Trainee teachers' observation of learner-centred instruction and assessment as applied by History and Social Sciences teachers

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"If a child can't learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn."
Ignacio Estrada

Abstract

A growing body of research shows that the overall quality of teaching and learning is improved when learners have the opportunity to become actively involved in the learning process through which ample opportunities are given to question, apply and consolidate new knowledge. With the dawning of a new South Africa in 1994, more emphasis was placed on learner-centred instruction and assessment which is the reason why policy documents such as the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) and the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) endorsed this educational approach. The aim of this study is to investigate through the observation of trainee teachers to what extent History and Social Sciences teachers have adjusted from their predominately traditional educational paradigm of transmitted and absorbed knowledge by passive learners to employ different learner-centred instructional and assessment practices that emphasise the responsibility of learning into actively engaging learners.

By means of a structured questionnaire a small scale study (n=51) was done in urban, rural, township, and private schools in the North West and Gauteng provinces. The findings, inter alia, suggest that although History and Social Sciences teachers showed a willingness to utilise some of the learner-centred instruction strategies, their tendency to implement the traditional teacher-centred instruction strategies were much stronger. The findings further show that teachers preferred to be the primary assessors of the learning results.

Keywords: Learner-centred instruction strategies; History teaching; Social Sciences teaching; Teaching and learning; Assessment.

Introduction

Given the pivotal role of learner-centred instruction in realising the set goals for History and Social Sciences, it is essential to explain how this teaching and learner-centred approach has been viewed over time.

Learner-centred instruction does not originate from the modern era. Over 2000 years ago Plato portrayed ideas of learner-centred instruction through strategic questioning (Ozmon & Craver, 1995:xix). In the 18th century Jean Jacques Rousseau provided a comprehensive presentation of learner-centred ideas. He propagated self-activity and discovery learning: "Let him [the learner] know nothing because you have told him, but because he has discovered it himself" and furthermore "give your pupil no lesson in words; he must learn only from experience" (Rousseau, 1928:149).

Since the start of the progressive education movement in the 19th century and due to the influence of theorists, such as, John Dewey (1915:240-243), Jean Piaget (Schewebel & Raplh, 1944:245-247) and Carl Rogers (1951:197-199) whose collective work focused on how students learn, some educators started to replace traditional teacher-centred approaches with more learner-centred "hands-on" activities. Progressive education provides for "active learning by doing" and competence-directed learners whose individuality and personality will develop to such an extent that it will promote independent creative thinking (Coetzer, 2001:35-39; Olson, 1999:29). In traditional teaching methodologies the tendency was that teachers directed the learning process and that learners played a receptive role in their learning. Learner-centred instruction means inverting the traditional teacher-centred understanding of the learning process and putting learners at the centre of the learning process.

During the 20th century the learner-centred paradigm continues to dominate education theory and practice internationally (cf. Kandel, 1958:177; Tenenbaum, 1951:253-257; Deblois, 2002:72-77). In South Africa Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) was implemented in 1998 in the form of Curriculum 2005 (C2005), (DoE, 2002:5). This education approach de-emphasises content and replaces formal, didactic instruction with learner-centred and self-discovery learning.

One of the greatest challenges facing educators worldwide today is that of how to produce learners who are critical thinkers. In South Africa the realisation that critical thinking is both an important life skill and educational concept, gained prominence since 1995 when it was stated that

"…the Curriculum, teaching methods and textbooks at all levels and in all programmes of education and training, should encourage independent and critical thought" (RSA, 1997:10-12). This ideal was translated into a plan of action when the development of critical thinking skills was adopted as one of the Critical Outcomes by the South African Qualifications Authority in 1997 (Pienaar, 2001:125). The challenge is to ensure that all South Africans obtain the necessary knowledge, skills and values to become creative and critical thinkers. One way in which critical thinking can be fostered in the classroom, is by applying learner-centred instruction and assessment.

C2005 was revised in 2001 to be introduced in schools the following year as the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS), (DoE, 2005:2; DoE, 2002:2). Once again it emphasised a "participatory, learner-centred and activity-based education" (DoE, 2002:12). Despite the structural and design changes which were made in an effort to simplify and streamline C2005, teachers were still struggling to effectively implement the RNCS. In an effort to make the curriculum more accessible, the Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, stunned the educational community in November 2009 when she announced that OBE was dead. Consequently, the RNCS was replaced in 2012 by what was believed as to be an "improved and more user-friendly curriculum" known as The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (DBE, 2011a:14-15). Although this new educational policy was perceived by some educationists as a "back-to-basics" classical curriculum which accentuated the acquisition of basic scholastic skills in literacy and numeracy (Jones, 2011:4; Govender & Naidoo, 2011:9), it nevertheless re-emphasised learner-centred instruction in all subjects in encouraging "an active and critical approach to learning, rather than rote and uncritical learning..."(DBE, 2011b:4).

Literature review

Theoretical framework

To locate a research study in a particular paradigm, the theoretical frameworks underpinning learner-centred instruction, as well as explanations of the concept learner-centred instruction should be considered.

This research is grounded in a constructivist research paradigm as indirect, or learner-centred instruction is framed within this learning theory. Kim (2005:7) describes it as learning which involves the construction of own

knowledge from own experiences.

Constructivist approaches to teaching and learning have emerged from the work of psychologists, such as, Bruner, Piaget and Vygotsky. This theory - sometimes referred to as socio-constructivism - is an eclectic theory in which elements from other curriculum theories are combined. Traditionally learning has been thought to be a "mimetic" activity – a process that involves learners in repeating or miming newly presented information, whereas constructivist teaching helps learners to internalise and reshape, or transform new information (Brooks & Brooks, 1993:15).

Learning content which revolves around a constructivist approach will, according to Spector (1993:9-19), reveal the following characteristics among others:

- It will reduce the amount of content information and not merely add more facts as research produces new information;
- The focus will be on processes to develop connections and form conceptual frameworks into which new information may be integrated, rather than to teach content loaded with detail. The emphasis will be on holistic concepts;
- Instead of the content being selected and organised around the structure of the discipline, it will be organised around themes, current issues and real life problems. The curriculum will in fact be problem-based rather that discipline-based.

The most important implication of constructivism on teaching and learning lies in the shift from teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred instruction. Learners must engage in hands-on activities and independent research in order to construct their own meaning. Constructivism is grounded in the idealistic, post-modern doctrine that the mind is constitutive of the reality that it experiences (Rorty, 1989; Bruner, 1986; Goodman, 1984). As Hein (1991:1) claims "constructing meaning is learning; there is no other kind". Constructivism is based on the belief that learners should be helped to construct knowledge that is meaningful and useful in their own lives. What is important is not so much "what" learners learn, but "how they learn (Taylor, 2002:175). The skills they learn are more important than the content (Jacobs *et al.*, 2011:46).

