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Finding Learning in Teaching: Eritrean Primary Teacher Educators' Perspectives on Implementing Learner-Centered and Interactive Pedagogies

Hanna Posti-Ahokas, Katri Meriläinen and Anna Westman

Abstract: Eritrea has given an increasing policy emphasis on implementing learner-centered interactive pedagogies (LCIP) at all levels of the education system. However, both teachers and teacher educators struggle with implementation of matching school practices. This study attempts to identify some of the gaps between the objectives set in the National Education Policy of the State of Eritrea and the everyday practices observable at the educational institutions. The focus of the analysis is on examining data from teacher educators at the Asmara Community College of Education. The international exposure and collaboration with Finnish education experts has been appreciated by the teacher educators as a source of inspiration and modelling of learner-centered practice. The findings are indicative of changing pedagogical practice and an enhanced culture for professional development.

Introduction[1]

Learner-centered pedagogy is one of the most pervasive educational notions in contemporary Africa. Yet, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence from a variety of sources that learner-centered education has not become established in the average African classroom.[2] The theory of learner-centered pedagogy suggests that learning is more effective when the learner actively constructs knowledge instead of rote-learning and cramming. Learner-centered education is regarded as an effective alternative to teacher-centered education, since the focus is shifted from the teacher's activity to the student's activity. In accordance, the learner-centered approach is believed to help improve students' academic performance. In Eritrea, like in many African countries, the educational system is frequently blamed for leading to uninventive, patterned thinking, and for lowering students' academic motivation.

In Eritrea, the official educational policy strongly advocates learner-centered and interactive pedagogy.[3] The core objective is to enhance national productivity and innovation. The teacher educators' role is crucial as they are key agents of change. A teacher education that promotes the learner-centered approach will bring forth teachers, who advance the called for skills of innovative thinking and life-long learning.

Background and Context

The Sustainable Development Goal 4 calls for significantly increasing the number of qualified teachers particularly in least developing countries by 2030, "especially through international cooperation for the training of teachers." This, in essence, was the starting point for the cooperation between Finn Church Aid (FCA) and the Eritrean Ministry of Education (MOE) focusing on teacher educational development in two Institutes of Higher Education.

The multiple challenges of education development in Eritrea are reflected in the high repetition and drop out-rates and in the low levels of youth proceeding to secondary education. According to the most recent available statistics only 69.5% of students proceed to junior secondary level and only

2 Mtika and Gates 2010.
3 Government of Eritrea 2010.

31.5% continue to upper secondary education. Girls' enrolment is critically low, averaging about 44% for primary schools, 33% for secondary schools and less than 5% for tertiary institutions.[4] Furthermore, the quality of education has worsened: the 2015 national assessment to Monitor Learning Achievement (MLA 3) revealed declining performance at Grade 5 where only 25.4% of students attained the minimum master level (MML), compared to 49.9% in 2008.[5]

Just as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a transformation from teacher to learner-centered pedagogy is seen as one solution for enhancing quality in education in Eritrea.[6] The educational policy of Eritrea strongly stresses the importance of Learner-Centered and Interactive Pedagogy (LCIP) at all educational levels. With the implementation of a new National Curriculum in 2008, LCIP is introduced as the foundation of education. However, both teachers and teacher educators struggle with implementation of matching school practices. This study attempts to identify some of the gaps between the objectives set in the most recent National Education Policy of the State of Eritrea from 2009 on the one hand, and the everyday practices observable at the educational institutions on the other. This study focused on examining data from teacher educators at one of the two Eritrean teacher education Colleges, Asmara Community College of Education.

The National Curriculum Framework for Eritrea sets Learner Centered Interactive Pedagogies as its foundation "to promote learning with understanding."[7] In the Curriculum Framework, learning is clearly regarded as an active process:

> Learning is more than simply attending classes for a prescribed period of time. It is an active process in which learners share responsibility for initiating, sustaining and managing the learning situation. The more learners feel that they share responsibility for their learning, the more they get engaged to achieve particular educational outcomes. This process is central to learning with understanding.[8]

To this end, a 2012 Ministry of Education report indicates that several actions have been taken to promote LCIP in Eritrean education, including monitoring curricula, a study on the application of learner-centered and

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4 Government of Eritrea 2013a.
5 Government of Eritrea 2015.
6 Posti-Ahokas, Idriss and Hassan 2016.
7 Government of Eritrea 2008: 1.
8 Government of Eritrea 2008: 35.

interactive pedagogy, as well as in-service training programs, workshops and seminars conducted for teachers, school directors and supervisors.[9]

The Curriculum Framework recognizes the various challenges and the critical role of pre-service and in-service teacher education for successful implementation of the LCIP approach. A recent study found cultural conflict, insufficient education of teachers, lacking teaching resources, and low teacher motivation as the key challenges to implementing LCIP at school level.[10] The commitment to learner-centered and interactive pedagogy represents a new challenge to teacher education programs. This includes operationalizing a range of innovative approaches, which require teachers to involve and inspire learners in the process of constructing and developing knowledge. To promote the implementation of these approaches, pre-service and in-service teacher training programs will need to critique and move beyond the traditional conceptions of pedagogy. Also the key role of teacher educators' as implementers of change is acknowledged. To generate change in the curriculum reform, teacher educators will need professional renewal in teacher education and in school-based Continuous Professional Development (CPD).[11]

