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Social studies teachers' views of learner-centered instruction

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This study explored social studies teachers' views of learner-centered instruction and learning theories by employing the methods and procedures of the qualitative research tradition. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The techniques and strategies of inductive qualitative data analysis were used to analyze the interview transcripts. The results showed that the participants had positive attitudes toward learner-centered instruction which they believed has the potential to make instruction engaging, enjoyable, involving, challenging, and relevant to students' learning. The teachers identified their teaching orientations more with the cognitive and constructivist approach than the behaviorist approach. The teachers' responses indicated the impact of the community on their views and practices.

Cette étude a exploré les vues des professeurs sociaux d'études au sujet des théories d'instruction centrées par étudiant et d'étude. Il a employé les méthodes et les procédures de la tradition qualitative de recherches. Détaillées, des entrevues de semifinale-structured ont été conduites avec les participants. Les techniques et les stratégies de l'analyse de données qualitative inductive ont été employées pour analyser les transcriptions d'entrevue. Les résultats ont prouvé que les participants ont eu des attitudes positives vers l'instruction centrée par étudiant. Les participants ont cru que l'étudiant centré a le potentiel de faire l'instruction s'engageant, agréable, impliquer, provocant, et concernant l'étude des étudiants. Les professeurs ont identifié leurs orientations d'enseignement plus avec l'approche cognitive et de constructiviste que l'approche de behaviorist. Les réponses des professeurs ont indiqué l'impact de la communauté sur leurs vues et pratiques.

Diese Studie erforschte Ansichten der Sozialstudien Lehrer der Anfänger-zentrierten Anweisung und Lernentheorien, indem sie die Methoden und die Verfahren der qualitativen Forschung Tradition einsetzte. Eingehende, halb-strukturierte Interviews wurden mit den Teilnehmern geleitet. Die Techniken und die Strategien der induktiven qualitativen Datenanalyse wurden verwendet, um die Interviewabschriften zu analysieren. Die Resultate zeigten, das die Teilnehmer positive Haltung in Richtung zu Anfänger-zentrierter Anweisung hatten. Die Teilnehmer glaubten, das Anfänger zentrierte Anweisung das Potential hat, die Anweisung zu bilden, die sich engagiert, erfreulich, das Mit.einbeziehen, schwierig, und relevant zum Lernen der Kursteilnehmer. Die Lehrer kennzeichneten ihre unterrichtenden Lagebestimmungen mehr mit der kognitiven und constructivist Annäherung als die behaviorist Annäherung. Die Antworten der Lehrer zeigten die Auswirkung der Gemeinschaft auf ihre Ansichten und Praxis an.

Este estudio exploró las opiniones los profesores sociales de los estudios sobre teorías centradas principiante de la instrucción y el aprender. Los métodos y los procedimientos de la tradición cualitativa de la investigación fueron utilizados en

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el estudio.Las entrevistas profundizadas, semi-estructuradas fueron conducidas con los participantes. Las técnicas y las estrategias del análisis de datos cualitativo inductivo fueron utilizadas para analizar las transcripciones de la entrevista. Los resultados demostraron que los participantes tenían actitudes positivas hacia la instrucción principiante-centrada. Los participantes creyeron que la instrucción centrada principiante tiene el potencial de hacer la instrucción que engancha, agradable, participación, desafiadora, y relevante a aprender de los estudiantes. Los profesores identificaron sus orientaciones de enseþanza más con el acercamiento cognoscitivo y del constructivist que el acercamiento del behaviorist. Las respuestas de los profesores indicaron el impacto de la comunidad en sus opiniones y prácticas.

Introduction

As postulated by the *National Council for the Social Studies* (1993), the fundamental goal of teaching social studies in secondary schools is to help students become responsible, critical, reflective, and active citizens who can make informed and reasoned decisions about the societal issues confronting the local, state, and global community respectively. Students are expected to develop a positive disposition toward participatory democracy and to actively engage in the public issues for the common good. In order for students to take the office of citizenship as active and participatory citizens, they need to have the kinds of opportunities that allow them to actively engage in thinking, reasoning, and questioning. Since learner-centered instruction urges students to actively construct meaning and understanding during every phase of the learning process, it can serve as an invaluable tool to help realise the vital goals of social studies education.