Learner-centred instruction posits that human beings learn by actively constructing and assimilating knowledge rather than through the passive addition of discrete facts to an existing store of knowledge. Shor (1992:17) argues that "People begin life as motivated learners, not as passive beings", they learn by interacting, by experimenting, and by using play to internalise the meaning of words and experience. Vakalisa and Gawe (2011:2) explain that learner-centred instruction involves intrinsic involvement of the learner with the learning events. The teacher, who strives to meet the need for active participation of the learner, engages the learner in reflective and critical thinking exercises about the content. Borich (2007:12) agrees with this explanation and adds that learner-centred instruction fosters true learning for understanding. Learner-centred instruction approaches teaching and learning from the perspective of the learner rather than that of the teacher. Kim (2005:8) asserts that the teacher should act as facilitator who encourages learners to discover principles for themselves and to construct knowledge by working to solve realistic problems.

According to Lea *et al*. (2003:322) a review of some of the literature reveals that learner-centred instruction is grounded in the following principles:

- reliance upon active rather than passive learning;
- an emphasis on deep learning and understanding;
- an improved responsibility and accountability on the part of the learner;
- an increased sense of autonomy in the learner;
- interdependence between teacher and learner;
- mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship, and
- a reflexive approach to the learning and teaching process on the part of both teacher and learner.

Framed within the constructivist learning theory is experiential learning. The central argument in this theory, originally expounded by Dewey (Jacobs 2011:40), is that students can only acquire knowledge through personal experiences. Experientialists believe that one cannot place curriculum components (content, methods, assessment, etc.) in neat little boxes because all these components are intricately interwoven. Educationists however believe that knowledge about how to educate the young and their ability to learn should be researched in different ways. Theorists who hold this view of knowledge have come to be known as social constructivists. They claim that

knowledge is a construction of the learner and that it is subject to the school milieu within which the learner is located. Knowledge, according to this view, is acquired through an interactive and dialogical engagement with what is to be learnt. A social-constructivist understanding of learning content requires a learner-centred approach to teaching, where the teacher applies strategies such as, for example, cooperative learning (Gawe *et al.,* 2011:186-198).

Although this research is grounded in a constructivist research paradigm, it has been pointed out that there are elements of experiential learning present which is underpinned by a social constructivist theory.

Relevant research studies

Extensive research has been done over the years, locally and internationally, to determine what instructional strategies are applied in classrooms (cf. Orlich, *et al.*, 2012; Larson & Keiper, 2011; Huitt, *et al.*, 2009; Frangenheim, 2006; Killen, 2006). As far as it is relevant to this research, learner-centred instruction is seen as an indirect teaching mode. It includes instruction and assessment strategies such as projects, simulation, role-play, class discussions, excursions, cooperative and problem-based learning, etc. Problem solving is a form of inquiry learning which engage learners in seeking knowledge, processing information and applying ideas to real life situations (Van der Horst & McDonald, 1997:176).

Subject knowledge is important when teaching Social Sciences and History. However to evoke, and even more importantly, to keep the interest of the learners, the way the subject knowledge is presented, can make the difference. According to a report of the National Council of Education Research and Training in New Dheli (2006:9) Social Sciences/History teaching needs to be revitalised towards helping the learner acquire knowledge and skills in an interactive and creative environment.

Within the South African context, Bunt's (2013:292-293) contemporary study came to similar conclusions and recommended that Social Sciences/ History teachers need to be made aware of the different instructional and assessment strategies that affect the nurturing of creative thinking. He postulated that direct teacher-centred instruction (lecturing, repetition and drilling of information) is primarily still used in the Social Sciences/History classes.

With the emphasis on creative ways of communicating their learning, the educational experience of many learners unfortunately conditions them to take a passive approach to the learning process. They are taught that the way to earn good grades and to make it through school successfully is to memorise information and to recall this information when called upon (Puccio *et al.*, 2006:23). The authors suggested that teachers often treat learners as input-output systems, pump information into them, to assess the information that comes out and not concern themselves with the extent to which the information has been internalised.

The importance of teaching and learning skills has been a vital part of teacher training for many years. Trainee teachers at most institutions, but specifically at the North-West University (NWU), have been introduced to, and applied instructional strategies as an integral part of their training over a long period of time in Professional Studies as well as in all the different subject didactic modules. Since the infusion of OBE that campaigned for a more inclusive and active learner participation in class, more attention was given during training to learner-centred instruction strategies (Calender, NWU, 2000-2013).

Learner-centred assessment

In theory, learner-centred assessment is formative in nature (Andrade, *et. al.*, 2012:49). This means it is individualised, responsive and provides feedback to learners for the improvement of their learning. Feedback gives learners the opportunity to regularly monitor and regulate their own learning and in doing so become independent self-directed lifelong learners (Jones & Tanner, 2006:60-62; Earl, 2003:101). To improve learning through formative assessment, it is necessary for the learners - in collaboration with their teachers - to become actively involved in their own assessment. For this reason learners should act as assessment agents by assessing their own and the work of others through self- and peer-assessment (Heritage, 2007:142).

In the case of self-assessment learners are given the opportunity to come to decisions about themselves and their abilities in determining where they stand in relation to the intended learning aims (Noonan & Duncan, 2005:1). Learners receive feedback from themselves and must develop the skills necessary to assess their own progress and learning. This means that the learner has to reflect on identified areas of weaknesses and shortcomings that hamper the attainment of certain learning aims. By taking responsibility for

their learning, attempts are made to eliminate these deficiencies by developing self-regulation strategies to meet their own learning needs (Brooks, 2002:70).

When peer-assessment is implemented, learners assess each other's work and give feedback to their fellow learners about their progress under guidance of the teacher (Marnewick & Rouhani, 2004:274). Peer-assessment differs from self-assessment in the sense that it gives an "external" perspective of personal learning and performance whereas self-assessment reveals a more "internal" perspective (Fallows & Chandramohan, 2001:232). Self-assessment teaches the learner to reflect on his/her own work, while peer-assessment teaches the learner to reflect on the work of other learners. Peer-assessment can be useful for both the learner that receives the assessment critique as well as for the learner who is performing the assessment. Learners who are assessing another's work are able to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their own work (Kristin, 2002:80). It is however, an important prerequisite for teachers to teach learners the skills required for peer-assessment in advance.

According to Heritage (2007:142-143), for teachers to successfully apply formative assessment in a learner-centred instruction environment, specific knowledge and skills are a prerequisite. The following requirements are seen as critical for the teacher's knowledge: domain knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of the learner's prior learning and knowledge of assessment.

