

# **Pupils' experiences with learner-centred pedagogy in Tanzania**

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**Abstract:** Teachers and pupils co-construct classroom reality, but existing studies examining learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) in the Global South have primarily focused on teachers. Pupils' experiences with LCP and its contribution to their learning have attracted little scholarly attention. This research seeks to address this gap to some extent by exploring not only teaching and learning practices observed in classrooms but also pupils' narratives about their experiences in Tanzania. This research utilised focus group discussions with pupils and classroom observations to understand pupils' perspectives on classroom experiences. Pupils spoke of discussions, group work and pupil-initiated Q&A as their favourite classroom activities; however, classroom observations revealed virtual absence of LCP-related practices. Analysis of pupil–teacher interactions and pupils' perceived relationships with teachers indicates their view of teachers as a respected source of knowledge and their fear of teachers. The paper underscores pupils' perspectives as a step to make LCP policies truly centre on learners.

**Keywords:** learner-centred pedagogy, pupils' schooling experiences, children's voices, Tanzania

## **Introduction**

Considered as ‘best practice’ or a ‘universal panacea’ in education reforms, learner-centred pedagogy (LCP) has been widely adopted by governments in the Global South, notably in sub-Saharan Africa on which this paper focuses. The agreement on Education for All (EFA) in 1990 demanded that many low-income nations make educational reforms to provide quality education for all members of society, where ‘quality’ implied a constructivist teaching style (Vavrus 2009). The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) enacted in 2000 aimed to achieve universal primary education with the EFA initiative running in parallel, accelerating education reforms with ‘student-centred learning’ (UNDP 2014, 22). UNESCO (2015) reports that one of the achievements of EFA throughout the MDG years from 2000 to 2015 includes that ‘textbooks became more student-centred’ (204). Following the pedagogical direction of the EFA and MDGs, the Incheon Declaration for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) continues further to embrace ‘learner-centred, active and collaborative pedagogical approaches’ (UNESCO et al. 2015, 8).

Several studies have nonetheless suggested a seeming incompatibility of LCP principles and the manner of their implementation in these contexts, including a lack of basic educational materials (Pontefract and Hardman 2005), overcrowded classrooms (Sifuna and Kaime 2007), unqualified or underqualified teachers (O’Sullivan 2004) and education systems assessing fact-based knowledge rather than the skills supposed to be nurtured through LCP, such as creativity and problem-solving (Bartlett and Vavrus 2013).

While substantial empirical evidence illustrates the discrepancies between policy ideals and local appropriation of LCP as indicated above, existing literature has overlooked a critical element of pedagogy: the students. Research has centred predominantly on the act of teaching and the teachers; although learning and the students make up equally important constituents, learners’ perspectives and experiences have received much less attention. Fuller

and Snyder (1991) attribute an ignorance of students and learning from research foci to our assumption that students are ‘invariant, textureless creatures’ (275). Sorin (2005) further underlines this, noting that the image of the child as innocent, incapable and powerless has until recently dominated the construction of childhood since the late Middle Ages. When such an image of the child meets educational policymaking, interventionists have left children out by setting their exclusive focus on teachers as the important change-makers (Tabulawa 2013). Student voices have therefore been ‘silenced, suppressed or ignored’ (James 2007, 261) both in terms of research foci and in the policy discourse surrounding LCP implementation in low-income countries.

The research interests of existing studies range from teaching practices (Nakabugo and Siebörger 2001), teachers’ beliefs and values (Brinkman 2019; Dyer et al. 2004) and their conceptualisation of LCP (Barrett 2007; Sikoyo 2010) to the possible effects of teacher training on teachers’ classroom practices (Hardman et al. 2009; Thompson 2013). Even when researchers have included students in their studies, their analytical focus has been on the teachers. For example, O’Sullivan (2004) analysed students’ work but only to evaluate the teachers’ practices and their perspectives on their own teaching. Hardman et al. (2009) included pupils among their interviewed participants but only to assess the effectiveness of a teacher-training programme and not to inquire into what the pupils themselves experienced. That having been said, Tabulawa (2009, 2013) observed classroom interactions and practices from both teachers’ and students’ perspectives in Botswana, arguing that both agents act upon each other to negotiate power relationships and shape classroom reality. This study builds on Tabulwa’s and explores the co-constructed nature of teacher–student interactions in the context of Tanzania. It further compares and contrasts policy ideals of LCP, student views of classroom experiences and observed classroom practices.