Given the pivotal role of learner-centered instruction in realising the goals of the subject, it is essential to document how social studies teachers view this paradigm of instruction. Fraenkel (1992), previous editor of *Theory and Research in Social Education*, stated that detailed descriptions of social studies teachers' perspectives, beliefs, and, instructional practices are needed if the profession is to assess accurately the nature of instruction and to determine where, when, and how changes might be made and implemented. A large number of empirical studies have also showed that teachers' conceptions play a significant role in framing the ways they plan, implement, and evaluate the curriculum (e.g., Clark and Peterson 1986; Thompson 1992; Fang 1996; Andrews and Hatch 2000; Hancock and Gallard 2004). All of these research studies show that in order to understand the way teachers teach, we must uncover the structural components of teachers' thoughts. The purpose of this study was to examine social studies teachers' views of learner-centered instruction and of learning theories.

Literature review

Theoretical framework

What does the concept of learner-centered instruction mean? What are the characteristic features of learner-centered instruction? What theoretical frameworks lay the foundation for learner-centered instruction? How do we come to know and recognise that learner centered instruction is being practised? Answering these questions adequately necessitates a conceptual definition of learner-centered

instruction which in turn requires an understanding of the epistemological and theoretical frameworks underpinning learner-centered instruction.

Although the concept of learner-centeredness is based on a fluid theoretical framework and subject to change as it is continuously redefined by theorists and applied researchers (Henson 2003), a consensus does exist among the education research community as to the primary characteristics of the models of learner-centered instruction. The constructivist epistemological stance, constructivist pedagogy, cognitive-metacognitive, affective, socio-psychological, and developmental theories together with the progressive theoretical perspective on education come into play in defining the characteristic features of learner-centered instruction.

Learner-centered instruction is first and foremost based on constructivist epistemology which posits that knowledge is temporary, nonobjective, internally constructed, and socio-culturally mediated (Fosnot 1996; Crotty 1998; Hendry, Frommer, and Walker 1999). In other words, constructivist epistemology postulates that knowledge is neither discovered nor passively received from the world or authoritative sources, but actively constructed as individuals or groups make sense of their experiential worlds (Maclellan and Soden 2004). Individuals are assumed to construct their own meaning and understanding. This process of meaning-making is believed to happen through the interplay between individuals' existing knowledge and beliefs and the new knowledge and experiences that they come into contact with (Richardson 1997, 2003; Schunk 2004).

Constructivist epistemology informs constructivist pedagogy which is defined by Richardson (2003), the editor of *the Handbook of Research on Teaching*, as 'the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on individual students developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind' (1627). Elaborating on the characteristics of constructivist teaching and learning, Richardson (2003, 1626) identifies the following five principles as the premises of constructivist pedagogy:

1. attention to the individual and respect for students' background and developing understandings of and beliefs about elements of the domain (this could also be described as student-centered);
2. facilitation of group dialogue that explores an element of the domain with the purpose of leading to the creation and shared understanding of a topic;
3. planned and often unplanned introduction of formal domain knowledge into the conversation through direct instruction, reference to text, exploration of a Web site, or some other means.
4. provision of opportunities for students to determine, challenge, change or add to existing beliefs and understandings through engagement in tasks that are structured for this purpose; and
5. development of students' meta-awareness of their own understandings and learning processes.

Catherine Twomey Fosnot, the winner of the 1994 award for '*Best Writing on Constructivism*', defines the process of learning from the angle of constructivism as 'a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality… and further negotiating such meaning through cooperative

social activity, discourse, and debate' (Fosnot 1996, IX). Even though constructivism is 'a theory of learning not a theory of teaching' (Richardson 2003, 1629), Fosnot (1996) elucidates constructivism in relation to teaching as well. According to her, teaching resting on constructivism discards the idea that teachers can transmit meaning to students via symbols; i.e., concepts cannot be taken apart as discrete entities and taught out of context. Rather, the constructivist approach to teaching provides the learners with the opportunity to engage in meaningful, concrete experiences by means of which they can look for patterns, construct their own questions, structure their own models, concepts, and strategies. Teachers take on the role of a facilitator as opposed to that of director acting autocratically. Autonomy, mutual reciprocity of social relations, and empowerment characterise a constructively conducted classroom (IX–X).

Based on constructivist pedagogy, learner centered instruction is a system of instruction based on a student's individual choices, interests, needs, abilities, learning styles, types of intelligences and educational goals within an authentic context where situated thinking is deemed important (APA 1997; McCombs and Whisler 1997; Weimer 2002). Building on the knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes that learners bring to the school is a fundamental tenet of learner-centered instruction (Weimer 2002). For this reason, learner-centered instruction approaches the design of instruction from the perspective of the learner rather than the perspective of the teacher. The teacher tailors instruction and subject matter to students' needs, interests and capacities (Dewey 1916).

