**Managing Change in the Teaching and Learning of Geography in South African FET Classrooms**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Education systems are currently changing to learner-centred pedagogical approaches. The transformation and its effects and impact on pedagogy have been spreading throughout the regions of the world (Catling & Willy, 2010). With geography being an in-and-outdoor theoretical and practical subject, it, therefore, requires active learning for learners to enhance and promote their cognitive abilities for lifelong learning. Prior to 1994 in South Africa, traditional teacher-centred methods of learning were the order of the day (Vavrus et al., 2011). In 2012 a new policy known as the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was introduced to mitigate challenges as well as enhance and develop teaching exercises to support learners’ acquisition of knowledge through understanding, instead of recalling and reproducing memorized facts. The challenge in the teaching and learning of geography in schools is that most teachers are still using traditional teaching-learning practices, where learners become objects to be filled with information by teachers (Swarts, 2003). These traditional practices seem to make learners passive in their knowledge-construction processes. In most South African public schools, the inefficient practice of learner-centred teaching and learning methods arises from inexperienced and incompetent teachers, inadequate resources and facilities, etc. (Mdessa & Nyoni, 2022). Kasanda (2005) indicates that the practice of learner-centred education in schools is affected by a lack of competencies for learning theories reflecting learner-centred educational practices. Therefore, a gap still exists between learner-centred curriculum theories and real practice in teaching.

Learner-centred exercises are in line with constructivist teaching and learning pedagogical approaches (Weimer, 2013). In support of this, Thompson (2013) argues that learners need to become active agents in the acquisition of their own knowledge through inquiry, problem-solving, and collaboration with others. A learner-centred teaching approach to Geography indicates that individuals should be responsible for their learning, hence learner-centredness in geography for this paper. The idea with learner-centred pedagogical approaches is that teachers need to know their learners well so that they become responsive to their needs and preferences for the benefit of all involved in the subject (Benson, 2012). Huang (2022) further indicates that traditional teacher-centred learning continues to narrow the gap between what teachers want to teach and what learners want to learn, thus causing demotivation in learners. Abdukhayotovna (2022) asserts that for subjects such as geography, a learner-centered approach reflects a modern society where choice and democracy are essential and raise the quality of education to new levels. According to Martin et al (2021), one of the pillars of a learner-centred approach to learning is the enhancement of communication and reflective skills for both teacher and learners, as it improves participation, fosters collaboration, and makes learning fun for learners. Thus, the change to learner-centred pedagogical approach develops geography learners' intellectual/critical thinking skills, observation, and problem-solving skills, promotes learners' self-directed and life-long learning, nurtures the leadership qualities in learners, and reinforces communication and interpersonal skills.

Underpinned by the interpretive qualitative paradigm, we employed phenomenology as the mode of inquiry as teaching and learning is a lived experience for both teachers and learners. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with three geography teachers and structured classroom observations in three FET Geography classrooms (Grades 10, 11, and 12). Teachers were purposively selected, as they were the specialists in the geography subject. Data were analysed through thematic analysis. This paper intended to explore the nature in which the change from teacher-centred to learner-centred in geography teaching and learning is managed, and what challenges teachers face in using learner-centred approaches and techniques to geography teaching and learning in their daily teaching experiences. Therefore, the paper responded to the question: What are the dynamics experienced by teachers as they manage the change in the teaching and learning of geography in their classrooms?

**REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

**The importance of geography as a school subject**

Geography as a school subject teaches learners to think through physical and human systems, patterns, distributions, and interactions between humans and their environment. Fessler (2013) asserts that geography is an art that is visually oriented and therefore requires active role players. The significance of geography as a subject is that it influences the professional character of learners (Alajmi, 2021; Kinder, 2022), produces all-inclusive knowledge for addressing individual and societal problems, and also creates various job opportunities (Opoku et al., 2021), and it gathers knowledge about learners’ environment, space, and time (Korvasova, 2021). Martin (2022), however, argues that the number of undergraduate degrees presented in geography has depreciated, and therefore suggests learner-centred ways of teaching geography so that learners develop new insights, views, and ways of understanding the subject. The author further argues that there is greater contestation in environmental education and teachers need to assist learners to develop their identities within the subject of geography. This could be done through teachers using a learner-centred approach to teaching geography, teachers valuing their own and their learners’ narratives and connections with real life (Martin, 2022), and enabling learners to bring about change in their lives and communities through the subject (Rushton & Reiss, 2021; Zid & Casmana, 2021). Geography prepares learners to become lifelong learners, as what they discover about the planet in geography classrooms will influence their worldview for their entire lives. Furthermore, geography provides learners with the opportunity to develop personal perspectives about how they should value the world and equips them with the skills to know how to use natural resources sustainably (Mkhize, 2023a; 2023b). However, the shift to learner-centred teaching is marred with a few challenges, as discussed in the subsequent section.

**Challenges to learner-centred education**

Changing to learner-centred pedagogies requires a paradigmatic shift in teacher roles, from being the sole source and transmitter of knowledge to become the facilitator so that learners can construct their own knowledge. Matewere et al. (2022) assert that factors such as the characteristics of the teacher, the learning atmosphere and empowerment are some of the barriers to effective learner-centred teaching. In the teaching and learning of geography, some of the factors may include time lack, methods of assessment, the dearth of knowledge about learner-centered instruction, and teachers’ perceptions towards learner-centered teaching. Du Plessis (2020) indicates that pre-service teachers have a restricted understanding of learner-centred teaching and are currently confronted with severe challenges regarding learner-centred teaching. Among these challenges, the author lists problems with discipline, congested classrooms, and time constraints. As a result of overcrowding in some FET classrooms, learners become unmanageable and thus teaching and learning time is wasted. Geography is already an interactive subject and geography teachers need to develop their own viewpoints among a multitude of teaching and learning challenges and make an assessment on how these might affect their work (Fisher & Binns, 2016). These and other challenges can be overcome if all role-players can manage this change in teaching Geography in FET classrooms, as discussed in the subsequent section.

**Managing the change to a learner-centred approach in Geography teaching**

Teachers are agents of change, and therefore, it is incumbent on them to use their knowledge of policies, and scholarly outlook to ensure that change to learner-centred teaching and learning in geography takes place. One of the effective ways of managing learner-centred education is through collaboration (Barfield, 2016). Collaboration creates a sense of trust among those involved in the collaboration. The author further states that one of the challenges to collaboration is time and space for collaboration, however, this depends on the participants to regroup and make it work. Learner-centred education favours teacher-learner interactions (Sakata et al., 2023; Zabeli et al., 2018). This approach further improves learners’ learning and their whole school experience since it allows them to tap into their real lives and experiences. Using a learner-centred approach contributed in some way to improving quality learning in geography. Qambaday and Mwila (2022) list some of the advantages of a learner-centred approach including active learning for the learners and providing meaningful learning with an aim to improve their academic performance.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) (Mezirow, 1997) underpins this paper. In the context of this paper, Bel, Smirnov and Wait (2018) define TLT as positioning and aligning the way learners learn through interpreting their life experiences into making meaning. During knowledge construction, learners evaluate their past ideas and understanding and change their perceptions about the world as they acquire new information through critical reflection (Bel et al., 2018). TLT argues for a shift or transformation from old traditional ways of teaching where learners are passive recipients of information from their teachers, to teaching and learning processes where they are active participants and constructors of their own new knowledge. Transformative learning should be utilized to manage this transformation. The following opportunities may be implemented in geography classrooms, providing opportunities for critical thinking. This suggests that teachers can create opportunities for critical thinking through providing content that introduces new ideas. Consequently, learners engage with new content through dialoguing and through critical questioning and collaborating with others (Rodwell, 2018). Through TLT, learners learn to share ideas from their lived experiences and prior knowledge. Transformative learning provides an opportunity for learners to learn from each other and question their understandings, expectations, and principles with opportunities to act on new knowledge (Caldis & Kleeman, 2019).