Quality teacher education has been globally recognized as a critical aspect of education development.[12] In Eritrea, the national Education Sector Development plan for 2013-2017 identifies teacher education as a priority. The low quality of education is strongly attributed to low capacity of Higher Education Institutions to provide quality training and professional support to teachers: only 46% of primary school teachers and 83% of secondary level teachers are formally qualified.[13] Specifically, there is a critical lack of quality pre-service teacher training programs aimed at equipping teachers with professional competence and proficiency in subject content, lack of training in pedagogic theory, lack of in-service training, teacher practice, and post-training follow-up, and limited monitoring and professional support.

Asmara Community College of Education (ACCE), where the studied activity is located, is the first governmental teacher education institution established in 1945 during the period of British military administration. ACCE has a mandate to train primary school teachers who will be assigned to teaching positions by the Ministry of Education, and to provide in-service training and upgrading programs for teachers, who are already in service. The

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9 Government of Eritrea 2012: 16.

10 Hamid, Zerai and Muhammedali 2016.

11 The National Curriculum Framework: 42-43.

12 E.g. UNESCO 2014.

13 Government of Eritrea 2013b.

National Commission of Higher Education accredits the diplomas provided by the ACCE. The integral linkage to the Ministry of Education supports effective placement of teachers after graduation. Academically, ACCE can be considered independent in terms of curriculum development and practical implementation of teacher training programs.

Until 2015, recruitment of students to primary teacher education at ACCE has been based on Grade 12 matriculation examination results only, so that the lowest-performing students have been selected for the low-status teacher education programs. Low student motivation resulting from involuntary placement has been a key challenge for the college. However, as the only primary teacher education institution in the country, ACCE has advocated for finding ways to reinvigorate the teaching profession and to increase the quality and motivation of teacher students. As a result of these efforts, the recruitment process of primary school teachers is being reformed.

The existing, yet developing, partnerships between Eritrean Higher Education Institutes and international actors can provide a valuable starting point to the achievement of the national education development objectives. This paper draws on the experience of the collaboration between ACCE, FCA, and the Teachers Without Borders (TWB) Network Finland launched in 2015.[14]

The focus of the study is to analyze the impact of Finnish-Eritrean collaboration on the attitudes and practices of the teacher educators at the ACCE. We aim to analyze 1) what kinds of gaps can be identified between the Eritrean Educational Policy regarding LCIP and the current classroom practices and

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14 Finn Church Aid (FCA) is a Finnish non-governmental humanitarian and development cooperation organization that operates in over twenty countries across four continents. FCA's work with local communities is organized into three key areas: the right to education, the right to peace, and the right to livelihood. FCA's work to support the Right to Quality Education in Eritrea is firmly based on FCA's Strategy – both the one covering the years 2013-2016 (Finn Church Aid 2013) as well as the new Strategy 2017 onwards (Finn Church Aid 2016). The strategy has guided FCA's work to support the institutional capacity of the Eritrean education institutions since 2015. Teachers Without Borders, a network based in Finland and coordinated by FCA, is a network of education experts who provide technical education expertise and are deployed for a period of six-twelve months to development programs run by FCA and other Finnish NGOs. At the core of the FCA Eritrea program on the Right to Quality Education are the efforts of two of these education experts who work in ACCE. The focus of their work is on enhancing holistic professional support and research required for quality teaching and learning in schools. Since the academic year 2015-2016, Finnish education experts sent through the TWB have worked at the ACCE, providing day-to-day support to professional development of the academic staff of the College in the forms of trainings, peer-learning support, co-teaching and collaborative action research.

2) in what ways has the ACCE-FCA cooperation built the capacity of teacher educators to provide quality education.

The analyzed data consists of a needs assessment done with ACCE teacher educators at the beginning of the academic year 2015-2016 and an end-of-year evaluation by teacher educators of collaborative practices, including study circles, pedagogical forums and learning cafes. The analysis was conducted after the first two education experts had finished their postings and before the next experts had started their work. The literature review below frames the study in proven solutions for building the capacity of teacher educators to engage in LCIP. Furthermore, the analysis will consider the emerging knowledge of these Finnish-Eritrean experiences, in order to offer suggestions and recommendations for the future development of ACCE-FCA cooperation and teacher education development more generally. Through the study, we want to provide evidence of practices that work in international professional collaboration in the area of teacher education to be used by FCA and other actors who work to support use of LCIP in developing countries.