The problem with attempting to understand LCP only through the lens of the teachers moreover misses an important component of pedagogy. With the literature concentrating only on classroom practices and perceptions of teachers, questions like what students are experiencing in the classroom and at school under the ongoing LCP implementation, and whether LCP benefits learning or impairs pupils' achievements have remained unanswered. Such a research practice presents a problem from the social constructivist perspective, within which LCP has a theoretical grounding. Social constructivism stresses the situatedness of knowledge within the social realm, positing that knowledge is a social product of construction and reconstruction. In any classroom both teacher and students participate in this joint project, negotiating knowledge, values, beliefs and human relationships by means of interaction (Fleming 2015; Tabulawa 2013). It is not just the teacher who dominates and controls classroom processes, but the students also influence the teacher. Besides, research on pedagogy needs to acknowledge the distinctive views of both teachers and students. This position requires a constructivist ontology that sheds light on the multiple realities of the same phenomenon, depending on which groups a person belongs to (Patton 2015). Consequently, any effort to examine and alter pedagogy must consider both teachers and students.

Furthermore, the absence of learners' views in LCP policies is ironic considering the principles underpinning learner-centredness. Some of the fathers of social constructivism and LCP, namely Socrates (Plato 2005) and Rousseau (2007), espoused learning that is individualised in terms of the learner's own interests, prior knowledge and experience. Similarly, Dewey (1916) advocated democratic education where children possess autonomy and have a say in their learning. Multilateral agencies inherit these beliefs, campaigning that students are active agents who have a voice (UNICEF 2009; UNESCO 2017). Nevertheless, little research has focused on learners, hence the lack of empirical evidence on their views

runs contrary to the tenets of LCP. Thus, attempting to fill the research gap regarding children's perspectives in studies on LCP implementation in the Global South, this paper addresses two research questions:

- (1) How do teachers and pupils co-construct classroom reality in Tanzanian primary schools in the context of LCP implementation?
- (2) What do pupils' views of classroom experiences indicate about the local enactment of LCP policies in relation to LCP principles and tenets?

The next section contextualises the study theoretically, historically and culturally. We then describe our methodological approach with unstructured lesson observations and focus group discussions (FGDs), followed by the presentation of data in the form of three vignettes and an analysis of the generated data. We conclude the paper with implications of this research for educational policies and practice in the Global South.

## **Background to the study**

### ***Theoretical grounding of LCP***

Here we illustrate the historical path of the concept of LCP, wherein certain educative features can be traced back to educational theorists and philosophers from a variety of scholarly traditions. LCP evolved through an understanding that knowledge is a product of social construction, whose origin dates to one of the founders of Western philosophy, Socrates. Socrates believed that prior knowledge and experiences vary from individual to individual, based on which they construct knowledge. He had many students or followers and became an affable and influential interlocutor for them. Socrates held debates with his students in the pursuit of truth, where he constantly asked them questions to bring out their existing knowledge (Swardson 2005).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) later contextualised the philosophical notion of constructivism within an educational framework (Tabulawa 2013), that of child-centred

pedagogy. As a philosopher living through the Enlightenment era (1715–1789), Rousseau stressed the role of experience in learning processes, with a premise that the interpretation of the world depends on what individuals sense, believe and experience. Taking this notion further, John Dewey (1859–1952) situated learner-centredness in the practical context of education. He coined the term ‘progressive education’, through which he aimed to foster the concept of democracy among children. Dewey also experimentally actualised his ideal of education in his own school, with the curricula based on the children’s interests, stressing collaborative learning and encouraging democratic relationships between the teachers and students (Cuban 1993).

Cognitive psychologists such as Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) soon established scientific evidence for Dewey’s progressive education. The former argued that children’s development must necessarily precede their learning, whilst the latter claimed that social learning tends to precede development. Piaget observed children’s growth in experiments, uncovering that they exhibit different behaviours, abilities and interests in certain developmental stages regardless of differences in culture or environment (Ginsburg and Opper 1988). Vygotsky also attended to children’s development but with a focus on the social and cultural environment in shaping one’s knowledge and experiences – the basis on which Vygotsky is called the father of the social constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978).

The concepts these scholars developed eventually converged as ‘learner-centred pedagogy (LCP)’ whose key components include an emphasis on individuals, the independence of learners, democratic relationships between learners and teachers, the learners’ active roles and the importance of interactions. Albeit having evolved largely from Western-oriented theories, these eclectic educational ideas are considered universally effective regardless of sociocultural and environmental contexts (Schweisfurth 2013, Vavrus

2009); they have been travelling around the world from Western to non-Western countries with aid agencies as the mediator, as shown above. In the next section we take Tanzania as a case country and consider how it has adopted the concept of learner-centredness over time.

### ***Tanzania's politico-cultural context***

Tanzania has seemingly cultivated a compatible basis with LCP principals politically and ideologically decades before the recent global spread of LCP (Author). To revive traditional society in the postcolonial era, the first president Julius K. Nyerere issued Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) to set up the purposes of education as enhancing the cooperation of villagers, achieving the common good and structuring an egalitarian society (Nyerere 1967). Nyerere valued the links between the educational curriculum and people's local lives. The curriculum stressed the skills needed in the sector through 'learning by doing', aiming to foster cooperative attitudes among the students; the importance of exams should therefore be downgraded (Kassam 1994). Furthermore, the process of educating pupils should be democratic in ESR. Nyerere asserted that 'It [education in Tanzania] must produce good farmers; it has also to prepare people for their responsibilities as free workers and citizens in a free and democratic society, albeit a largely rural society' (1967, 388). Pupils therefore should be entitled to make decisions regarding, for example, how to spend school money and how to work on the school farm. This was because 'only then can the participants practice – and learn to value – direct democracy' (Nyerere 1967, 398). Thus, democratisation of learning, curriculum relevant to local lives and collaborative learning constituted the major themes in ESR, which could be argued to resemble some of the LCP tenets.