Domain knowledge refers to teachers' understanding of the concepts, knowledge and skills to be taught within a certain subject domain. Moreover, teachers should know the set of assessment requirements necessary to achieve them, and what a successful performance in each looks like.

In turn teachers' pedagogical content knowledge will enable them to use and skilfully apply differentiated instruction strategies in the classroom. To support self- and peer-assessment, it is also necessary for teachers to be knowledgeable with multiple models of teaching metacognitive processes whereby the learner makes judgements on his/her work (by applying already obtained pre-knowledge and skills) and set goals for self-improvement.

For teachers to build on learners' prior learning, it is necessary to know what that prior learning consist of. Prior learning includes aspects such as the learners' knowledge and skills in a specific content area, the attitudes of the learners on their value and interest in the subject, their levels of initiative and self-reliance to learning and their language proficiency.

Assessment knowledge will enable teachers to deploy a range of formative assessment strategies, thereby maximising the assessment opportunities for gathering evidence. Teachers should also be knowledgeable on how to align formative assessments with the instructional aims. Finally, teachers should be well aware of the fact that by acting as the primary assessment agents, it will not single-handedly create enough opportunities for the gathering of evidence on the learners' current learning status. For this reason it is important that self- and peer-assessment should also be part of the formative assessment process.

By referring to the skills as being essential for teachers to successfully implement formative learner-centred assessment, Heritage (2007:145) firstly emphasises the importance of a positive classroom culture. It includes teachers to obtain the skill to create a classroom culture that supports and encourages self-and peer-assessment. For this to happen, the classroom must become a place where the learners feel that they are respected and their contributions are valued. Only if the learners are regarded as partners by their teachers during the assessment process will they become successfully involved in the monitoring and assessing of their own learning and that of their peers.

A second teacher skill required is to provide guidance and support for learners to assess their own learning and also that of their peers. In particular, teachers should teach their learners the skills required for self- and peer-assessment and the manner in which to give constructive feedback on their own and that of their peer's performances. A rubric designed by the teacher and the learners with quality performance criteria can be used as an assessment instrument whereby the teacher can teach the learners the skills to judge the quality of their own work or that of their peers. In this way it becomes a collaborative experience between teacher and learner and between learner and learner (Costa & Kallick, 2004:83).

A third teacher skill that links with the above and that is considered as crucial to the effectiveness of formative assessment is the interpretation of the assessment information collected. This means the teacher must have the skills to analyse and interpret the assessment results in terms of the degree to which the intended assessment criteria have been achieved. Hereafter the results should be converted into clear and descriptive feedback which the learners can use for self-evaluation for better future learning results and growth. When specific individual's learning needs has been identified, recommendations should also be given during feedback on how to address them in order to eventually improve learner performance. This involves a further skill in

selecting the learning experience that will place appropriate demands on the learner to reach the desired aims. Accordingly the teacher must ensure that the learners receive the appropriate support for the new learning to take place. Only then learners will put plans into action to do something to encourage their learning and by doing so, become self-regulated independent achievers.

Research methods

Procedure and sampling

In order to empirically determine to what extent Social Sciences and History teachers apply the pedagogy of learner-centred instruction and progressive assessment, a survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire. The data was collected by means of a probability sampling method (simple random sampling) drawn from Social Sciences and History teachers (n=51) at different types of schools (urban, rural, township, private) in the North West and Gauteng provinces. The data was collected by Social Sciences and History third and fourth year trainee teachers of the Potchefstroom and Vaal Triangle campuses of the NWU during their compulsory practical teaching observation period.

Before they left for their respective schools, each trainee teacher who has Social Sciences (Intermediate and Senior Phase) or History (Further Education and Training Phase) as a major, received a questionnaire as part of their normal observation assignments. The questionnaire consisted of three sections of closed questions. Section A was to gather information on the type of school (urban, rural, township, private) they have attended and the size of the class where they have done their observation. Section B listed respectively teacher-centred and learner-centred instruction strategies, while section C focused on the different assessment agents (teacher, learner, peer and group) that can be utilised to conduct assessment in class. In both Sections B and C a 4 point Likert-type scale was used to determine the extent and frequency to which Social Sciences and History teachers apply teacher- or learner-centred instruction strategies in their classes. The following response alternatives were given: “always”, “often”, “seldom” and “never”.

By using the predetermined response scales in Sections B and C as an observation checklist, it was requested from each of the trainee teachers to complete the questionnaire on the last day of their practical teaching period. This would provide them with ample time to do lesson observations in an

effort to establish the type of instruction strategies that were applied by the Social Sciences or History teacher to whom they were assigned during their stay at the school. At the same time this *in situ* insight would enable the trainee teacher to determine the extent of appropriation and application (or lack) of certain learner-centred instruction strategies. After completion of the questionnaire the trainee teachers had to add it to their portfolio as another of various other documents that reflects on their practical teaching experience. On their return to their different campuses, the data was collected by the researchers.

Data analysis

In order to quantitatively determine to what extent and frequency Social Sciences and History teachers apply the pedagogy of learner-centred instruction, the items of Sections A to C were tabulated, and with the aid of the Statistical Consultation Services (SCS) of the NWU (Vaal Triangle Campus), presented in colour coded stack bar charts (Pietersen & Maree, 2007:184).

By means of a descriptive analysis, data were organised and summarised to promote an understanding of the data characteristics (Pietersen & Maree, 2007:195). The data of the responses are summarised with percentages; it is however possible that the use of means, which is not illustrated in this analysis, could indicate further significant differences.

All assignments to be completed during the teaching practice period are available for approval to principals, mentors and subject teachers. For this research, permission was obtained from principals and mentors/subject teachers. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of schools and teachers partaking in this research were not mentioned.

Research findings

Types of schools, class sizes and language of instruction

The findings showed that most of the research participants, namely 34 (66%) come from urban schools followed by nine (18%) in rural schools, seven (14%) in township schools and 1 (2%) in private schools. Schools with more than 46 pupils in their classes represented 8% while nearly half the schools had 31-45 (47%) pupils per class, followed by 41% of the schools with 15-30

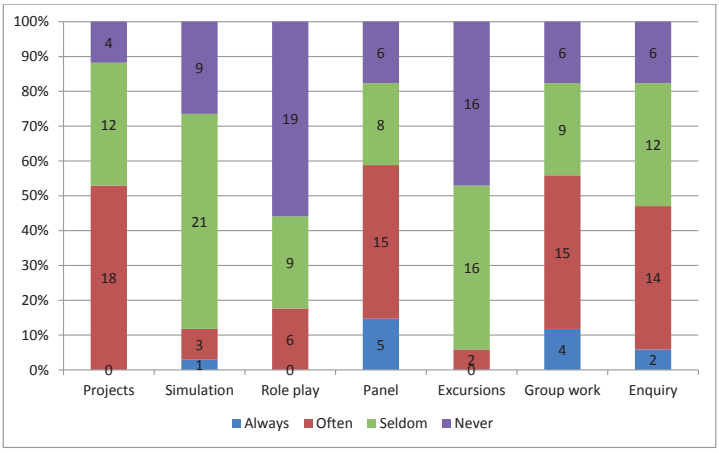
pupils per class. A mere 4% of the schools had a learner total of 1-15 pupils in their classes. Due to fact that there was only one private school involved in this micro study, its research results will not be reported.