Enhancing Learner-Centeredness in Teacher Education

To understand how learner-centeredness can be enhanced in teacher education, one must first look at those, who could implement such a pedagogy, that is, teacher educators:

> Just as student learning is significantly determined by the quality of teaching (of teachers by extension), teacher development (conceived as teacher learning) is in part determined by the quality of the learning opportunities which teachers (prospective, beginning and experienced) engage in. The quality of such learning opportunities is, in turn, determined in part by the quality of the designers and facilitators, that is, teacher educators and trainers.[15]

The professional development of teacher educators, and thus their ability to implement various pedagogies in teacher education, has begun to receive attention relatively recently.[16] While the rhetoric on professional development for teachers strongly advocates a linkage between teaching and learning, the reality is often top-down mandated and one-time sessions, leaving little room for more thorough involvement and control by teachers and teachers educators for their own professional development.[17]

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15 Dembele and Lefoka 2007: 547.
16 Loughran 2014: 271; Olatunji 2013: 73-74.
17 Loughran 2014: 271.

Loughran points out that many teacher educators begin their career as school teachers and only later take on the role of educating future teachers. This transition can be demanding as the work context of a higher education institution is an academic one, characterized by research in addition to teaching.[18] The more demanding goals of teacher education require teacher educators to have not only a sound grasp of pedagogy, but a mastery of how to use pedagogy effectively in their own practice. In Olatunji's study of professional development in African universities, he found that only a minority of universities offer induction programs to support new faculty members as they make the transition to university teaching.[19] Likewise, this issue is especially salient in the Eritrean context, where ACCE is still very much in the middle of the process of reforming teaching from a technical to an academic discipline.

The curriculum of teacher education is often organized so that there is a divide between subject matter and teaching about teaching. At the Asmara Community College of Education, both previous and ongoing efforts aim at holistic curricula for the different teacher education programs. However, it has proved to be a challenge to ensure a strong shared ownership of those curricula. In practice, the subject content is often prioritized at the cost of didactic support provided by the curricula. Such a fragmented starting point easily leads to a gap between theory and practice, because student teachers lack a coherent approach that would simultaneously support their learning and teaching.[20] The so-called "technical rationality model" assumes that knowledge on subject matter and pedagogy will be transmitted to student teachers in the same way that they will then go on to transmit this same knowledge in their future classrooms. Epistemologically this model is strongly inspired by behaviorism, and reflection by the student-teacher is notably missing. The idea of teaching as a technical profession is prevalent in much of the globe, also in Eritrea.[21]

Alternatively, a constructivist epistemology espouses the role of learners' interactions and reflection in creating knowledge. There are a variety of constructivist-oriented perspectives, but LCIP can be used as an umbrella term to understand and refer to such pedagogy. Simply, LCIP is "an approach that informs the practices of teaching based on the assumption that people learn best by actively constructing and assimilating knowledge rather than through the passive addition of discrete facts to an existing store of knowledge."[22]

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18 Loughran 2014: 272. See also Olatunji 2013: 74-75.
19 Olatunji 2013: 78-79.
20 Loughran 2014: 274.
21 Vavrus, Thomas and Bartlett 2011: 26.
22 Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 26-27.

Vavrus *et al.* situate the relatively recent push for LCIP in sub-Saharan Africa within the postcolonial historical context of education in the region. While there have been some attempts for reform or even transformation through decolonization of the mind, for the most part, formal education carries the legacy of colonialist education structures, including traditional, teacher-centered methods based on a technical understanding of teaching.[23] The dissatisfaction with these traditional methods has led to calls for LCIP and other education reforms.[24]

Many sub-Saharan African countries have joined the trend towards LCIP at least on the policy, if not on the practical, level since the mid-1990s (33). These policy changes were often linked to wider political and economic changes as reforms were implemented to appease international donors (34). The international development organizations have used their influence to a large extent to push the global educational trends involving LCIP in sub-Saharan Africa (36). Importantly, the Education for All global initiative was launched in 1990 and further enhanced awareness and eagerness to implement LCIP (35).[25]

Mtika and Gates, in their study on Malawian teacher students attempting to put learner-centered theory into practice, also point out how progressive pedagogical notions promoted in teacher education institutions have not resulted in widespread change in classroom practice.[26] They underscore that teacher educators and policy makers need to be aware of this to ensure that the educational system actually benefits from the strength of learner-centered pedagogy. This notion clearly illustrates the two levels of the puzzle: how to successfully transform an educational policy into practice in both teacher education and schools. Considering this same puzzle in their study on the professional development of teacher educators at the College of Education in Eritrean Institute of Technology (EIT), Posti-Ahokas *et al.* point out that there is limited research on how teacher educators can develop their own practice to be more learner-centered and bridge the gap between theory and practice.[27] This study aims to contribute to the knowledge-based practices that could be applied to bridge the gap and thus enhance quality and relevance of teacher education in Eritrea and elsewhere.