Learner-centeredness can be defined as 'the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners – their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs – with a focus on learning' (McCombs and Whisler 1997, 9). The instructional approach based on the principles of learner-centeredness (a) emphasises the student as the main agent of learning; (b) makes student learning the principal goal; (c) concentrates on the use of intentional processes on the students' part; (d) encourages teacher-student interaction in which students become more active learners; (e) expects the teacher to act as a facilitator or a guide; (f) focuses on how well students learn not the frequency of information transmission; and (g) views each phase of the instruction in terms of its effects on students' learning (Fosnot 1996; APA 1997; McCombs and Whisler 1997; Henson 2003).

Relevant research studies

There are a few studies that specifically examined social studies teachers' views of learner-centered instruction or constructivist approach to teaching and learning. LeSourd (1984) explored 14 social studies teachers' attitudes toward five selected instructional strategies (making graphs, concept development, inquiry teaching, and value clarification), all of which were constructivist in nature save for direct reading. The study results indicated a uniform and enthusiastic attitude toward the selected instructional strategies. The participants judged instructional strategies by considering the realities of teaching situation. The dominant rationale for the positive response was the usefulness and flexibility of the instructional strategies, student needs, and teacher responsibility. Teachers' attitudes toward instructional strategies were basically shaped by the diverse intellectual capacities of students, the role of the teacher in implementation, and the expected results of the implementation.

Byer and Dana-Wesley (1999) investigated pre-service social studies teachers' views of active instructional methods after teachers were exposed to a four-step procedure for implementing the constructivist approach in social studies methods classes. The researchers concluded that students' evaluations of the instructor of the active methods class were significantly higher than students' evaluations of the instructor of the passive methods class. Koeppen's (1999) investigation of pre-service teachers' reactions to issue-oriented social studies involving active teaching methods in primary grade showed that teachers were often uncomfortable with bringing up controversial issues for discussing with students at the elementary level. Teachers felt that it was difficult to create issue-centered social studies curriculum. Still, all but three of them had a positive reaction to their experiences in issue-based social studies.

Doyle (1997) examined the impact of the teacher preparation programme on pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning as they were in the transition from being a student to being a teacher. He reported that teachers changed their views of teaching and learning as they went through the programme, becoming more constructivist in their views of teaching and learning. They saw teaching as a process of facilitating and guiding learning. Similarly, they viewed learning as an active process of growth and change. Bowman et al. (1998) investigated whether elementary teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning would change after their exposure to a five-year cognitively guided instructional program (CGI). Two years after the onset of CGI, the researchers assessed changes in teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning mathematics by administering the CGI Beliefs Scale. They found that during the first year, teachers' beliefs about the value of CGI declined even with the extensive support they were provided. It took teachers two years to recover their previously held beliefs about CGI.

Woolley and Woolley (1999) explored changes in student teachers' beliefs about behaviorist management, behaviorist teaching, constructivist teaching, and constructivist parents through a survey conducted to both student teachers and cooperating teachers. The research findings indicated that that most student teachers were more constructivist and less behaviorist than cooperating teachers. Some student teachers and cooperating teachers seemed to have ambivalent attitudes toward both learning theories. Some student teachers changed their beliefs because of their cooperating teachers who influenced them by modeling, giving feedback, and encouraging them to take risks. The researchers suggested that teacher educators reflect on when to use behaviorist and constructivist learning theories instead of seeing either theory as superior. There are also other studies that investigated teachers' and academics' conceptions of teaching in different educational settings (e.g. Dall'Alba 1991; Martin and Balla 1991; Samuelowicz and Bain 2001; Trigwell and Prosser 2004; Koballa et al. 2005; Norton et al. 2005).

The studies reviewed above looked generally at teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in different subject areas. What differentiates this study from the earlier studies is its focus on social studies teachers' beliefs about learner-centered instruction and major learning theories. To fill the gap in the research literature, the present study investigated teachers' views of learner-centered instruction (in conjunction with their views of behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist learning theories) by seeking answers to the following questions:

- How do social studies teachers view learner-centered instruction? What beliefs do they have about this paradigm of instruction?
- What difficulties and challenges do social studies teachers confront if they employ learner-centered instruction in their classrooms?
- How do social studies teachers make sense of cognitive, constructivist, and behaviorist perspectives on learning?