To follow is an analysis of the number of Social Sciences/History teachers and the frequency expressed as a percentage of the sample size in each of the different categories of learner-and teacher-centred instruction strategies. By also introducing the different categories of teacher-centred instruction strategies a more complete picture can be given regarding the mode of instruction. For example, in cases where the use of certain learner-centred instruction strategies was for whatever reason disapproved of by the class teachers, it will be easy to establish what teacher-centred instruction strategies they preferred instead. A further category that is analysed, is the extent of involvement of the different assessment agents (the persons responsible for executing the assessment activity) which is likewise presented as a percentage of the sample size. The research results for each of these different categories will be reported separately for each of the urban, rural and township schools.

Learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies and assessment in urban schools

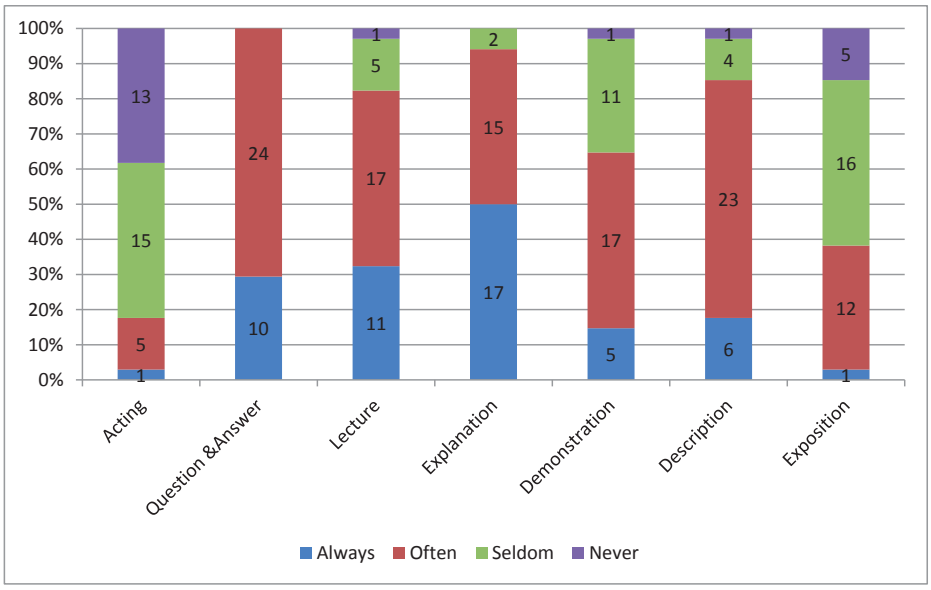
Charts one and two respectively show the extent to which different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies were implemented in urban schools as observed by the trainee teachers. Chart three reflects the extent of involvement of the various assessment agents in urban schools when assessing the different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies.

Image 1: The application of different learner-centred instruction strategies in urban schools



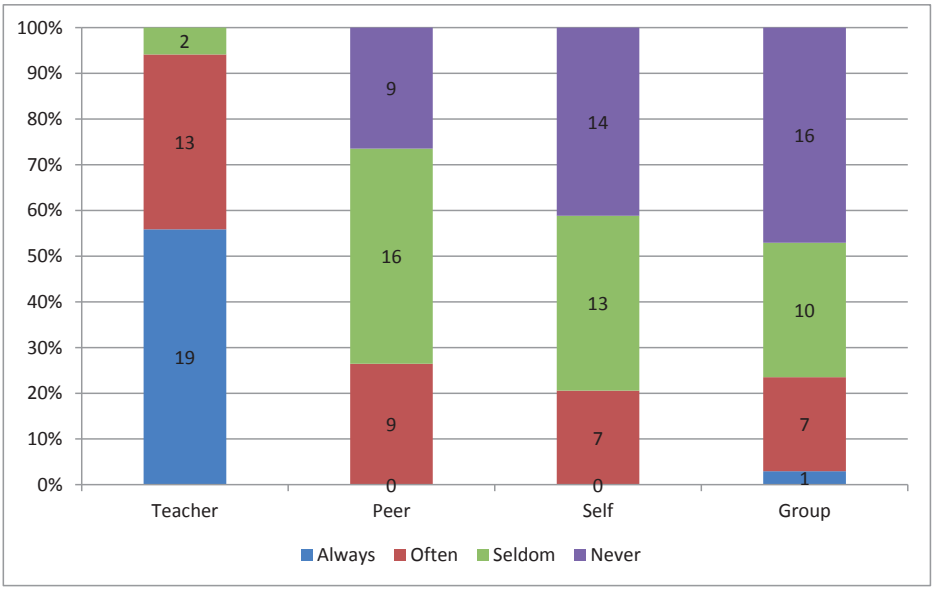
From the data it is clear that projects (52.9%), panel discussions (44.1%), group work (44.1%) and enquiry-based learning (44.1%) were the most "often" learner-centred instruction strategies used by the teachers in urban schools. The results additionally revealed that more than a half of the teachers (55.8%) "never" used Role-play while an overwhelming majority (94.1%) "seldom" and "never" preferred the application of excursions as a learner-centred instruction strategy. A significant majority of the teachers (61.7%) preferred to rarely used simulation as a learner-centred instruction strategy.

Image 2: The application of the different teacher-centred instruction strategies in urban schools



The data discloses that all of the teachers (100.0%) in urban schools "always" and "often" preferred questioning and answering as the instruction strategy. This is followed by the instruction strategies of explanation (94.1%), description (85.2%), lecturing (82.3%) and demonstration (64.7%). As opposed to this, the application of acting is "seldom" and "often" applied by the majority of the teachers (82.3%). This was also the case with the application of exposition by a significant majority (61.7%) of the teachers.