Citing a wider study of teacher education programs in sub-Saharan Africa, Vavrus *et al.* point to the conflict that often arises when LCIP is found on

23 Shizha 2005: 67-68; Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 32-33.
24 Dembele and Lefoka 2007: 535-536; Shizha 2005: 67-68.
25 This paragraph is based on Varvrus *et al.* 2011: 33-35.
26 Mtika and Gates 2010.
27 Posti-Ahokas 2016.

the policy level and possibly preached by teacher educators, but much more rarely put into practice when educating student teachers.[28] Through his work in Uganda, O'Sullivan emphasized the importance of taking into account the contextual realities when aiming for pedagogical change in teacher education.[29] Posti-Ahokas *et al.* address the Eritrean teacher education scene in particular, positing the need to identify practices that support the professional development of teacher educators for the sake of reaching the Eritrean government's goal of quality and learner-centered education.[30]

The debate on LCIP in the African context is a lively one and can be understood as part of the broader discussion on the urgent need for increased quality in African education, as outlined by Dembele and Lefoka and Vavrus *et al.*[31] Vavrus *et al.* conclude that the conditions for quality teaching must include elements of various pedagogies. Eschewing a divide between learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches, it is instead wise to see these approaches lying on a spectrum from which the teacher is able to choose different approaches at different times.[32] LCIP's role in improving the quality of education is clear when teachers are empowered to implement various pedagogies in their own contexts.

The complex process of teacher educators' professional development demands that teacher educators themselves have "agency in the active development of their scholarship."[33] According to O'Sullivan, quality should be contextualized by identifying teaching and learning practices that are effective in their contexts.[34] As teachers should be trained to use those practices that work, the role of teacher education and particularly the pedagogical practices used in initial teacher education become critical.

When considering teacher educators' own journeys in professional development, it is vital to point out that recognizing and responding to students is only possible when teacher educators come to confront their own values.[35] This has been a crucial element in the professional development of the teacher educators in this study, as they have been exposed to new ideas and methods. Their own agency can be enhanced through sustained, structured professional development programs.[36]

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28 Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 38-42.
29 O'Sullivan 2010.
30 Education for All 2015 National Review Report: Eritrea; Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016: 1-2.
31 Dembele and Lefoka 2007; Vavrus *et al.* 2011.
32 Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 58.
33 Loughran 2014: 280.
34 O'Sullivan 2006.
35 Loughran 2014: 279.
36 O'Sullivan 2010.

Furthermore, a teacher's identity as a professional is formed in relation to their colleagues and student teachers, as well as affected by the wider society. In the Eritrean case, the low status of the teaching profession and the general lack of motivation amongst teachers and teacher educators can be a severe stumbling block for improving one's own practice.[37] In contrast, Posti-Ahokas *et al.*'s study shows the significance of collegial support in individual teacher educators' professional development, but also clarifies the need for sensitivity, contextual understanding and an interactive approach to professional development activities.[38] Similar, Isotalo points to the potential of collaborative learning communities within teacher education institutions as a key context for professional identity development and improvement of practice.[39]

In this study, it becomes clear that by using LCIP to learn about teaching with LCIP, the lessons learnt from research on professional development have been put into practice. Vavrus *et al.* argued that teachers tend to "teach as they were taught" and in this way end up teaching lower-order thinking skills.[40] As an example, a study by O'Sullivan in Namibia showed how teacher students who were taught in the college using teacher-centered methods transferred the practices to their own teaching in primary schools.[41] Loughran explains Lortie's concept of "the apprenticeship of observation," which is helpful in understanding how some approaches and beliefs are brought to a student teacher's or teacher educator's practice, regardless of pedagogy and more explicit intentions.[42] When one understands the weight of such beliefs on teaching, teacher educators are able to see "the ramifications for ways of working with students of teaching and what that might mean for enhancing the knowledge and development of their own professional practice."[43]

When teacher educators engage in meaningful professional develop-ment, they are able to affect change to make teacher education more learner-centered and interactive. Posti-Ahokas *et al.*'s study places Eritrean teacher education in the wider discussion on teacher education in sub-Saharan Africa, calling on continuous professional development activities for teacher educators in such a way that activities and training sessions utilize a LCIP.[44] Indeed, the real drive for LCIP comes when the teacher educator learns

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37 Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016; Isotalo 2017.
38 Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016.
39 Isotalo 2017.
40 Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 32-33.
41 O'Sullivan 2002.
42 Lortie 1975 in Loughran 2014: 275.
43 Loughran 2014: 276.
44 Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016: 15-16.

to, in Russell's words, "resist the myth that teacher educators provide right answers about teaching, such as teaching tips and resource packages, so that productive professional learning can begin."[45]

It is clear that enhancing LCIP in teacher education takes time. Loughran cites several researchers, who all posit that teacher education should involve creating knowledge together, significant relationships between teacher educators and student teachers, and the modeling of sound practices by teacher educators.[46] Drawing on Westheimer and Lord, Posti-Ahokas *et al.* explain the significance of critical and open discussion in a professional learning community as a vital foundation for teacher educators to reflect and improve their own pedagogies.[47] Clearly, such an understanding of teacher education requires the ongoing and reflective professional development of teacher educators as they both teach about teaching and learn about teaching.[48] Changes in ways of thinking about and understanding learning require teacher educators to continue their professional development. Indeed, Vavrus *et al.* advocate that practicing teachers need time and support to understand and implement new pedagogies like LCIP.[49] In the same vein, Olatunji recommends that African IHE that want to strive for quality education put into place activities that promote professional development. These can include work within the faculty as well as work in cooperation with outside consultants.[50] This study focuses on the latter kind of work, in which Finnish education experts support the capacity of local Eritrean teacher educators.