Nonetheless, ESR was claimed to be partly idealistic but less realistic, in ways that it contradicted with the traditional way of learning (Author). Education in traditional Tanzania aimed to transmit existing values, knowledge and customs to the next generation. In communities that maintained tribal harmony, learners observed the skills of the master and

followed the example without questioning (Mushi 2009). Elderly people received respect from community members as the possessors of knowledge, and rigid relationships between older and younger generations existed (Cameron and Dodd 1970). Nyerere's attempt to integrate traditional learning with the auspices of 20<sup>th</sup> century schooling provisions and infrastructure witnessed some difficulties in fully implementing the ideals laid out in ESR. The assessment strategy kept testing student ability to memorise and recall rather than higher-order thinking skills. In spite of Nyerere's wish to align curricula with people's everyday lives, they remained rigidly determined without allowing teachers and students to introduce changes or to provide input, due to there being too much content to be covered (Mosha 1990). Authoritarianism also continued in classrooms; there was no room for students, or even for teachers, to make decisions about the imposed curriculum (Mbilinyi 1979).

Whilst varied arguments exist regarding successes and failures of ESR (e.g., Regmi, Andema, and Asselin 2020; Urch 1989), decades later international agencies brought principles of democratic student–teacher relationships, curriculum linked to local lives, and ‘learning by doing’ to Tanzania through LCP programmes. Following the legislative frameworks of EFA, MDGs and SDGs that embrace pedagogical principles of LCP, the country has long been committed to the advancement of LCP. The Basic Education Master Plan enacted in 2001, for example, listed the policies and government programmes aligned to the realisation of EFA and urges the adoption of ‘learner centred methods’ (MoEC 2001, 23) although no specification was given as to what these methods look like. To reform prevalent teaching practices that ‘do not easily support learner centred methods’ (MoEVT 2010a, 9), the In-Service Education and Training Strategy set out to improve the quality of education using LCP, entailing ‘interactive teaching’ and ‘active problem solving’ (ibid 15). Similarly, the recent Basic Education Curriculum (MoEST 2016, 28) promotes LCP in line specifically with participatory and interactive aspects of LCP:



This curriculum emphasizes learner-centred approach in which the pupil is the focus. [...]

[T]his curriculum emphasizes participatory methods of teaching and learning. In the whole process of teaching and learning, the teacher must ensure that every pupil gets an opportunity to participate fully in the activities regardless of their differences.

These policy pronouncements explicitly state the Tanzanian government's commitment to realising the international schemes and indicate its concentration on LCP in educational settings.

Contrary to such policy pronouncements, existing research conducted in the country has revealed little implementation of LCP in local schools. Vavrus's (2009) ethnographic study examined the student teachers' views of constructivist pedagogy and their classroom practices. Through participant observation and in-depth interviews with teachers, the author identifies several dimensions that can conflict with the cultural framework in Tanzania, such as an education system requiring pupils to memorise knowledge and inadequate teacher training and poor resources. Likewise, qualitative research carried out by Barrett (2007) found similar obstacles for primary teachers attempting to apply LCP in the classroom. Barrett criticises a policy discourse on teaching and learning that tends to dichotomise pedagogy into either LCP or teacher-centred teaching and proposes mixed pedagogy contingent on the local environment and culture. Such research conducted in Tanzania, however, is not an exception with its exclusive focus on teachers while leaving the views from pupils and students out of LCP discourses; to address this gap, our study set out to juxtapose LCP as policy and its enactment in the classroom as observed by the researcher and perceived by pupils in primary schools.

### **Research design and methods**

The research on which this paper is based utilised a comparative case study design (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017) with multiple data gathering methods (Author); this paper reports on results from classroom observations and FGDs conducted by Author 1. The cases studied

were chosen at two stages of regional and school levels. School cases were selected purposively from two geographical regions – Dar es Salaam and Kigoma – chosen based on national examination results (Author), and school type and location (revealed as critical factors for LCP implementation in the literature), drawn from a list of schools supplied by district education officers. Fieldwork was conducted in 13 schools, through which 1,024 pupils from Grade 6 classes participated in the research. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the 13 schools with pseudonymised names.