Image 3: The extent of involvement of the different assessment agents in urban schools

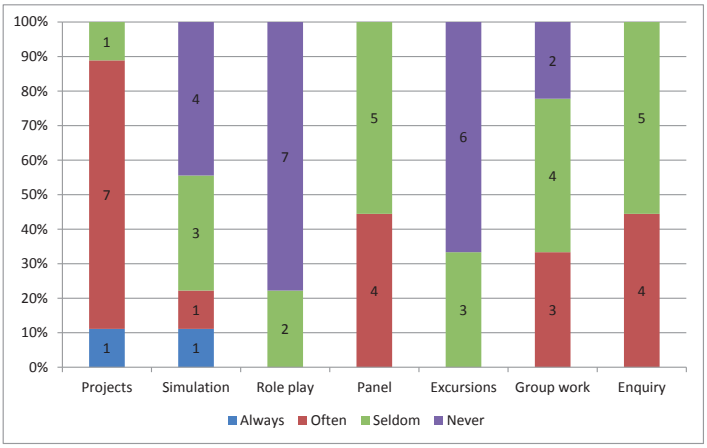


The data shows that the overwhelming majority (97.0%) of the teachers in urban schools preferred to be the responsible agents who "always" and "often" performed the assessment of their learners. This is supported by the fact that a vast majority (84.3%) of the teachers "seldom" or "never" considered the request for learners to assess themselves. Furthermore, the data reveals that the majority (74.5%) of the teachers "seldom" and "never" applied peer-assessment as an assessment option. Using the group as the assessment agent also proved to be an unpopular preference as the majority (72.5%) of teachers "seldom" or "never" applied it in the class.

Learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies and assessment in rural schools

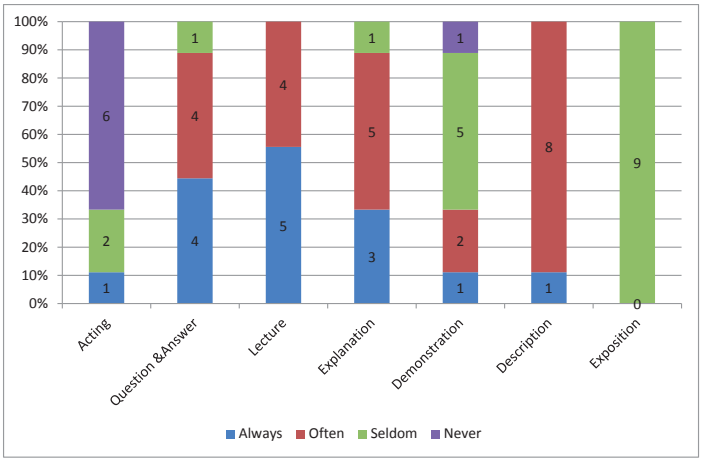
Charts four and five respectively show the extent to which different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies were implemented in rural schools. Chart six reflects the extent of involvement of the various assessment agents in rural schools when assessing the different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies.

Image 4: The application of different learner-centred instruction strategies in rural schools



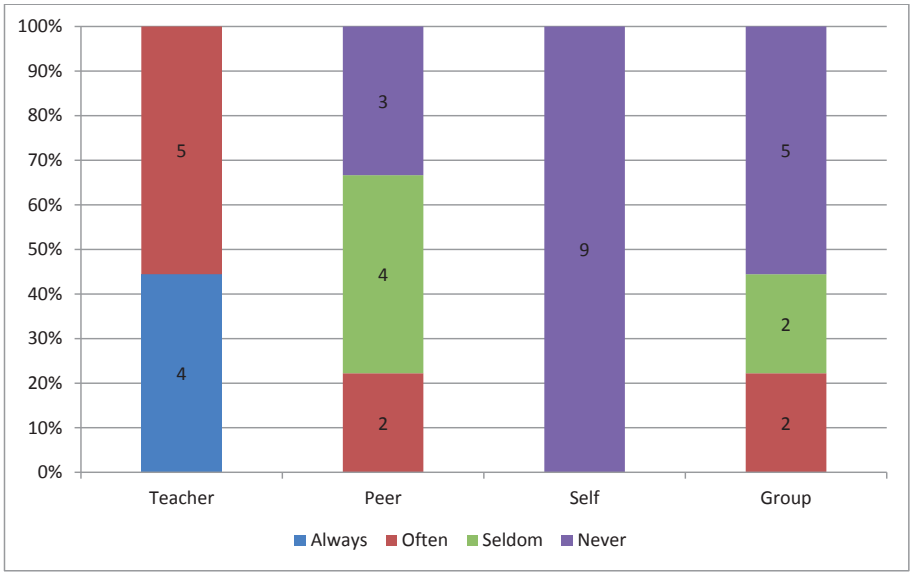
From the data it is clear that the overwhelming majority (89.0%) of the teachers in rural schools favoured projects as the teaching and learner instruction strategy that is "always" and most "often" used. Panel discussions and enquiry-based strategies were also "often" implemented by 44.4% of the teachers. In contrast, the majority (77.7%) of the teachers and a significant majority (66.6%) respectively "seldom" and "never" used Role-play and the undertaking of excursions. In addition the data revealed that the majority (77.7%) of the teachers "seldom" and "never" applied simulation as an instruction strategy in the class. This also applied to the use of group work where significant majority (66.6%) of the teachers "seldom" and "never" applied it.

Image 5: The application of the different teacher-centred instruction strategies in rural schools



The data reflects that all the teachers (100.0%) in rural schools preferred to "always" and "often" use lecturing as an instruction strategy. Likewise, the use of questioning and answering and demonstration as instruction strategies are also "always" and "often" favoured by an overwhelming majority (88.8%) of the teachers. Description is another popular instruction strategy as an overwhelming total (88.8%) of teachers preferred to "often" apply it. The data further reveals that all of the teachers (100.0%) "seldom" applied exposition as an instruction strategy. Additionally, more than half of the teachers (55.5%) do not regarded demonstration as a very popular instruction strategy as it is "seldom" implemented.