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper responded to the question on the dynamics and experiences of teachers as they manage change in the teaching and learning of geography in their FET classrooms. Teaching and learning are lived experiences for both teachers and learners, therefore this paper employed phenomenology as a mode of inquiry. The paper is underpinned by the interpretive paradigm and is a qualitative study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and structured classroom observations where the researcher took field notes, with teachers from three FET geography classrooms (Grades 10, 11, and 12). The teachers were purposively selected as they were specialists in the geography subject, and data were analysed through thematic analysis. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed. The transcribed data were compared to the structured observation field notes with the aim of discovering similarities and generating themes as they emerged. All ethical considerations were observed, and participants were informed and consented to their voluntary participation in the study.

The table (Table 1) below, provides demographic details of the participants as these have an impact on how they manage change from teacher-centred to learner-centred in teaching geography in their classrooms.

**Table 1.**

*The participants*

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Teachers | Grade Teaching | Age | Qualification | Major subjects | Years in Teaching Geography |
| Participant 1 | 10 | 29 | PGCE | Geog + Tourism | 5 |
| Participant 2 | 11 | 33 | B.Ed. Honours | Geog + English | 8 |
| Participant 3 | 12 | 44 | B.Ed. Honours | Geog + History | 9 |

**Key:** Geog – Geography, PGCE – Postgraduate Certificate in Education, B. Ed – Bachelor of Education

**FINDINGS**

The findings revealed three critical themes that emerged from the participants. The first theme was the ineffective use of technological devices during teaching. When technology is neither used nor used inefficiently, it renders the change to learner-centred teaching futile. The second theme was the lack of collaborative learning among FET classrooms. Learner-centred pedagogies thrive in a collaborative culture. Thirdly, it emerged that teachers struggled to manage the teaching of the geography syllabus in their FET classrooms. We then present the findings by reflecting on the voices of the participants through their verbatim quotes. It is worth noting that the three participants are identified as:

* Grade 10 teacher – T10
* Grade 11 teacher – T11
* Grade 12 teacher – T12

The findings are presented below followed by the interpretation of the data.

**Ineffective use of technological devices during teaching**

When participants were asked about the challenges, they faced in changing from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach in teaching, it emerged that they struggled with incorporating the use of technological tools such as computers and projectors in the teaching of Geography in their classrooms. These were their views:

*One of the challenges for me is that I am not familiar with technology. So, when I intend to present Geography lessons using projector, for instance to allow my learners to watch videos, it is very difficult for me.* **T10**

*Most of the teachers are not able to use technology effectively, teaching and learning of Geography will not be effective in our school, and we rely on textbooks and other material such as paper maps and global maps.* **T11**

*For me, it is the time factor; I rush through everything hoping to finish the syllabus on time, as I am teaching Grade 12, I just go through the textbook and previous question papers and forget about other things that will delay us.* **T12**

The data reveals that geography teachers were not familiar with using technology in teaching geography. The school is well-resourced, but teachers lack the skills to use technological devices in order to facilitate and manage learner-centred teaching. Geography teachers seemed to be focusing on the results in their FET classrooms, rather than the means to achieve the results. Doering et al., (2014) assert that geography teachers are in need of continuing professional development so that they are able to integrate technology meaningfully in enhancing learners’ geographical inquiry skills.Kurniawan et al., (2020) postulate that technology-based geography learning depends largely on the teachers’ ability to manage change in their classrooms. Mensah, Poku and Quashigah’s (2021) study conducted in Ghana on the integration of technology in teaching and learning in high schools, confirms the data findings of this paper, that teachers possess high levels of knowledge in Geography content and little knowledge and skills in technology integration with an aim to facilitate learner-centred teaching. Through structured observations, it was evident that the classrooms were equipped with ICT tools and learner-teacher support material (LTSM), however, teachers seemed to focus on using textbooks to teach new content to their learners.