Research methods

Procedure and sample

The methodological framework of the study is based on qualitative research design. A purposeful sampling procedure was used to recruit participants for the study. The main criterion for selecting participants was the number of years teachers have taught social studies in secondary schools. As Cuban (1991) and Entwistle et al. (2000) have argued, teachers with a good deal of teaching experience are in the best position to evaluate, judge, and articulate their instructional practices. The second criterion was the participants' levels of education. The complexity of the research topic with its emphasis on learning theories suggested that teachers hold at least master's degree, Ed.D. or Ph.D. Therefore, teachers with at least five years of teaching experience and advanced degrees in education were the samples of the study. The participants were selected from three public middle and high schools in three cities in a southeastern state in the US. To protect teachers' identities, each teacher was given a pseudonym. Interview was the basic method of data collection. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately an hour in length were conducted individually with the participants.

Aimed at getting rich and detailed answers to the research questions, interview questions asked the participants to express their views of (a) three major learning theories; i.e., behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist, (b) learner-centered instruction and (c) the problems and difficulties with respect to the implementation of learner-centered instruction. In order not to influence the participants' perspectives, interview questions were structured in a broad way. For instance, to get the participants' views of behaviorist learning theory and of learner-centered instruction, they were respectively asked: 'Please tell me your opinion about behaviorist learning theory', 'Tell me about your beliefs concerning learner-centered instruction in the teaching and learning of social studies'. Likewise, to help teachers answer the questions on the basis of their experiences in teaching social studies (rather than theoretical frameworks), they were asked to answer the following questions:

- Think about your instruction in terms of planning, implementing and assessing your lessons. How do you benefit from these learning theories during these phases of instruction?
- Which one or ones do you favor to practise more in your class and why?
- Think of a time when you practised a learner-centered instructional method in your social studies classroom. Describe your experience in practising that particular teaching method in detail.
- Do you have any other experiences in implementing learner-centered instruction in your classroom?

- Which learner-centered instructional practices do you prefer to use more than other ones?
- Have you encountered any difficulties, challenges, or dilemmas when you employed these learner-centered instructional practices? If so, explain your experiences in detail.

Depending on each participant's responses to general questions, specific questions were posed for them to answer. In order to ensure comparability across the participants' responses, all the participants were asked the same questions. But depending on each participant's responses, different probes were used to help them both deepen their responses and give more relevant answers to the research questions. The kinds of probes employed in the interviews were detailed-oriented probes (where, when, what, and how questions), elaboration probes (such follow-up questions as 'Would you elaborate on that?', 'Could you say some more about that?', 'Could you explain that more?'), and clarification probes ('What do you mean by that word or sentence?') (Patton 2002, 374). In order to provide the participants with an opportunity to have the final say, the interview was ended with the following question: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to add? All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

Description of the participants

Scott

Scott is a 37-year-old male social studies teacher in a secondary school located in the northern rural area of the state. As a licensed full-time teacher, he has been teaching social studies for 10 years. He holds B.A. degree in history and Master of Education degree in social studies education. He has been pursuing his Ed.D. in the field of social science education for two years now. Scott's experiences in high school history classrooms have long-lasting effects on his life. Because his history teachers taught the subject matter in an enjoyable manner, Scott says, he developed a love for history. Ultimately history became his favorite school subject when he was a high school student.

Nancy

Nancy is a 36-year-old social studies teacher in a high school located in a small town in the western rural area of the state. She has been teaching social studies for five years. She particularly teaches economics, civics, and government classes. She holds B.A. degree in history, Master of Education and Ph.D. in social studies education respectively from a prestigious research university.

Ron

Ron is a 36-year-old ex-social studies teacher. He taught such strands of social studies as civics, government, history and economics in high schools for 13 years. He did his undergraduate education in fine arts and got an associate degree. He holds Master's of Education and is currently engaged in a special degree in social studies education. He intends to pursue Ed.D. degree in the same field. Ron is very interested in politics as indicated by another role he plays. He is a mayor in a small

town in the northern rural area of the state where he has been living since he was born.