Image 6: The extent of involvement of the different assessment agents in rural schools

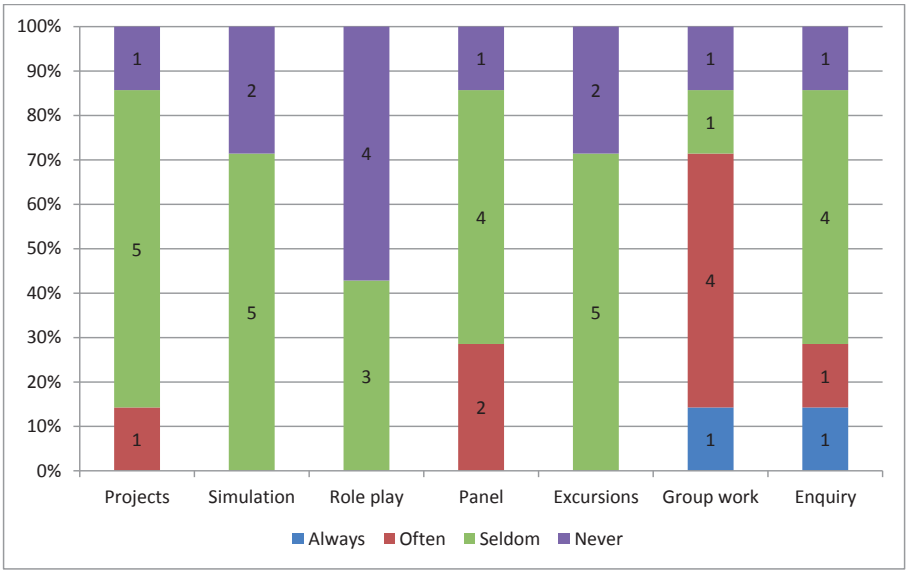


The data reveals that assessment by the teacher in rural schools are highly rated as 44.4% and 55.6% respectively indicated that this kind of assessment is "always" and "often" implemented. On the other hand, assessment by the peers of the learners is not regarded as a popular way of assessment, as the majority of the teachers (77.7%) preferred to "seldom" and "never" make use of this type of assessment. Moreover, all of the teachers (100.0%) "never" applied self-assessment in their classes. Group assessment is also not experienced as a very popular way of assessment as the majority of the teachers (77.7%) "seldom" and "never" applied it.

Learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies and assessment in township schools

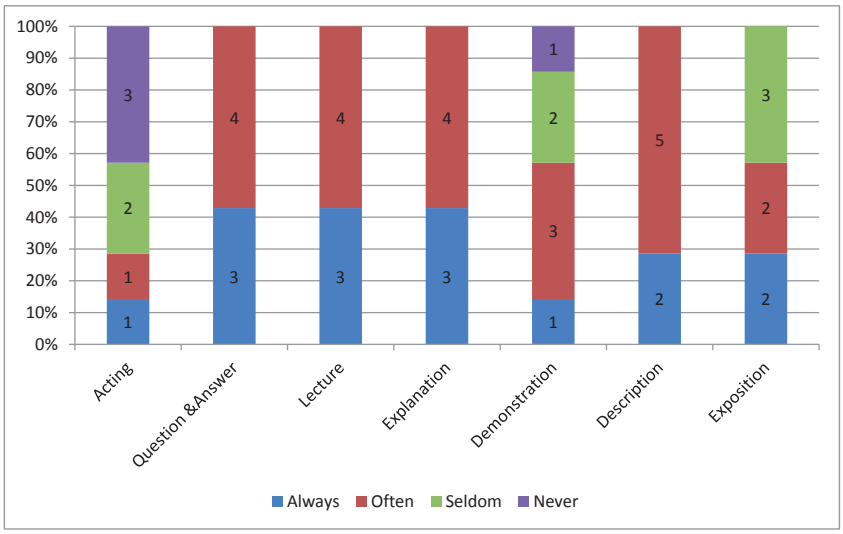
Charts seven and eight respectively show the extent to which different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies were implemented in township schools. Chart nine reflects the extent of involvement of the various assessment agents in township schools when assessing the different learner- and teacher-centred instruction strategies.

Image 7: The application of different learner-centred instruction strategies in township schools



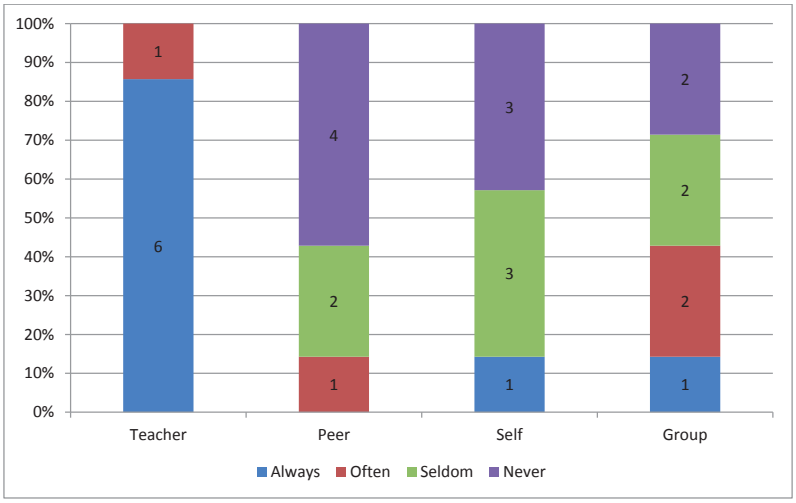
The data reflects that the majority (71.4%) of the teachers in township schools favoured group work as the most popular instruction strategy that is "always" and "often" implemented. Hence, the majority (71.4%) of the teachers are "seldom" inclined to implement simulation and excursions. Of further importance is the fact that more than half (57.1%) of the teachers "never" regarded Role-play as an option when considering learner-centred instruction strategies. Subsequently, 71.4% and 57.1% of the teachers respectively "seldom" implemented projects and enquiry as instruction strategies. This also applied to panel discussions where the majority (75.0%) of the teachers "seldom" applied it.

Image 8: The application of the different teacher-centred instruction strategies in township schools



The data shows that all of the teachers (100,0%) in township schools are "always" and "often" committed to the teacher-centred instruction strategies of question and answer, lecturing, explanation and description. In the case of demonstration, the data reflects that more than half of the teachers (57.1%) indicated a willingness to apply it in the class. The majority of the teachers (71.4 %) "seldom" and "never" used acting and therefore not regarded as a popular learning and teaching instruction strategy option.

Image 9: The extend of involvement of the different assessment agents in township schools



According to the data an overwhelming majority of the teachers (85,7%) in township schools "always" apply teacher assessment. Furthermore, the data reveals that 42.8% of the teachers "always" and "often" made use of the group to do the assessment. In contrast, an overwhelming majority (85.7%) of the teachers "seldom" or "never" applied peer- and self-assessment in their classes.

Discussion

Apart from township schools, the research results confirmed that project work is the most popular learner-centred instruction strategy implemented by teachers in urban and rural schools.

The importance of the application of projects lies in the fact that it integrates various learner-centred activities, for example: planning, research, analysing data and the preparing of written reports (Warnich, 2010:101). When doing historical projects, it does not only help learners to become active agents in their own learning whereby they will become thoroughly acquainted with their research topic, it also challenges them to start to think like historians whom, in the end, will share their knowledge and understanding with authenticity at the same time (Bass, 2007:19).

