier in the case of Rwanda by the country's small size. In a country nearly the size of Belgium and with all office headquarters and governmental institutions in the capital, it is easy to meet and collaborate.

6. Conclusion and discussion

An examination of the rationales for and mechanisms involved in late adoption of LCP in Rwanda shows that at this stage of dissemination, the influence of global transfer mechanisms and actors seems to have been amplified. Although there was ample empirical evidence available about the policy practice gap of LCP in developing countries, the key stakeholders did not question LCP itself. Instead, the (non-contested) belief in the salutary effect of this pedagogy seems to have grown. The findings of this study show that this can be explained by the multiple global mechanisms deployed and the omnipresence of global actors in Rwanda.

First, this study demonstrates how international rankings and belief in 'world models' affect a transfer process. The normal pattern of education reform includes a quest for 'best practices' (Beech, 2006; Philips and Ochs, 2003). Initially aid agencies identified LCP as a remedy for poor educational quality, followed by the government, who perceived LCP together with CBE as the means to overcome the skills gap in Rwandan education. The government felt inspired by the good performance of some Asian countries who adopted CBC, but not LCP. This distinction between CBC and LCP though was not made, nor was the question about contextual suitability asked. Apparently, the discourse of (perceived) 'best practices' was so strong that this left no room for doubts or discussion, making a case for *world culture* theorists.

Second, the case of Rwanda shows that at this stage LCP not only travelled from North to South, but, through the mechanism of regional harmonization, also within the South. Rwanda is a member of the EAC, and in 2014 all member states (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda and South Sudan) drafted a curriculum framework and agreed to harmonize their national educational systems according to this framework. This included the adoption of LCP, illustrating that pedagogies not only travel from the 'haves' to the 'have-nots', as *world systems* theorists argue, but that the transfer also takes place within the Southern Hemisphere.

Last, this study also shows that the many aid agencies and the way they are organised created 'amplification' for the promotion of LCP. Overall, the many aid agencies played a major, if not decisive, role in the transfer process and in the education sector in general. This is best illustrated by the fact that when one speaks about the education sector in Rwanda, one means MINEDUC, DfID and UNICEF. They have what is called 'a (permanent) seat at the decision-making table' (Swedlund, 2013, p. 358). Simultaneously there is 'voice amplification' that occurs when smaller (and bigger) donors join up, allowing them to speak with one voice, as is the case in Rwanda. Despite the incidental conflicts due

to varying strategies and methodologies, there is a general tendency to align programmes. Nearly all education aid agencies participate in the national educational platform called Rwandan Education NGO Co-operation Platform (RENCP) or in the many working groups or task-forces, enabling them to speak with one voice and to actively participate in education reforms, as was the case during the curriculum revision.

A study of late adopters not only sheds light on globalization effects, but also gives insight into the economic dimension of pedagogy transfer (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). This study shows that without the international aid agencies, the adoption of LCP most likely would not have occurred. In the first phase, a DfID fund plus individual aid programmes enabled the transfer of LCP to schools. In the second phase, UNICEF, at the request of the GoR, decided to fund the whole curriculum review process. Without this financial support, which permitted the consultative character of the process and the technical support of the many aid agencies, it is unlikely that the new curriculum would have such a learner-centred appearance.

The omnipresence of aid agencies and their resources explain why the GoR adopted LCP, but the question remains why those aid agencies did not discuss the empirical evidence of the limitations of LCP in developing countries. One of the possible explanations might be the fact that CBC and LCP were adopted hand in hand, leading to the incorrect assumption that the good results of some Asian countries could not only be explained by the choice for CBC, but also be attributed to LCP. Another explanation might be the distinction between the pedagogy itself and the implementation of LCP. Aid agencies might ascribe the disappointing results to implementation issues only, rather than to the pedagogy itself. A third explanation might have been the ambitious atmosphere that characterized the process. Those involved in the curriculum revision strived for the best and not for something mediocre and that might have immunized them for the likely problems of LCP.

One can also raise the question why the issue of language-in-education has not been mentioned in documents or by the interviewees. Language and the use of English (or French) as the language of instruction is often discussed in relation to learning outcomes and African development (Trudell, 2016; Brock-Utne, 2001). Lack of this discussion is remarkable considering the fact that the majority of teachers is far from fluent in English. This can affect the implementation of LCP in a twofold manner. First, a reform in a language incomprehensible to teachers is, as indicated before, one of the explanations for the policy practice gap. In this case, the lack of teachers' fluency in English and the introduction of various new concepts and definitions like generic competences and cross cuttings might seriously hinder a good understanding, as was the case with a curriculum reform in South Africa and Uganda (Jansen, 2006; Altinyelken et al., 2014). Second, one can imagine that lack of English proficiency on the part of teachers and students seriously impacts classroom interactions and participation, which is at the core of LCP. For instance, a study of Mulumba and Masaazi (2012) showed that in case of insufficient language skills teachers and students tend to fall back on cramming.

Another remaining question is how LCP is going to be implemented at classroom level in Rwanda. As *post-colonial* theorists suggest recipient countries have the power and agency to adapt or recontextualize this pedagogy for their own local context. The many definitions and appearances of LCP indicate a certain contextual flexibility. Schweisfurth's initiative to the development of minimum standards of LCP give room to local interpretation and application of this pedagogy. Further research should therefore focus on if and how teachers adapt LCP to their daily classroom reality and ultimately, if this modified form of LCP fulfils the many promises that accompanied and justified its adoption.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding

agencies in the public, commercial or not-for profit sectors.

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