[Table 1 near here]

With written consent from both the teachers and pupils, 17 Grade 6 classes in the selected schools were observed and videoed. Author 1 sat at the front or the back of the classroom depending on the availability of space and a desk. While recording the lessons with a video camera, she took notes on what she saw, felt and experienced in relation to LCP features as much as possible to generate a narrative account of the behaviour of the teachers and pupils. Author 1 visited the schools as an outsider, staying there only for one to two days; we acknowledge that the presence of the researcher – known as the observer effects (Bryman 2016; Robson 2002) – might well have influenced how teachers and pupils acted in the classroom. Time constraints precluded more informal interactions outside the classroom, which Author 1 would have wished.

Before or after the lesson observation depending on the schools' schedule, Author 1 invited three girls and three boys from each of the 17 classes to an FGD. The pupils were selected or volunteered by the teachers based roughly on their academic ability, and the discussions were recorded with the pupils' consent. Two research assistants translated between Swahili and English as required; some pupils, especially those at private schools, responded to Author 1 in English.

The FGDs took place in or outside the classroom depending on the availability of space and chairs. To ensure privacy and to encourage pupils to speak freely, Author 1 negotiated with the schools that FGDs could take place in an empty classroom or quiet outside space uninterrupted by staff or other pupils. Author 1 asked pupils seven questions around classroom activities, relationships with teachers, and family life and relationships. Pupils were asked specifically about their most and least preferred learning activities and what they would do if they could change one aspect of their classes and/or schools, to explore their perceptions and experiences of school and classroom activities. These queries sought to uncover any enablers and hindrances to LCP implementation from pupils' perspectives. Pupils were also asked about their relationships with their teachers or to what extent they followed teacher orders. The topic of home relationships explored family interactions and decision-making, but this is not covered in this paper. Each FGD took approximately 30 to 40 minutes.

### **Findings and analysis**

As a preface to the main findings, we present narrative portraits of three lessons. The vignettes are not meant to generalise their teaching and learning processes to all the observed classes, but to illustrate particular pedagogical features found in different classrooms and lessons that we will explore further in subsequent sections.

#### ***Vignette 1: Juma's English class, Amani (urban public)***

The English teacher Juma, with 14 years of teaching experience, taught close to 50 pupils sitting in rows on shared benches. One light bulb hung down from the wooden roof; however, the sunlight from the window made the room bright so that Juma did not need to turn on the electric light. The teacher started his lesson by introducing the topic of the English phrases 'so...that...', 'too...to...', and 'enough...to...'. The pupils sometimes took part in his explanation by completing Juma's sentences.

Juma: Maybe you are given examples like, a sentence like ‘John is clever’. Because of his being clever, he, this is John, cannot fail. John is?

All pupils: Clever.

Juma: He cannot?

All pupils: Fail.

Juma: These are two sentences. This one sentence, and this is the other sentence.

The pupils knew when and what to say because of Juma’s rising intonation. After five minutes of such interactions with the whole class, the teacher pointed to a small boy sitting in the front row. Juma asked him his name and urged the class to agree that the pupil was short. This prompted Juma to make a sentence using a phrase, ‘He is too short to touch the ceiling’. The class verbally repeated the example several times.

In the middle of the lesson, Juma instructed the pupils to organise themselves into small groups. They were expected to form one sentence from two using the phrases ‘so...that...’ or ‘too...to’. For instance, Juma wrote two short sentences: ‘Asha is very young’ and ‘She cannot walk alone’. The task was to produce one sentence using the designated phrases, ‘Asha is too young to walk alone’. By repeating ‘Class, quiet, quiet’, Juma commanded the pupils to *silently* read the sentences on the blackboard. It was apparent that the pupils who had formed groups were confused about when and how to discuss. While the teacher was writing several sentences on the board, some pupils took notes whereas others were barely engaged with any task. Few verbal exchanges occurred. After finishing writing down four sentences, Juma asked one group to answer the first question, assuming that they had discussed to prepare their answer. The group was not ready. The teacher looked a little embarrassed but moved to another group to seek their response. A female pupil gave a correct answer, but she presented on her own behalf and not her group. Juma continued to call on two other pupils, each of whom correctly answered. The teacher directed the whole class to give these pupils a clap. Everyone in unison clapped their hands three times. After

around 15 minutes of such interactions, the teacher ended his class with a writing exercise. Juma copied questions from his textbook, and the pupils wrote down their answers in their exercise books until the time had come to end the lesson.

***Vignette 2: Abdu's English class, Kisutu (rural public)***

The classroom at Kisutu offered enough space and equipment for about 50 pupils. The room did not need electric light thanks to the bright sunlight. The English teacher, Abdu, had just started his teaching career. Abdu taught how to use the past tense with the preposition 'for'. Abdu wrote on the board, 'Using the word "for" to express the time in the past'. This led him to verbally introduce the topic, followed by repetition by the pupils.

Abdu: Right, today we are going to teach the usage of the word 'for'. So, our topic...our main topic is expressing duration. Class, what? Say expressing duration.

All pupils: Expressing duration.

Abdu: Expressing duration.

All pupils: Expressing duration.

Abdu: Loudly. Expressing duration.

All pupils: Expressing duration.