Looking into the reasons why projects are a popular choice, it could be ascribed to the instructions of the National Protocol for Assessment, Grades R-12. This policy document requires from Social Sciences and History teachers to do a compulsory component of formal school-based assessment. Different percentage weights are allocated for the different school phases when this type of internal school-based assessment is performed. The assessment results are formally recorded, moderated (to ensure that the appropriate standards are maintained) and used for progression and certification. Examples of formal school-based assessments include: projects, practical tasks, oral presentations, demonstrations, performances, practical demonstrations, tests, examinations, etc. (DBE, n.d.: 4-12).

It is unclear why Social Sciences and History teachers in township schools, unlike their counterparts in urban and rural schools, prefer not to apply project work as their first choice learner-centred instruction strategy. Although it is common knowledge that the same circumstances might also apply to those poverty-stricken schools in rural areas, the deprivation of facilities such as libraries, electricity, computers, photocopiers and paper might inhibit teachers of township school's interest to implement a learner-

centred instruction strategy like project work (Naude, 2008:20; Reyneke, 2008:152,160; Rademeyer, 2007:2; Harley & Wedekind, 2004:206).

From the research findings it can further be deduced that simulations was not considered as a popular learner-centred instruction strategy in all three of the different types of schools. Although limited research over the last twenty years has been done to sufficiently postulate and articulate the potential advantages of the large-scale use of simulation in Social Sciences and History classes, researchers nevertheless agreed that this learner-centred instruction strategy assist learners in learning historical concepts and making Social Sciences and History teaching engaging and relevant (DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012:2-3; Gorton, & Havercroft, 2012:66; McCall, 2012:11). The advantage of simulation lies in the mere fact that it reflects activities or circumstances that are as near as possible to the real situation (Reid, *et al*., 2012:179).

Simulations can also include the digital historical simulation game where a computer game represents the past and the learner/player is placed in a historic role to make important decisions to compelling problems (McCall, 2012:9-11). Taking into consideration that the availability of computers for teaching and learning only increased from 8.8% in 1996 to 13.0% in 2000 in all South African schools, it might serve as a reason why very few Social Sciences and History teachers opted not to implement digital simulation as an instruction strategy (Lundall & Howell, 2000:58,156).

Apart from computer accessibility, the successful implementation of simulation furthermore requires of teachers to carefully plan, facilitate and debrief the learners by means of a classroom discussion or writing an assignment to ensure that the learners meet the expected outcomes (DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012:14; McCall, 2012:9-11). A lack of expertise due to improper training in simulation as a learner-centred instruction strategy along with the large classes (nearly half of the schools in this research had 31 to 45 pupils in a class), can serve as two further possible reasons why the Social Sciences and History teachers were cautious to experiment with this type of instruction. In large classes it is difficult to carry out participatory lessons where learners can take active roles (cf. Warnich & Wolhuter, 2010:70-73).

Another learner-centred instruction strategy that was not reckoned as a priority in its application in all three types of schools, was the undertaking of excursions to historical sites whereby learners would have the chance to experience hands-on learning and through this actually "doing" history. Different reasons can be listed why Social Sciences and History teachers were

reluctant to take their learners on excursions. To list a few: the lack of personal motivation on the side of the teacher; extensive administrative and logistical planning and preparation; lack of financial resources; unavailability of staff to accompany the learners during their visit; medical risks; added liability and the danger of lawsuits in case something goes wrong; difficulty in controlling learner behaviour; too time consuming that infringes on important teaching time; leads to the disarrangement of the schools programme and interfere with the regular administrative duties (Ritchie & Coughlan, 2004:116-117).

Role-play is another learner-centred instruction strategy that Social Sciences and History teachers in all three types of schools preferred to seldom apply. In its most basic form, role-play requires learners to put themselves in someone else's shoes and then to dramatize how they think the person(s) would have behaved under particular circumstances. Role-play thus offers a successful learning experience to learners as they must interpret the information that has been provided to them or which they themselves have researched and collected. The learners must play particular roles in imaginary situations in ways that they think historical characters would have behaved under the actual circumstances (Killen 2007:280-281).

Once again the success of role-play will depend on the planning and management skills of the teacher. In order for role-play to succeed, the teacher must be in control of the class because it must remain a learning experience and not turn out to be an unstructured activity where the learners enjoy themselves, but learn very little in the process. For this reason teachers might possibly feel insecure due to their lack of proper training in this field, and are therefore not prepared to risk with role-play as an instruction strategy. Another reason can be attributed to all the time spend in the preparation, execution, assessment, debriefing and follow-up processes of role-play that in the end will impact negatively on the remaining teaching time.

A further reason why teachers might tend to steer away from implementing role-play can be credited to certain external factors that have to be taken into consideration before the planning and execution of a role-play activity. For example, if the classroom (due to large numbers) is too small to accommodate the role-play activity, the availability of the school hall or an alternative venue must be considered. Other factors that need to be considered include the time necessary to complete the role-play (which may require using a double period), suitable storage space for any equipment used, the availability and accessibility of sources for learners when they need to prepare their dialogues,

adequate time for rehearsals, et cetera (Van Ments 1983:44-46).

The extent to which the learner-centred instruction strategies of enquiry learning, group work and panel discussions were applied, varies in the three different schools. In urban schools all three mentioned strategies were used with reasonable regularity. As far as enquiry learning is concerned, it also, to a large extent, covers project work in the sense that the research is driven by a process of inquiry over a period of time (Spronken-Smith, 2007:2-6). This interconnectedness and the fact, as earlier discussed, that project work (and by implication also enquiry learning) form a compulsory component of the formal school-based assessment programme, contributes to a further possible reason why both these strategies were more than often used.

Apart from project work, it is also expected from Social Sciences and History teachers to do source-based instruction as an additional activity of their formal assessment programme (DBE, 2011b:35-36; DBE, 2011c:49; DBE, 2011d:47). By its very nature the analysis of primary and secondary sources engage learners in a process of inquiry which is normally done in a supportive learning environment such as groups. This might add as a further reason why enquiry learning as well as group work was more often implemented. Likewise, panel discussions are also seen a strategy that enhanced group work when panel members within their groups are requested to share their research on a specific topic before their peers (Hirsch, 2013:1; Van Eeden, 1999:211-228).

In contrast to urban schools, panel discussions and inquiry learning are seldom applied as teaching and learner strategies in rural and township schools. Most of these (black) schools are historically the worst off in respect of the availability of adequate physical resources (libraries, computers, electricity, photocopiers and paper, etc.), the level of training and personal skills of teachers and the availability of quality learning and teaching support material. These limitations will definitely impact negatively on the teacher's enthusiasm to apply any learner-centred instruction strategies. Interesting is the fact that teachers in rural schools were not keen to implement group work, while their counterparts in township schools were more than prepared to do it. It is difficult to clarify his phenomenon. Both rural and township schools - more than the old model C schools - are generally characterised by over-crowded classes (Warnich & Wolhuter, 2010:73). Teachers with large classes struggle with the challenge implementing learner-centred activities such as for example group work due to the danger that their class discipline

could be threatened (Warnich & Wolhuter, 2010:67-74).