Methodology and Protocol Followed

The target group was the ACCE teaching staff, approximately 56 teacher educators. (There was some fluctuation in the staffing throughout the academic year 2015-2016.) The age range of the target group was 21-72 years. The gender distribution was 4 female teachers and 52 male teachers.

The focal data consists of two surveys for teacher educators at ACCE, and of the continuous monitoring and evaluation process. Both questionnaires were distributed to the entire teaching staff. The number of returned needs assessment questionnaires was 31. The number of returned end-of-year evaluations was 17.

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45 Russell in Loughran 2014: 279.
46 Loughran 2014: 274.
47 Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016: 5-6.
48 Loughran 2014: 275; Olatunji 2013: 76.
49 Vavrus *et al.* 2011: 69.
50 Olatunji 2013: 81.

The first of the two surveys was conducted in November 2015 as part of FCA's needs assessment upon entering the College and starting new cooperation. The first two TWB education experts started to work in ACCE in October 2015. The second survey is the end-of-year evaluation conducted in June 2016, after the first academic year during which ACCE and FCA were working in cooperation.

The research design of this study is mainly qualitative, and data has been collected using several methods. In addition to the data collected through the questionnaires, the personal experience of the international education experts is used as a significant reference. Continuous and frequent classroom observations, both at ACCE and in schools of different educational levels, consultations, and co-teaching helped build a comprehensive understanding of the current situation. The brief review of literature on professional development in teacher education presented in the previous section frames the qualitative content analysis of the data.

Presentation of Findings: Needs Assessment

The first data set includes the answers to the first two questions of the needs assessment survey conducted in the beginning of the academic year 2015-2016.

1. The Eritrean National Curriculum emphasizes a learner-centered and interactive pedagogy. How do you implement these approaches in your work as a teacher educator?
2. The Eritrean National Curriculum highlights the learners' active participation in their own learning process and the development of creativity and critical thinking. Can you give examples of how you promote these goals in your teaching?

The 31 answers to these two questions resonate a somewhat consistent voice. Roughly summarized, the answers are characterized by four features. First, the answers are heavily problem-focused and tend to highlight the challenges involved in implementing LCIP in the Eritrean context. Next, answers emphasize methods instead of philosophies, and in this way portray LCIP more as a set of methods than a philosophy or way of thinking about teaching and learning. In addition, the methods are listed without contexts. Fourth, the answers reflect uncertainty about what LCIP is on a practical level.

Many of the teacher educators felt that LCIP is something that cannot be implemented in their context. This becomes evident in both the survey answers and particularly in the professional conversations with the educa-

tors. A third (9 out of the total 31) brought up experienced obstacles with applying LCIP. The answers reflect the same issues that are typically brought up in conversation too. The following reasons include material and structural challenges, but also issues related to human resources. Teacher educators pointed out their own challenges as well as those of their students, in particular the unqualified in-service teachers, who study at ACCE to gain accreditation:

- Large class sizes;
- Shortage of facilities;
- Time pressure in delivering vast subject contents;
- Difficulty of changing the teacher-centered tradition;
- English as the medium of instruction;
- Students' poor academic competence;
- In-service teachers' inefficient competence in applying LCIP;
- In-service teachers' lack of professional motivation;
- Teacher educators' lack of professional motivation;
- Teacher educators' inefficient competence in applying LCIP.

The comments resonate the findings of several previous studies.[51] An apparently widespread perception amongst the teacher educators was that large class size is a stumbling block for applying LCIP. Also, they experienced that the shortage of teaching aids prevents the use of LCI methods. Many of the answers also reflect concern for unqualified in-service teachers' inefficient skills in applying LCIP. This answer summarizes a cascade of experienced concerns:

> In my opinion in Eritrea it is impossible to use learner-centered and interactive pedagogy. Because the size of the class is very big, you can't get enough material and specially in elementary school the teachers will not [have] enough knowledge of these ideas.

In accordance, the collaborative pedagogical activities during the academic year 2015-2016 paid attention to exemplifying a solution-oriented approach to LCIP, showing how learner-centeredness can be seen as a way to solve the challenges posed by e.g. large class sizes or lack of materials. The general goal was to transfer the focus of attention from problems to solutions, calling for resourcefulness instead of resources. Novel ways of overcoming the experienced challenges were created together (e.g. during pedagogical forum

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51 See Mtika and Gates 2010; Vavrus *et al.* 2011.

meetings), best practices from other comparable contexts were discussed (e.g. during study circle meetings), and concrete methods were experienced and tested (e.g. during training in LCIP for teacher educators).

Several answers manifested the unfamiliarity with LCIP in practice. As widely recorded in educational research,[52] teachers tend to favor and hence pass on the types pedagogical practice they have been objected to themselves.

> It is not easy to change from the teacher-centered to student-centered. So we need to really feel the importance of LCIP.