Abdu then explained the topic in more detail but in a somewhat confusing manner.

So, we are going to use the word 'for' to express a time. The word 'for' is used to express...to express the time or the known time. Or another word, we say to express the known...the known time. The word 'for' is used to express the known time, the time which is known, but in the past. Class, are we together?

The pupils' affirmative answer in unison came next. Abdu asked the pupils to give example sentences, followed by a boy's verbal presentation: 'I have eaten food, comma, for ten minutes ago'. Despite the awkwardness of the sentence, Abdu responded with praise, directing the rest of the class to congratulate him by chanting.

After having two more pupils present their sentences, the teacher gave the class an exercise to make four sentences using the word 'for' to express time. He checked if the pupils understood the task, to which some of them answered 'no'. Abdu's ears caught the word. He told them five times to raise their hands if they understood. No one raised their hands at first, but as the teacher continued asking the same question, more and more pupils gradually responded positively. At the end the whole class expressed that they had understood the task, allowing Abdu to conclude that there was no need to explain the exercise again. The teacher intended to ensure their understanding, but the way he did so seemed to force the pupils to respond with 'yes'. Abdu gave eight minutes for the pupils to complete the sentences, and he ended his lesson after he had corrected the pupils' answers individually.

***Vignette 3: Nyo's mathematics class, Umoja (urban public)***

Sunshine from the windows and open door provided light in Nyo's class. A maths teacher with 25 years of teaching experience, he was one of the oldest teachers observed in this research. His lesson with over 70 pupils was on calculating cubic volume, and he delivered it facing the chalkboard throughout his lecture. In dead silence, Nyo started drawing a cube on the blackboard. The pupils were carefully watching the teacher without speaking a single word. Looking at his precisely drawn cube, Nyo uttered, 'You multiply eight for all three sides, height times length times - ?' The pupils followed with, 'Width', as if it was their ritual. They appeared to know when their teacher wanted them to complete his sentence or to give particular answers. In the same manner, as Nyo calculated the cube on the blackboard, the pupils followed him by stating the numbers.

Nyo:               What do you write?

All pupils:       Zero.

Nyo:               How many will you have in your mind?

All pupils:       Two.

Nyo:               One times three?

All pupils: Three. Five. Nine. Six. One. Seven. Nine. Eleven. Two.

Nyo: So, we write it is equal to...

A few pupils: Three.

In the middle of the review, Nyo questioned the class about the meaning of surface, sides and edges. The pupils could not give any satisfactory answers, resulting in the teacher providing exemplar answers.

Nyo was the only teacher observed to unreservedly give the pupils strokes during the observation. In the middle of his lesson, Nyo allowed time for the pupils to copy his writing on the board into their notebooks, during which he paced the classroom with a stick. When he reached a male pupil, who seemed not to be writing properly, he beat the pupil's back three times. The teacher then wrote three problems for the class to solve, and again he walked around the room to mark the pupils' answers. He beat the backs of several pupils who made noise, who made mistakes in the exercise, and who did not follow the teacher's order to collect the assignment. A few pupils screamed, but Nyo did not desist. The writing exercise lasted for nearly 40 minutes out of one hour, and the lesson ended without a greeting.

The three vignettes epitomise virtual absence of LCP-related activities or interactions. The teachers predominantly utilised teacher-led classroom practices typified by one-way lecturing, close-ended questions and writing exercises among others. We now draw on pupils' perspectives in an attempt to unpack these observed pedagogical approaches. Based on the FGD data supported by classroom observations from across the 13 schools, we juxtapose pupils' perceptions of classroom and schooling experiences with teaching and learning practices observed in classrooms.

### ***LCP-related classroom activities favoured by pupils***

In the course of the development of LCP concepts, and building in particular on the work of Vygotsky and Dewey noted above, certain kinds of classroom practices have become associated with LCP, including discussions, small group work and learning individualised to

each student's needs and wants (Schweisfurth 2013). To explore whether and how LCP's pedagogical features and models might align to what pupils perceived best supports their learning, participants were firstly asked about their preferred lesson activities. Clearly showing a preference for LCP-related practices, 14 out of the 17 FGDs mentioned 'discussions' and 'group work' as their favourites. Many of them explained that they could understand better in discussion, as exemplified in the excerpt below taken from the Kawe School FGD:

Researcher: What kind of activities do you prefer to have in the classroom?

Boy 1: Group discussions.

Researcher: Why do you like group discussions?

Girl: Because when we discuss, we understand more.

Boy 2: We share views and knowledge. We get to know each other more.

A female pupil in Mwenge similarly commented, 'I like when we sit in groups and do some exercise in groups [because] I can understand the subject well', whilst a girl in Umoja told that 'in a discussion group, everyone provides views, different views'. For others, working together through discussions provided a mechanism to support one another in their learning processes. A boy at Siha noted, 'in a discussion, we get opportunities to help each other'. A group of pupils at Bunge elaborated this point when Author 1 enquired why they liked discussions.