To the extent that teacher-centred instruction strategies were implemented, almost all the teachers in the three different schools indicated that they always and most often prefer lecturing as an instruction strategy. Other teacher-centred instruction strategies that were high in favour as they were often and always used by the overwhelming majority of teachers were: questioning and answering, explanation, description and demonstration. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the teachers chose to be the assessment agents themselves while they showed a reluctance to implement peer-, self- and group assessment.

Recommendations

Arising from the results of this study, the question to be asked: Why are Social Sciences and History teachers - despite the existing curriculum's plea to do so - not yet fully committed to embrace learner-centred instruction and assessment to the same level as recognition is given to the traditional way of teacher-centred instruction and assessment?

According to Prawat (1992:354, 356) teachers are important agents of change and their traditional knowledge and beliefs on learner-centred instruction strategies will ultimately influence their attitude on the degree and extent of the application thereof. He postulates that most of the issues associated with the implementation of learner-centred instruction strategies could be overcome if teachers are willing to make a paradigm shift by rethinking and re-examining their existing beliefs on their instructional and assessment practices. Ultimately teacher's beliefs will guide their thinking, planning, decision making and behaviour in their classrooms.

A number of factors can be short listed as possibly responsible for the realisation of Social Sciences and History teacher's pedagogical beliefs on why they are not completely comfortable with introducing learner-centred instruction strategies to its full extent. For example, in instances where teachers were the products of schooling and training systems that was characterised by teacher-centred instruction strategies and rote learning it may have contributed to the reinforcement of their own belief to follow the same instructional approach in their classes. This particularly applies to the South African context where the vast majority of teachers received their education during the apartheid-era where limited exposure was given to learner-centred instruction. Instead,

the then curriculum focused on content, rote learning memorisation and summative assessment practices (Spreen & Valley, 2010:42,48).

Teacher's beliefs can also be built on the assumption that learner-centred instruction is too time-consuming (which will not leave enough time to complete the curriculum) and requires too many resources and teaching experience that they are lacking (Spreen & Valley, 2010:51; Isikoglu, *et al.*, 2009:350; Lombard & Grosser, 2004:213). Moreover, teachers' beliefs can be based on their view that the implementation of learner-centred instruction and formative assessment is accompanied with greater demands on their work load and pedagogical responsibilities and therefore to be sidestepped (Prawat, 1992:357). Teachers may also be of the opinion that learner-centred instruction undermines teacher authority and class discipline and therefore prefer to distance themselves from it (Spreen & Valley, 2010:51). Some beliefs may be grounded in views that the curriculum is purely an examination-driven practice and all that really matters is to coach learners to obtain good examination results. Where such beliefs exist, a constructivist pedagogy which promotes deep conceptual understanding and critical thought of the subject matter is usually neglected (DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012:2; Isikoglu, *et al.*, 2009:355). Formative assessment practices are in these instances seen as "yet another thing" that encroaches on valuable teaching time and is not considered as a meaningful process that will enhance learner performance (Heritage; 2007: 141,145).

Apart from Social Sciences and History teacher's pedagogical beliefs there are also other impediments that might restrain them from their intention to practice a learner-centred and formative assessment paradigm of instruction. This include, to name a few: the learner-to-teacher ratio, lack of training and competency of the teachers, the dominant pedagogical orientation of the school, the availability of appropriate quality learning and teaching support material, physical resources, technological constraints, the dilemma of formative assessment, negative attitudes of learners towards learner-centred instruction, and a lack of parental interest and involvement in the learning of their children (Mtika & Gates, 2010:400-402; Spreen & Vally, 2010:51; Warnich & Wolhuter, 2010:70-76).

It should stay a major priority for government and education authorities to eradicate these systemic and other shortcomings in schools to pave the way for those teachers who are keen to apply learner-centred instruction and formative assessment practices in their classes.

As teachers are considered as important agents of change, it is therefore necessary to make certain pedagogically sound investments to encourage them to choose to alter their beliefs. But first, a need to understand how Social Science and History teachers view learner-centred instruction and formative assessment is necessary. Only then plans can be devised to efficiently and effectively deal with their pedagogical issues on learner-centredness. In an effort to make them more receptive, Social Science and History teachers need to have a better understanding of the theoretical and practical underpinnings of learner-centred instruction as well as the skills necessary to successfully implement it. Teachers in this study who have only applied a label or surface feature of the learner-centred pedagogical theory, such as project work, might have a rare conscious of the underlying learner advantages that this learner approach holds. Hence, they might also have an inadequate understanding of how to apply the different learner-centred instruction strategies in a real classroom environment. By eliminating teacher's ignorance and equipping them with knowledge and skills, it might influence their deeply held beliefs in such a way that they will show a willingness to employ changes in their focus on how learner-centred instruction and assessment practices should be executed.

What is needed, apart from the introduction of extensive and comprehensive training and workshop programmes which will provide the type of training which will assist Social Science and History teachers to develop and enhance their knowledge and skills on learner-centred instruction and assessment practices, is what Roth and Tobin (2001:16) termed "co-generative dialoguing". This type of dialogue will create a platform for teacher educators, school teachers, curriculum advisors and policy makers to interactively share perspectives about the issues and dilemmas Social Science and History teachers face with regard to learner-centred instruction and formative assessment. This synchronised participatory effort where all the participants have equal opportunities to contribute will undoubtedly influence teacher's willingness to rethink their views on the adoption of a more constructivist approach to teaching and learning in Social Sciences and History.

Conclusion

Although caution needs to be taken in drawing generalised conclusions in a small case study of this nature the authors are of the opinion that this research allowed them to say something on teachers approaches towards the

extent of implementation (or lack) of certain learner-centred instruction and assessment practices.

The findings reveal that although the teachers showed a willingness to utilise some of the learner-centred instruction strategies, their tendency to implement the traditional teacher-centred instruction strategies were much stronger. The findings furthermore report that the teachers were by far more in conformity with the application of the different teacher-centred instruction strategies than in the case of the learner-centred instruction strategies. On the subject of assessment the overwhelming majority of the teachers in the different types of schools were reluctant to democratise their assessment practices to accommodate formative assessment practices. Peer-, self- and group assessment which is an important essential for the successful implementation of learner-centred instruction strategies were hardly used. Instead, most of the teachers preferred to be the only responsible agent when the assessment of their learners was performed.

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