> Most of our schools don't apply this method in their teaching and learning activities specially in the lower classes (levels) (intermediate and junior).

The nature of the cooperation with non-Eritrean education experts also led to challenging viewpoints on both sides. The teacher educators' attitude towards LCIP was positive in general. However, especially in discussions with the educators, it also became very clear that the LCIP approach was seen as something requiring extra effort and energy instead of easing the teachers' work. Some of the answers credited the efforts made to promote the LCIP and the usefulness of professional development activities:

> [W]ith continuous workshops and discussions it somehow is okay. But still we have problems in class sizes and having motivated teachers.

As the answer above indicates, teacher educators are concerned with the structural problems preventing LCIP from becoming widely rooted in the school system. In the collegial discussions in particular, the low status of the teaching profession and difficulties in recruiting qualified teachers and motivated teacher students were recurring themes. Furthermore, even though the teacher educators were apparently familiar with the national educational policy in general, most of them seemed to be short of a deeper understanding of the policy's objectives. Also, they seemingly lacked a feeling of having possibilities to influence the system. These observations call for a recognition from the educational policy makers who should carefully consider how to effectively support the stakeholders active in implementing the educational policy, and how to use their expertise and experience as a resource in further developing the policy.

From a broader perspective, academic success in Eritrea is traditionally measured in high stakes testing and numerical grades within an educational

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52 Loughran 2014; O'Sullivan 2002; Vavrus *et al.* 2011.

system that is widely based on rote learning. Thus, the teacher educators, too, often struggle to recognize the value of creative thinking and testing hypotheses as part of the learning process. This, for some, makes LCIP seem like a strange and ineffective approach. Quality learning is easily understood as high achievement in the traditional, exam-driven system.

Some of the most commonly mentioned individual methods associated with LCIP as reflected in the educators' answers were discussion, question and answer, role-play, brainstorming, and open-ended questions. While the answers on the one hand display a great deal of commitment to challenging and guiding students towards higher-order thinking, they on the other reveal a shakiness in fully understanding the concept of LCIP. The answers frequently contain hesitation markers such as "I try my best," "as far as I can," "even though – but." This together with the problem-focus creates a sense of defensiveness, as if LCIP was regarded as slightly unpractical or inconvenient. Many of the answers reveal an underlying thinking of LCIP as a teacher-dictated assignment which gives students a limited space for creative thinking before returning to the more familiar method of teacher-led lecturing.

> Question and answer method is my preferable method that I currently employ in my classroom practices. In addition to this, I also give my learners assignments that would help them to make sense of whatever issue they are supposed to accomplish.

In the collaborative planning and action, the FCA education experts strived to systematically place emphasis on regarding LCIP as a comprehensive line of thinking instead of a set of separate methods and techniques. In other words, efforts were made to see the forest from the trees. Importantly the pedagogical activities involved engaging the teacher educators in trying out LCIP in practice and also being subject to LCIP methodology during for example workshops. The educators were encouraged to modify the exemplified practices to suit their subject-specific needs, personal preferences, and familiarity with their students.

Another marked concern displayed in the needs assessment answers was that of the medium of instruction. After primary school (grades 1-5), the medium of instruction changes from the mother tongue to English in Eritrean middle schools, high schools, and IHE. In reality, the English skills of the majority of teachers are at best very basic.

> Of course, if learning in our country is in vernacular, we may not face problem to use learner-centered pedagogy. However, how the students actively participate in English???

The need to support both English teaching and teaching in English had already been identified by the management of ACCE. FCA activity in this area is a sustained feature of the cooperation.

Overall, it is also noteworthy that the kinds of tag words that are usually related with learner-centered study or theory are widely missing or few and far between in the answers. A person well familiar with the theory around learner-centered education would be likely to use concepts such as *active learning, responsibility for learning, innovative thinking, creativity, ability to take initiative, life-long learning skills, learning to learn, problem-solving skills* or *social skills* when describing such practices. Eight of the total of 62 answers (by 31 respondents) to questions 1 and 2 mention problem solving as a method applied. Creative and critical thinking are mentioned in 14 answers. Students' active participation is mentioned in six answers. Other concepts listed above were not mentioned.

To sum up, the needs assessment manifested a relatively superficial understanding and a light resistance towards LCIP. The approach was generally regarded as advantageous, but a deeper understanding of "why" seemed to be missing. The classroom observations and co-teaching experiences also strengthened the recognition that LCIP is rarely a prominent feature in either Eritrean primary teacher education classes or in the primary schools.

In consequence, the FCA activities throughout the academic year chose a consistent focus on approaching LCIP and educational quality through a variety of activities and perspectives, with practical, solution-focused routines. In addition to discussing, studying, and observing educational quality and LCIP in practice, the teacher educators were involved in activities where they took up the role of learners. This method was solidified by diverse ways of reflection and comparing cognate experiences.