**Lack of collaborative learning among FET classrooms**

From the conversations with participants, it emerged that there was a lack of collaborative practices among teachers, which could enable the change from teacher-centred to learner-centred learning. Responding to a question on collaborative practices in their teaching, participants responded as follows:

*I do not think and feel it is necessary for me because I just teach Grade 10 and maybe the content will not be the same, I wouldn’t know, however, when teaching map-work skills, I think collaboration with other teachers would be necessary because there are calculations involved.* **T10**

*No, a person only focuses on their class and their work, and that practice leaves no room for collaboration except when we meet for feedback after attending workshops because we are teaching the same subject, just different grades* **T11**

*For me as a Grade 12 teacher, it becomes very difficult to involve teachers from other grades except for other Grade 12 teachers; even then, the focus is ensuring that my learners pass their final examination, so if collaborating is going to assist them, we do it but it should not waste time for the Grade 12s.* **T12**

The data reveals that teachers had a restricted understanding of what collaboration is and what it entails. Owens and Hite (2022) state that when used effectively, collaboration enhances communication skills among learners. Lack of collaboration between teachers leads to lack of collaboration among learners themselves. The purpose of such collaboration is to enable a learner-centred approach to geography where teachers allow learners to learn through their own inquiry. The data further reveals that teachers were not as keen on collaboration, as it was seen as a time-consuming activity, and they seemed to be concerned with factors such as not teaching the same content and improving the pass rate. Kafyulilo (2013) refers to a concept of contrived collegiality, where collaboration is forced among teachers and as such poses a danger of resistance; however, teachers need to be educated about the benefits of collaboration. However, collaboration among role-players is effective when it is voluntary and it becomes productive and enjoyable. Learner-centred teaching and learning thrive with collaboration (Monari, 2018). Resonating with this view is Barfield (2016) who asserts that collaboration is the catalyst of educational change and it should be one of the strategies used to manage the change to learner-centred education.

**Managing the teaching of the geography syllabus**

The data revealed that all three teachers were struggling to cope with how to effectively teach and follow the syllabus, which influenced how they managed their geography teaching. As geography has pacesetters, Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs), and work schedules, teachers’ focus was only on covering content and concepts without ensuring that learners were actively engaged and involved in the lessons and understood the concepts. The following views emerged during the conversations:

*The Geography syllabus is more important in terms of lesson planning and preparations, but it does not guide effectively as to how to deliver the content. We only the support material that we have to facilitate the teaching and rely on the methods they teach us during workshops.* **T10**

*The way the Geography syllabus is structured, it Geography syllabus makes it difficult for some of us to teach effectively as we only intend to cover content and concepts without ensuring that learners understand. However, because they pass the subject, we continue like that for most of the time.* **T11**

*With the limited time that we have, we have to cover the syllabus and ensure that we revise everything by mid-year so that learners pass the subject. Yes. Some of the methods might work and make it easy for learners, but in Grade 12, we rush through so that we get all the work done in time.* **T12**

The data reveals that teachers used traditional methods to teach geography in their FET classrooms. This method assisted them to finish the syllabus on time, however, the guarantee that their learners have mastered the content is yet to be realised. Sims and Jerrim (2022) refer to this method as a traditional method where teachers select and structure content from their specific subject and then present it directly to the whole class. This method of teaching is characterized by natural coherence as evidenced by the generated data. Structured observations revealed teachers who were comfortable with working alone without any visible form of group pre-planning for their lessons. The theoretical framework of this paper argues for a shift and transformation to a learner-centred method of teaching, therefore, geography teachers need to shift from teacher-centred approaches to learner-centred methods of teaching to effectively manage the change in the teaching of geography in their classrooms.