Methods of data analysis

The techniques and strategies of inductive qualitative data analysis were employed to analyze the interview transcripts (Miles and Huberman 1994; Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Marshall and Rossman 1999). The researcher first read each interview transcript in detail in order to get a general sense of the whole interview and then re-read each interview transcript to start the formal coding in a systematic way. Since the analyst should first determine the unit of analysis for the data before coding (Patton 2002), sentences and phrases were selected as the units of analysis (line by line analysis). Coding in-depth interview transcripts line by line is one way to remain open to the data, and to identify the participants' implicit as well as explicit concerns and statements (Charmaz 2006).

Having selected the unit of analysis for the data, the researcher began to analyze each interview transcript by using open or low level codes with little abstraction. The main purpose was to understand the data from the perspective of the participants, so the researcher tried to stay close to the participants' own words, phrases, and sentences, or what is called 'indigenous terms', making some comments about the possible relationship among the codes. During this process of initial coding, what is called 'emic analysis' was employed by means of 'in-vivo codes', i.e., coding the data on the basis of the participants' own words as a bottom up approach to systematic data analysis. If the participant's own words were not sufficient to code what was emerging from the data, 'sensitizing codes' were used. Whenever a meaningful segment of text in the transcript was found, either an in-vivo or a sensitizing code was assigned to signify that particular segment. This process was followed until the entire interview transcripts were segmented and the initial coding was completed. Once all the interview transcripts were coded, cross-case comparisons were made, which is usually called 'constant comparison' method of analysis. On the basis of both indigenous and sensitizing concepts, each participant's response to the same question was compared with one another and then similarities, differences, patterns and themes across the data were identified.

Member checking was conducted to increase the credibility of the research study (Lincoln 2001). The researcher sent the research findings to the participants, asking them to make comments or suggestions on the descriptions and interpretations of their responses. None of the teachers disagreed with the presentation of their viewpoints in this research study. Lastly, a university professor also read the research findings and offered some minor changes for the constructions of categories.

Research findings

Difficulty of relating learning theories to instructional practices

The findings of the study suggest that the participants did not have enough knowledge base on at least one of the learning theories. As a result, they had difficulty explaining how learning theories, especially cognitive ones, relate to their instructional pratices. Therefore, one of the themes that emerged from the data is teachers' difficulty articulating their perspectives on learning theories. To illustrate

this, Scott did not recognize how his instructional practices relate to cognitive learning theories. When asked about his view of cognitive theory, Scott waited 10 seconds before giving his answers. After I asked the same question twice and provided a brief explanation about cognitive theory, Scott said, 'I don't really have a strong opinion on how cognitive theories of student learning really fit into what I do in the classroom. I don't really have that strong knowledge base on cognitive theories. It is probably something that I should read about more'.

Similarly, when I asked Nancy's view of learning, she initially said, 'This is a difficult question'. On another occasion while reflecting on her teaching practices, she said, 'I didn't really know what I was doing. I just knew the outcome that I wanted. I had no idea of these learning theories behind it'. This finding is consistent with the results of previous research studies that many teachers do not consciously know what learning theory informs and guides their instructional practices. Instead of explicit, teachers hold implicit theories and thus have difficulty articulating their practices in terms of a theoretical framework (Kagan 1992).

Positive attitude toward learner-centered instruction and reasons for it

All of the social studies teachers in this study displayed positive attitudes toward learner-centered instructional practices. The inductive data analysis reveals that the most important reason why they have a disposition to positively view learner-centered paradigm of instruction is the active and engaging nature of learner-centered instruction. In this regard, the most prominent theme emanating from the data is that of making instruction and learning engaging, involving, enjoyable, challenging, and relevant to students' lives. Teachers think that getting students engaged in the lessons can be best accomplished through those teaching strategies that urge students to use their mind and to actively engage in their learning. For instance, in articulating his philosophy of teaching and learning, Scott said:

> I am not there primarily just to give instruction. My perspective is that I am there to challenge and try to engage students so that they will want to find the answers as opposed to getting them from me. The phrase that is best used to describe that is that I am not the sage on the stage, but the guide on the side. And, I am more of a guide for my students to explore learning…. I think they [students] learn better when they do, when they have a chance to create, when they have a chance to experience.

Likewise, emphasizing the importance of developing active, productive, and successful citizens, Ron contended that academic information may not stay with students in their life, 'but, learning to think critically helps them to be successful in life'. He thought that students can go further and can have an opportunity to formulate their own opinions, think independently, reason, and explore topics through learner-centered instruction. Referring to students' future career developments, he also said, 'Exploration helps them in their career'.