Presentation of Findings: End-of-Year Evaluation

The second data set is from the end-of-year evaluation. The main message emerging from this set of data is an experienced strengthening of a practical understanding of the LCIP practice. The answers still heavily build on a methodology focus which indicates that it takes time for a new way of pedagogical thinking to take root. The second data set includes the answers to four question items on the evaluation survey. Questions 1 and 2 were multiple choice questions (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) with the option to specify how in one's own words. Questions 3 and 4 were open-ended.

1. I have learned new pedagogical practices that help me apply a more learner-centered and interactive approach in my teaching.
2. My professional identity as teacher educator has strengthened.
3. What has changed in my practice as an educator as a result of FCA interventions?
4. What kinds of new methods have you used, inspired by the new skills you have learned?

Of the seventeen teacher educators who returned the end-of-year evaluation questionnaire, eleven strongly agreed that they had learned new pedagogical practices that help them apply a more learner-centered and interactive approach in their teaching through FCA-cooperation. Six agreed. Ten respondents strongly agreed that their professional identity as teacher educator had strengthened. Six agreed and one disagreed.

The answers to both questions 1 and 2 reveal a way of recognizing professional value and potential in the familiar, everyday context:

> Now I am able what kind of materials can I use from my surrounding environments.

> It has refreshed my mind to use what I have learned and read about in books to use them.

The most striking finding regarding the sixth question about practice development was that – even though the question did not point the way towards specifically considering LCIP practices – seven out of the eleven answers mention an increased application of LCIP.

> I have started to engage in learning-centered interactive pedagogy.

> To plant the seed of "nothing is impossible."

The seventh question rather openly ushered the respondents to think about new LCIP-based methods they had applied. As the focus of collaborative action throughout the year had been on putting educational quality and LCIP into practice, it was not surprising that most respondents mentioned methods they had practiced and discussed during the range of pedagogical activities. However, these answers also support the previous finding that resources can be discovered in the commonplace setting, even within what might have previously been seen as troublesome.

> How to take advantage of the existing resource and class-size, how to inspire my learners towards the lesson.

> The work station activities, in a group work inspired me and I modified it and used it in my class context.

> Discussing with colleagues to the use of similar way of teaching, exploring ideas more than before.

Also, the answers give voice to thinking on a deeper level about the essence of learning. For example, one teacher educator answered:

> Individuals are responsible for their learning, and the role of the teacher is to facilitate the process.

The end of semester evaluation demonstrated an openness to change among the teacher educators. Despite the professional commitment evident in the needs assessment answers, that set of data did not directly suggest such flexibility and readiness to develop and implement new approaches during and after what, at the end of the day, is a relatively limited time. The data from the end-of-year evaluation, however, reveals a very positive attitude towards personal professional development and a generally strengthened professional identity.

The concern regarding these answers is the proportionately low number of returned questionnaires (17 out of 56). The returned questionnaires give a very successful image of the first academic year of cooperation between ACCE and FCA. Although there is reason to believe that the results reflect the teacher educators' true experience, the possibility of a higher questionnaire return rate by those especially satisfied with their experience of the collaboration needs to be acknowledged. At any rate, it becomes evident that at least a third of the ACCE teaching staff felt they had benefitted from the collaboration. This understanding was also supported by the constant increase in collegial consultations and initiatives taken by the Eritrean teacher educators to undertake common projects, as well as by the continuous feedback through working together during the academic year 2015-2016.

Implications and Key Lessons

The starting point for this study was the new Eritrean National Curriculum in 2008, with its heavy emphasis on LCIP, and the Finnish-Eritrean collaboration between FCA education experts and ACCE teacher educators. The

study sought to identify 1) what kinds of gaps can be identified between the Eritrean Educational Policy regarding LCIP and the current classroom practices and 2) in what ways the ACCE-FCA cooperation built the capacity of teacher educators to provide quality education. The results of the study reflect the work done in the academic year 2015-2016, by analyzing both a needs assessment from the beginning of the year and an end of semester evaluation on collaborative practices, such as study circles, pedagogical forums and co-teaching.

The long-term presence of FCA education experts has allowed for a continuous, repetitive and well-informed cooperative process of giving the teacher educators chances to become learners themselves. In the trainings and other pedagogical activities, they have been given the opportunity to integrate new experience in their existing expertise. Also, the teacher educators have been encouraged to share their knowledge and skills among the professional community. In addition to being taught about and discussing the pedagogical philosophy of LCIP, the teacher educators have also had the chance to try out activities that promote learner-centeredness, and are tailored to their context. An open and sincere collegial relationship has encouraged frank discussion where critical views and doubts have been welcomed. Despite a plenty of hesitation expressed along the way, the end of semester evaluation shows that the teacher educators strongly felt they had benefitted from the cooperation.

The findings show that continuous professional development activities increased the motivation of Eritrean teacher educators. The international exposure led to learning on both sides and provided modeling of learner-centered practices. Teacher educators' notions of LCIP remained, in some instances, problem focused, as they struggled to develop sound practices amidst many real, practical challenges in the Eritrean teaching environment. The emphasis was on methods rather than philosophies of education, indicating that further reflection on the nature of learning and teaching is needed. Indeed, a deep understanding of LCIP remains to be reached. This focus on methods, however, also often rightly brought discussion back to the context in which the participants live and teach. In this way, they had agency over their own professional development, seeking solutions and practices applicable in their own work.