Boy: Through discussions, we can share our ideas and complete tasks together.

Girl 1: Discussions help us share ideas together because some people may know something well, which others may not know.

Girl 2: When we share ideas, it helps us succeed in exams.

In contrast to what pupils wished for, as the three vignettes above portray, classroom practices were dominated by lecture-driven activities such as watching and listening to teachers, taking notes silently while teachers wrote on the blackboard and doing writing



exercises. Where discussions and group work were recorded, which was rare across all the 17 classes, pupils did not necessarily engage with learning from each other as they wished. Juma's vignette typifies such a situation. The teacher ostensibly employed the activity 'group work', but few exchanges of ideas or thoughts between pupils occurred. With his command to *quietly* discuss with others, the pupils in groups whispered at best but mostly maintained silence. Juma's purpose appeared just to organise pupils into groups for the sake of making groups; so long as groups were formed, his objective was achieved. It seemed not to matter to the teacher how and what kind of learning took place in the groups. Under such conditions, it is unlikely that the pupils learned different views, gained knowledge from peers or collaborated with each other to solve given problems.

The observation data regarding little discussion or group work corresponds with some pupils' experiences reported in the FGDs. In response to Author 1's question 'Do you have much discussion time in class?', a male pupil from Umoja quickly answered 'No'. Several pupils from Highland and Islamia similarly echoed that there were few discussions or small group activities. Likewise, in the rural public school Siha, pupils were not allowed much time for discussion with their peers: 'It happens rarely. We don't get much time for discussions. When teachers finish lecturing, they quickly move to exercise for exams, and they leave the classroom as soon as we finish exercise', a male pupil revealed. A discrepancy therefore appears to exist between LCP policies – which align well with what pupils preferred – and the enactment of the policies as perceived by pupils and observed in classrooms. A parallel situation can be seen in pupil–teacher interactions in the classroom.

### ***Teacher–pupil classroom interactions***

One of the most common interaction types observed in the classrooms involved teacher questioning, the majority of which were closed-questions. The questions the teachers posed required the pupils to recall facts such as in the example of Nyo's class. It appeared that the

teacher already had the ‘correct’ answers prior to asking the questions, which pupils seemed expected to answer in unison. The pupil–teacher exchanges were a verification process of whether the pupils could reproduce the exact answer Nyo had in mind. Only one answer, and nothing else, could be uttered by all pupils. In similar fashion, ‘pseudo-checking’, where students do not have a choice but are expected to give an affirmative answer (Hardman, Abd-Kadir and Smith 2008), also required pupils to give a certain response. For instance, the observed teachers often appraised pupil comprehension by asking, ‘Do you understand?’ and ‘Are we together?’ The pupil–teacher dynamic below was taken from a mathematics lesson in Kwanza School. After examining a pupil who gave the correct answer on mixed fractions, the teacher enquired of the whole class:

- Teacher: I think you understand, right?  
All pupils: Yes.  
Teacher: Is there anyone who has a question?  
All pupils: No.  
Teacher: No one?  
All pupils: Yes.  
Teacher: Now, let us proceed to the other topic.

Rather than a process for ensuring pupil comprehension, such an exchange sounds more like ritual. Both the teacher and his pupils seemingly expected a positive reaction from the latter, as if it was tacitly agreed upon by both agents.

In addition to teacher questioning, another kind of classroom interaction that was observed involved teacher elicitation, where the teachers prompted pupils to respond in the form of repetition or the completion of a phrase or word, as demonstrated in Juma’s and Abdu’s classes above. Juma seemingly expected pupils to complete his sentence, and the pupils knew when and what to say, responding as a whole class to the rising intonation at the end of the teacher’s sentences. Similarly, in the first chunk of communication in Abdu’s

class, the only word uttered by the pupils was ‘Expressing duration’. The answer was given beforehand, and the pupils did not engage in any thinking; they stated not an answer to a problem but a general phrase, and they merely repeated it.

In contrast to such classroom interactions led by teachers, pupils spoke in the FGDs of their preference for initiating interactions, specifically by asking questions and seeking clarification from teachers. For instance, a male pupil from Green stated, ‘I enjoy when a teacher is teaching and we are free to ask him or her questions. And the teacher responds to us’. Another pupil followed to agree: ‘I like when we ask questions to our teacher, the teacher responds by asking us questions’. In Bunge a few pupils detailed the benefits of Q&A in the learning processes to ‘know different answers to the same question’. One girl also elaborated that ‘Questions and answers help because someone may have a question but not the answer. So, when we bring up that question, others can learn [from it]’.

Pupils’ perceived classroom experiences, however, diverged from their desire, as seen in the three vignettes. The male pupil in Green introduced above, who would enjoy the freedom to ask questions of teachers, stated that such a moment seldom happened. A few pupils in Highland similarly reported, ‘We can’t ask questions to teachers because we don’t have time’. One pupil at Abdu’s school Kisutu responded as below when asked whether he posed many questions to teachers in ordinary classrooms:

Boy: No, not really.