**DISCUSSION**

Evidence from the researched school suggests that the school is well-resourced with ICT tools, however, teachers lack the skill of using and incorporating these into their teaching of geography. These findings resonate with Mensah, Poku and Quashigah’s (2022) study on technology integration into the teaching and learning of geography in Ghana, which revealed that teachers were not confident with integrating technological knowledge into the teaching and learning of geography. The use of ICTs in the teaching of geography with the intention of changing to learner-centred teaching has an impact on the school budgets. Gulbahar and Guven (2008) caution that equipping schools with these technological devices does not improve teaching quality when teachers lack the skills to utilize them effectively. This points to the training of teachers in using ICTs to achieve the learner-centred approach in all subjects, particularly in geography. The use of ICT would bring about much-needed transformation in the teaching of geography as a school subject. The success of teaching and learning in geography teaching depends on teachers tapping into learners’ backgrounds and real-life experiences, thereby affording opportunities for learners to be in charge of their own learning. Therefore, the effective use of ICT tools and other teaching resources will enable a seamless transition into a learner-centred approach.

The data findings further reveal that there was a lack of a collaborative culture and collaborative practices among teachers, leading to teachers teaching geography in isolation. Geography being an interactive subject would benefit much from collaborative teaching. Teaching methods need to connect geography curriculum content to learners’ real lives and teachers need to use learners’ experiences and prior knowledge as the platform for teaching where they only facilitate and guide learners to take charge of their knowledge construction. Without collaboration, this would be an impossible mission. Klein and Solem (2008) indicate that collaboration inspires interest in both teachers and learners and enables learners to grasp geographical concepts with ease. Collaborative learning fosters a meaningful alternation between theory and practice in the learning of the subject. To break barriers in the learning of the subject as well as bolster teachers’ professional development in the subject, a collaborative culture and collaborative practices would enhance the teaching of geography and the move to learner-centred teaching. Interschool and intra-school collaborative learning practices within lessons could yield positive results in the teaching and learning of geography in FET classrooms. The understanding and learning of geographical knowledge depend largely on how it is taught (Yli-Panula et al., 2020). From collaborative teaching, geography teachers gain autonomy in handling the subject, while learners gain autonomy in learning the subject.

Drawing from the voices of geography teachers, one catches the impression that there is some resistance from the teachers themselves to transform their teaching to a learner-centred approach. One learned that teachers have become complacent with the traditional method of teaching (teacher-centred approach), as long as it allowed them to cover the geography syllabus. Alam (2020) argues that one of the challenges in managing the teaching of geography is that the content is extremely voluminous, and its nature needs to be more clearly defined, thus teachers rush through to complete the syllabus. Another challenge associated with the geography syllabus is that it is yet to focus on the real lived experience of learners (Sunny, 2008). This resonates with the findings which further revealed that most teachers only focused on giving learners information without allowing them to reflect on their lived experiences and that teachers were concerned with teaching, assessing, and getting done with the syllabus without actively engaging learners.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

In light of the findings, we recommend managing the change in geography teaching through the effective use of technology, teaching aids, and resources, collaborative teaching among teachers as well as an intentional shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach in the teaching of geography. Teachers need to be involved in capacity-building activities to enable them to integrate ICT as a way of managing change in the teaching of geography. This paper also recommends the active use of collaboration strategies among teachers and among learners in the same school and with other schools to enable the shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches in geography teaching. The paper concludes that Geography requires active and participative teaching and learning so that it could yield the desired results. To manage change, geography teachers need to incorporate learner-centred practices in their teaching as learner-centred education ensures that learners participate in active learning. This could be done by integrating Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and relevant Learner and Teacher Support Material (LTSM), collaborating as well as being intentional about changing to a learner-centred approach with an aim to involve learners and allowing them to be involved in the construction of their own geography knowledge.

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