The key lessons learnt by ACCE and FCA include the importance of dialogue and joint planning. Indeed, building trusting collegial relationships takes time. Conducting a needs assessment at the beginning of the cooperation was vital for ensuring that all voices were heard in the beginning stages of planning. The needs assessment in itself exemplifies a way of opening the

dialogue and willingness to learn from the context. The collaborative working methods, observation, discussion and feedback led to increased relevance in training and other activities. Secondly, joint planning and a long-term presence in-country made it possible to gradually transfer responsibility from FCA to ACCE staff. Indeed, by using LCIP in training and other activities, ACCE teacher educators were active from the beginning. By taking time to know each other and share points of interest, it was possible to increasingly transfer responsibility of professional development. Ideally, the ownership of the activities should be shared widely by the teacher educators' community. International experts' role should be genuinely collegial; experts are also developing as professionals through collaboration, learning and receiving from the Eritrean colleagues under ACCE management.

Another critical lesson was that change begins with individuals. Collegial support and continuous professional development activities are necessary support structures for individuals, who aim to improve their own practice.[53] Individual teacher educators showed motivation and agency in taking responsibility for their own professional development.

The challenges to collaboration also taught us valuable lessons. Certainly, there must be a balance of expectations. The Finnish education experts sought to bring international exposure, activities for professional development and a culture of learning. On the other hand, their Eritrean counterparts were understandably interested in material support and sponsorship for degrees in addition to the aforementioned. The motivation of teacher educators to participate in such cooperation can be difficult to raise, as individual teachers might struggle with difficult life contexts, the lack of incentives or formal credits. The sustainability of change beyond single projects remains an issue, as professional development is a long-term process that requires support, resources and time. The findings of this study challenge international actors to move towards more structured approaches to professional development of teacher educators that go beyond the common one-off workshop approach.[54]

Overall, the findings are promising in that they point to changing pedagogical practice and an enhanced culture for professional development at ACCE. The activities focused on collaborative professional development that aims to build a sustained professional learning community at ACCE. The findings have shown how these collaborative activities have enhanced teacher motivation and commitment at ACCE which could potentially contribute to increased staff retention.

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53 See also Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016.

54 O'Sullivan 2010; Posti-Ahokas *et al.* 2016.

Institutional capacity building ensures that new and refined systems and policies can take root, and that programmatic activities in the short-term have a sustainable and lasting impact long after program activities conclude or passionate supporters have left. Based on the results, it is recommended that the current ACCE-FCA cooperation continues. Indeed, the study suggests that professional collaboration between teachers and teacher educators from the South and the North is a worthwhile enterprise.

While this study offers proven solutions and emerging knowledge on increased quality of education through the professional development of teacher educators, it is vital that in the future the wider scope of structural challenges in the Eritrean education sector are addressed. There is a clear need to re-evaluate assessment systems: the current examination system compels both students and teachers to stay rooted in a system of rote learning. Until this system is reformed, it is anticipated that rote learning and preparations for exams will continue to dominate classrooms at all levels of education. Such high stakes exams undermine the goals of the National Curriculum 2008 to found education on LCIP. Therefore, teachers' and teacher educators' continuous access to meaningful professional development and study of classroom practices are critical to contextualize LCIP in the Eritrean education system.

Towards a Conclusion

The objectives of advocating LCIP could be summarized into three macrolevel goals: 1) learner empowerment, 2) improved educational quality, and 3) improved status of the teacher profession.

Reaching these goals would in turn lead towards satisfying the Sustainable Development Goal 4 items. Learner empowerment encompasses promotion of gender equality and equality in general, as encouraging critical and creative thinking would support the questioning of experienced injustice. Understanding the usefulness of learning creates a solid basis into life-long learning. Reaching this understanding requires responsibility and possibility to at least limited self-determination to be given for the learner. Improved quality of education and learner empowerment can potentially lead into flourishing entrepreneurial innovation and activity. Obviously, the learners' increased competences mean a better-capacitated society. On a different level, yet extremely importantly, enhanced quality of education will ensure basic literacy and numeracy skills throughout Eritrea.

As the status of teacher profession in Eritrea is currently relatively low, this is a key issue calling for change. At present, it is very difficult to recruit qualified, or any, teachers in remote areas of the country. An increased number of applicants into teacher education is the only way of solving the

critical problem of too few teachers, and would also improve the accessibility to basic education. Furthermore, did the teaching profession become more attractive for well-performing students, this would manifest in increased professional motivation and commitment to develop the school culture, and the educational culture more broadly.

Perhaps the most important bottleneck in making any educational policy reality through practice is in proper training of teachers and, crucially, teacher educators to implement the policy. Mere theoretical informing does not seem to be enough. Even if the theory becomes widely accepted and the philosophy embraced, the practical implementation might remain a distant goal. However, the findings of this study suggest that significant educational change can be brought about in a relatively short period of time.

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