Researcher: Why might that be?

Boy: Teachers are sometimes exhausted because they teach a lot. They teach one period after another, and they get exhausted. So, they don’t like to be asked [questions].

These pupils seem to refrain from bothering teachers with questions. To further corroborate these accounts, some other pupils indicated their compliance to teacher orders. To Author 1’s query whether they follow teacher orders and/or sometime propose ideas, two male pupils in

Islamia simultaneously responded, ‘We follow teachers’, with one of them continuing to report that ‘we have few opportunities to say something to them [teachers]’. A boy in Baraka also revealed, ‘we always get orders from teachers. [...] We follow them for everything. We don’t have any chance to say anything’.

These pupil narratives and the observed interaction pattern may represent a power relation seemingly rooted in relationships between pupils and teachers. As discussed earlier, in traditional Tanzanian culture younger people paid esteem to elder people for their possession of knowledge and established values. Pupils’ giving correct responses and their ‘yes’ answer in pseudo-checking in current classrooms would present a similar adult–child relationship to grant teachers their status as a source of knowledge. Correspondingly, the pupils should never give wrong answers or utter ‘no’ to teachers. Indicating that they did not understand would challenge the value of the teacher as a source of knowledge. The pupils and teachers seem to have acted according to the social norms of schools in Tanzania about interactional patterns, sometimes to ‘save the face of teachers’ (Wedin 2010, 148).

Countering such a classroom culture was avoided as much as possible in most cases, as Author 1 observed no occasions where the pupils declared that they did not understand, except for in teacher Abdu’s class in which they obeyed the teacher in the end. The accounts given by some pupils in the FGDs imply their obedience to teachers, conforming with needs of teachers who were busy giving lessons, by not posing questions to or bothering them. Thus, pupil–teacher classroom interactions maintained hierarchical relationships between the two parties, and obedient attitudes of pupils toward teachers appeared prevalent. The next section explores an underlining mechanism that seemingly influences the formation and maintenance of such hierarchal pupil–teacher relationships.

### ***Corporal punishment and fear of teachers***

As discussed above, classroom interactions between teachers and pupils were revealed to be teacher-dominated. This could affect, and be affected by, pupils' perceived relationships with their teachers, including the prevalence of corporal punishment in classrooms. In Umoja School in this study, the teacher Nyo struck several pupils' backs for their incorrect answers and disobedience to the teacher during the observation. Although Author 1 observed instances of corporal punishment only in this class, cases of caning seem to have happened habitually across the 13 schools, as revealed by pupils in the FGDs. It should be noted, however, that the use of corporal punishment indicates the most extreme form of how teachers and pupils in the participating schools mutually positioned themselves in their interactions, but it is by no means the sole feature determining pupil–teacher relationships.

According to a boy at Mwenge, 'When some students fail to do well in exercise, [...] the teachers beat [them]'. A boy at Islamia informed Author 1 that teachers would not listen to pupils' explanations: 'he just beats you [instead]'. According to the pupils, the 'bad behaviours' that provoked corporal punishment by teachers included pupils' incomprehension, giving incorrect answers, bad exam performance and making a noise. The teachers at Amani, Mwenge, Highland and Green often punished the whole class even if only a few pupils had committed the 'bad' behaviour, pupils reported. Teachers also hit them without any reason (Amani, Green), and according to a female pupil in Kawe, some of them 'brought anger from home' and hit pupils. Common forms of punishment involved beating hands, heads and other body parts with sticks (Umoja, Green, Kisutu, Siha and Highland). The teachers also forced the pupils to do physical exercise as punishment, including hopping and headstands (Mwenge, Green and Highland). During the FGD in Highland, pupils showed Author 1 a pose with their hands on the floor lifting their entire body up. A female pupil explained, 'We stay like this even for ten minutes'.

Corporal punishment affects the relationship between learners and teachers. In contrast to LCP that promotes democratic relationships between the learners and teachers, corporal punishment can provoke pupils to internalise problems leading to poor mental health and anxiety (Gershoff 2002; Hargreaves 2017). If the punishment persists, children could avoid communicating and interacting with their teachers, which might lead to unquestioning attitudes developing among pupils (Harber 2002). For example, in the FGD in Kisutu School, a female pupil reported that a glimpse of a teacher with a stick made them ‘become afraid [...and] not want to follow the teachers’. Two pupils at Mwenge also reported feeling fearful of speaking up and saying that they did not understand or asking questions because of the possible punishment they might receive. Fear of their teachers might explain to some extent why pupils hardly asked questions or why they consistently affirmed their content understanding during lessons. Corporal punishment in fact goes against the very ethos of democratic student–teacher relationships envisaged in LCP (Dewey 1916) and that sees students as decision-makers in their own education (UNICEF 2009).