Nancy's perspective was also congruent with the other two teachers. She said, 'They [students] need to be able to… think critically. They need to be able to do that. They need to learn how to critically view media'. And she continued to display her positive view of learner-centered instruction by saying, 'Learner-centered instruction is more effective. It lasts longer in terms of learner recall and the learner's ability to apply what they have learned in other situations'.

As indicated by the above quotations, these teachers had strong beliefs about the educational value of learner-centered instruction. They believed that learner-centered instruction helps them better accomplish their instructional goals because of its active and involving nature. Learner-centered instruction, they thought, allows teachers to act as a guide and facilitator of students' learning. The quotations also revealed that these teachers are committed to helping students become life-long learners, independent thinkers, and self-directed learners who can formulate questions and seek information to find answers to the questions on their own. So, these teachers' emphasis on 'learning by doing', 'self-directed' or 'independent learners' are the foremost important concepts that they use to explain their instructional goals in conjunction with their views of learner-centered instruction.

Tendency to favor constructivist teaching and learning

All the three teachers in the study were in favor of constructivist learning theory and identified themselves mainly with constructivist-orientation to teaching. They expressed enjoyment in practicing constructivist learning theory because they thought that it provides different avenues for students' learning; makes teaching and learning enjoyable and more enduring; helps students become active; and gets students more engaged and more involved with their lessons. Scott articulated these points as follows:

> I really enjoy the constructivist perspective because I think it makes teaching fun, it makes learning fun. Students are more engaged if you follow a constructivist perspective, trying to get them involved and engaged in the lesson. And so, I think that is more enjoyable for them, and is more enjoyable for me.... To me, just from personal experience, I think that the students enjoy it and are more involved. They appear to be more engaged in learning. I think they learn better through constructivist methodologies.

Nancy emphasized a constructivist approach to teaching as well. She said, 'I am constructivist.... [Through constructivism] students have freedom to investigate... manipulate information'. Ron also stated that he applied constructivist theories in his social studies classrooms. He said, 'When developing lessons, I usually practise constructivist instructional practices such as teacher-led discussion, role-playing and simulation'. Ron especially likes playing the role of the devil's advocate. He stated that depending on the characteristics of the students in his classrooms, he takes different positions on a variety of controversial issues. For instance, he said, 'If students are against the affirmative action, I will be supporting it. If the minority students support it, I will be against it'.

While Scott and Nancy, both of whom strongly favor a constructivist approach to teaching, had proclivity to downplay behaviorist methods of teaching, Ron tended to prefer to use mixed methods to teach his subject as reflected by his own words 'probably a blend of all learning theories... different ways of teaching'. Ron stated that he makes use of a behaviorist approach while introducing new concepts 'over and over again' through direct instruction. Repetition is the key word Ron used to highlight his preference for behavioral theories at the initial stages of instruction. But, when developing lessons, he said that he prefers to apply cognitive and constructivist approaches in his social studies classrooms through learner-centered instructional practices. He gave some examples to illustrate his points through his teaching of the three branches of the government: legislative, judicial, and executive. He said:

> When studying the bills of rights and related concepts, especially after September 11, it is necessary to discuss how much freedom we want to exchange for security and allow the US government to monitor our activities…. Take concepts learned through repetitions and then reason over it.

On the other hand, Scott disregards the behaviorist learning theory because he thinks that it is inflexible and limited in scope, and does not fit every lesson or situation. He also claimed that it does not address diversity and complexity in the student population, nor can it accommodate individual student differences such as different learning styles, needs, and interests.

Another theme emerging from the data is the difficulty of teaching social studies in line with constructivist instruction. These teachers pointed out that the constructivist approach to teaching is difficult to practise in social studies classrooms. For instance, Scott said, 'I think they [students] learn better when they are engaged, active, and involved. From the constructivist perspective, it is very hard to do that'. According to Scott, hardship involved in practising a constructivist approach stems from the nature of history itself 'because it is hard for students to really connect with events that they do not think have any impact on them today…. It is hard really to connect them to events in the past'. Nancy similarly pointed out, 'Learner-centered instruction is more effective… Getting the learners to see what they have learned in these situations… That's another frustration'.

The impact of the community on teachers' views and practices

Even though it was not the focus of the research study, there is another important theme emerging from the data. That is the impact of the community on the way teachers view their roles; decide their instructional priorities; and plan and implement their lessons. For instance, Nancy made reference to characteristic nature of the community in which she teaches. Because she sees the community very conservative and provincial, she places a great emphasis on the goal of getting students to see multiple perspectives. She said, 'The community in which I teach is very conservative…. So, students have one mind set typically. And, I think it's my task in that class to say here is the other perspective…. Putting them in a situation and…start to think'. Scott also indicated the effects of the community on the way he structures his lessons:

> In my community and the area where my students come from this teaching style [constructivist] works with them. I think parts of it because we are fairly rural community and these students get out and do. I think they like to work with their hands. They like to experience things, so teaching that involves experimental learning, a constructivist approach.

A careful scrutiny of the data reveals that these teachers' views of the three learning theories (i.e., behaviorist, cognitive, and constructivist) are affected or shaped by (1) the way they view their roles and responsibilities as a teacher, (2) the nature of the subject matter, (3) types of students or student population they have to teach, (4) types of community which interacts with types of students, and (5) academic training (see Figure 1).

Impediments to learner-centered instruction

Trade-off is involved in implementing constructivist learner-centered instruction. Teachers reported that while practising learner-centered instruction in their
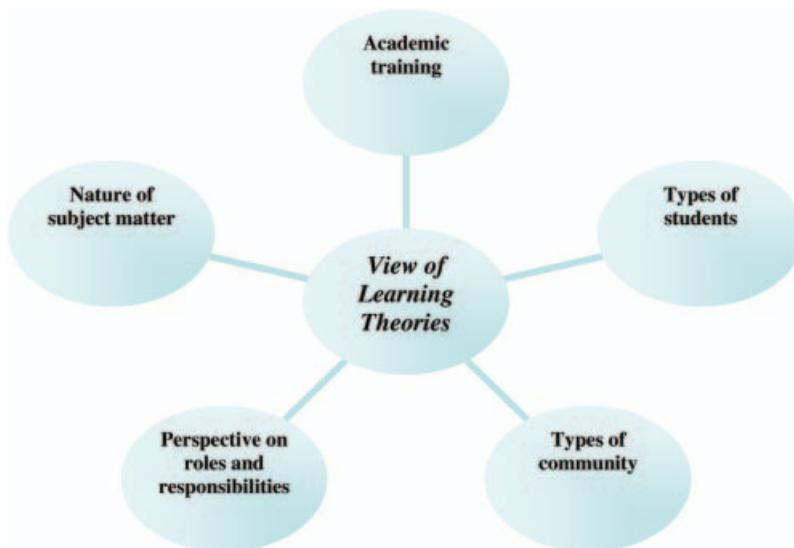
Figure 1. Factors affecting the teachers' views of learning theories.

classrooms, they confront dilemmas, difficulties and challenges. Most of the challenges teachers mentioned are related to the organizational structure of schools and classrooms.

The participants cited the following elements as obstacles before the successful implementation of learner-centered instruction: physical condition of classrooms, large class size, social loafing, lack of resources, time constraint, more teachers' time and effort, dilemma of assessment, technological constraints, responsibility to implement a coverage-oriented state-mandated curriculum (QCC), the present emphasis on accountability and achievement, standardised tests, lack of training, principals' concerns with students' control, students' unfamiliarity with constructivist teaching methods, and a lack of parental interest and involvement in student learning (see Table 1).

What follows is the illustration of some of these difficulties with the participants' own words. In reference to social loafing, coverage-orientated curriculum, lack of training, time restraint, and principals' concerns with classroom control respectively, Scott said:

> It is hard to get them all engaged, especially if you do some small groups. If you do groups of three, four, five students, probably one of those students will not be as involved as the other two or three…. Because in The State [Pseudonym], we have the graduation test and we have the end of course test. So, I must make sure they are prepared for those tests, at the same time I want to try having an engaging and constructivist classroom…. There is not a lot of opportunity for me to go and learn how to do this. And there is not a lot of time for me to go and do the research to find the articles and the research that tells me how to do this. And so, that's the difficulty.

There is another factor that seems to be affecting Scott's learner-centered instructional practice in a subtle way. That is the culture of school that teachers are expected to abide by or the traditions embedded in the school. Scott was concerned with how the principal viewed his teaching style. He said:

Table 1. Impediments to learner-centered instruction.