The negative effect of corporal punishment on the pupil–teacher relationship seemed to have halted pupils’ freedom of expression in contexts beyond the classrooms. For example, all the schools except for St. John held student associations as a mechanism to collect pupils’ views. However, these organisations did not function in the manner intended, and the leaders of the student organisations were not active at all in Green. A girl explained its reason: ‘We are not free to give our views, because the teachers are so harsh’. A male pupil expanded on this, reporting that ‘Some teachers are so harsh, and students are afraid of them. Even if we try to ask questions, we end up maybe getting strokes’. Likewise, even though Siha had a student committee, it existed as a symbol only and was not operating in practice. A male pupil explained:

We have a school government. But they are just there as a symbol and they are not working.

Because the prefects themselves are afraid of facing the teachers on behalf of the students.

Because when they go there, sometimes they are being shouted at.

The pupils' accounts of their perceived relationships with their teachers demonstrates the effects of corporal punishment in the classroom. These narratives may represent a culture of fear existent in the schools partly resulting from physical violence. Although teachers may conduct caning to maintain discipline and manage a large class size (Tao 2013; Yoshida 2011) that might reflect Tanzania's position on the use of corporal punishment, this runs counter to the work of Dewey (1916) who promoted democratic decision-making processes in schools. With fear and anxiety felt towards the teachers, pupils will not be able to express their opinions comfortably or be willing to build equal relationships with their teachers, as envisaged in LCP tenets.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

What pupils experience at school and how they subjectively perceive their experiences constitute the core of their learning. Despite children's educational experiences being crucial for their learning, their voices have been neglected by the literature in pedagogical research in the Global South. The present research sought to understand qualitatively how pupils viewed and experienced LCP implementation through lesson observations and FGDs.

The results from the classroom observations reveal the prevalence of a teacher-centred manner of classroom interactions initiated by teachers; however, it must be stressed that these teacher-led interactions are created *jointly* by both teachers and pupils. As our earlier discussion underlines, classroom reality is established not by teachers alone but by interactions between both teachers and pupils (Tabulawa 2013). The exclusive focus of the previous literature on teaching practices implies a supposition that it is teachers who determine and guide what and how lessons are conducted. In reality, however, through their compliance to teachers pupils also participate in constructing the classroom ambience.

Teachers, as knowledge depositors, are seen to possess a higher social position than pupils as knowledge recipients. This study suggests that to ‘save teacher’s face’ and maintain them as an authoritarian figure, both agents *in collaboration* act in an expected manner supported by prevailing cultural norms.

The co-created interactional patterns of closed-questions and teacher elicitation may also demonstrate the belief that knowledge is detached from human observation or experience, as opposed to the constructivist view of knowledge. Reality is perceived as absolute and fixed, and to learn is to absorb and reproduce the fixed knowledge. According to Pontefract and Hardman (2005), teachers in sub-Saharan African nations commonly provoke repetition and the completion of words and phrases by their pupils. Wedin (2010) further claims that cued elicitation does not demand that learners engage in critical thinking or higher-order thinking. Such accounts are discordant with LCP ideals. For example, UNESCO (2015) assumes that open-ended discussions and role-playing should happen in a learner-centred classroom. Complying with the international recommendations, MoEVT (2010b) articulates that competent teachers should ‘identif(y) the pupil’s interests and talents’ (9), and ‘compos[e] meaningful group tasks’ (14). The narrative accounts from participating pupils indicated their preference towards these LCP-associated activities and interactions, such as discussions, group work and pupil-initiated Q&A. However, the analysis of classroom practices, as well as pupils’ narratives regarding their perceived classroom experiences, show divergent results to those policy convictions advanced by international and national governments. Considering the pedagogical features similarly supported by LCP policies and pupils’ desire, further research is necessary to explore possible common ground between international, national and local endeavours.

In the FGDs pupils also discussed their perception of their relationships with teachers. Issues around corporal punishment and their fear of their teachers were unveiled through the



pupils' narratives, which might have otherwise been difficult to obtain from research with teachers alone. Most schools in this study, regardless of school type or geographical location, faced the problem of corporal punishment, and this seemed to contribute in silencing the pupils' voices. International policies of LCP encourage children to be decision-makers regarding school management, in addition to what and how to learn (UNICEF 2009; UNESCO 2015). Widespread punishment nevertheless seems to ensure that pupils keep a personal distance from their teachers (Harber 2002; Hargreaves 2017). Therefore, due in large part to pupils' fear of their teachers, LCP policies cannot be expected to work as envisaged in Tanzanian schools. Not only does physical punishment stifle children's voices, it also runs counter to the spirit of LCP.

In sum, this research focusing on the pupils' views has illuminated observed and perceived pedagogical dimensions that may remain obscure if investigated solely from the adults' viewpoint. We argue that reflecting upon children's experiences and viewpoints in studies on LCP, and more broadly in pedagogical research, can contribute to improving children's learning and schooling experiences. This paper could claim to be breaking new ground to introduce pupils' perspectives as a step to make LCP policies truly centre on learners.

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