Poor physical conditions in classrooms
Large class size
Student social loafing
Lack of resources
Time constraint
Technological constraints
More teachers' time and effort
Dilemma of assessment
Coverage-oriented curriculum
Teacher accountability
Standardized tests
Concern with classroom management
Teachers' lack of training in LCI methods
Students' lack of experience with LCI methods
Lack of parental interest and involvement

> You want to do something, but you think it might get a little loud, or might create a little chaos in the classroom, and you don't want your principal to come by and think ah! 'It is a wild class'. And, you want to be… you want to have an appearance in your classroom of teaching. You know, the students in their groups, and they are discussing, and they are involved, and there is a lot of learning going on. But, [that is] not a lot of teaching for me. And so, sometimes you want to make sure that the principal knows that you are still teaching.

Pointing out how difficult it is to involve students in discussion, Nancy said, 'During these activities, all get mad. They don't consider anyone else's world view but their own'. Ron also brought identical problems into attention, focusing on social loafing, time constraint, state-mandated curriculum, standardized tests, and the principal's notion of how an orderly classroom looks like. He pointed out:

> Students are getting off tasks; depend on other students to do the works especially in group activities by letting the smart do the work…. Sometimes it is too time-consuming. You have to cover 40-45 objectives. It is difficult to meet those objectives through learner-centered instruction…. Now we teach for standardised tests because of accountability…. You may have challenges by administrators. Sometimes administers or someone else outside of the classroom may think students are not learning in an orderly manner. You are expected to have students read the chapter, do the chapter review, complete the handouts, and let them take a test.

In conclusion, these three teachers have positive attitudes toward learner-centered instruction, prefer constructivist learning theory to behaviorist learning theory, and experience a host of dilemmas, difficulties, and challenges in practising a learner-centered paradigm of instruction.

Discussion and recommendations

If the goals of teaching social studies in secondary schools are to be accomplished, social studies teachers need to practise those instructional practices evolving out of cutting-edge learning theories. Based on constructivist and cognitive learning theories, learner-centered instruction (LCI) has a great potential to help teachers design engaging, involving, enjoyable, and interesting lessons. For all its educational

value, this mode of instruction still remains on the margin of social studies teachers' repertoire of instructional practices. Consequently, social studies classrooms are characterised by teacher-centered instructional practices, as a result of which most students find the subject to be boring, uninteresting, dull, and irrelevant (Shaughnessy and Haladyna 1985; Cuban 1991).

Given the current status of teaching and learning social studies, there is a need to transform social studies classrooms from teacher-centered to learner-centered. Social studies educators need to be concerned with how to make a change in teachers' traditional approach to teaching. To that end, we need to understand how teachers view LCI. When we come to know more about teachers' beliefs concerning LCI, we will be in a better position to efficiently and effectively deal with the problems of teaching social studies. The present study attempted to address this need by investigating social studies teachers' views of LCI and of learning theories. For this reason, this study is significant in terms of its potential to contribute to the gap in the literature.

As Cuban (1991) reported, social studies teachers' approaches to teaching the subject were colored by behaviorist learning theory and accompanying instructional practices. However, the participants of this study quite positively viewed LCI and believed in its educational value in secondary school settings. This interesting finding of the study seems to be inconsistent with previous research results. Since this study used a small sample, it may be the case that the participants' positive views of LCI and their tendency to implement constructionist theory are just an exception to the views and instructional practices of most social studies teachers.

Perhaps the sampling of the participants, all of whom were more educated than the average social studies teacher, was the reason for their leaning toward LCI. Or it is because social studies teachers have began to rejuvenate their teaching methods. Because of the influences of educational discourses on the merits of constructivist paradigm of instruction in recent years, teachers' classroom practices might have been changed within the last decade and a half. That is, today's social studies teaching in secondary schools might be different from that of the 1990s in terms of several respects including teachers' beliefs and instructional practices. What is more, teachers' conceptions of teaching are dynamic rather than static. Teachers continuously modify, change, redefine, or add to their conceptions of teaching on the basis of their experiences in a variety of settings. For this reason, further studies should be undertaken in order to illuminate the question of whether social studies teachers' instructional beliefs and practices have changed or not.

The teachers in the study had difficulty articulating their instructional practices in terms of theoretical frameworks or putting into words how learning theories relate to their instructional practices as is the case for many teachers and educators who were reported to lack sufficient academic discourse or vocabulary to describe their conceptions of teaching and learning (e.g. Kagan 1992; Entwistle et al. 2000). One of the reasons for pre-service and in-service teachers' failure to adequately describe their conceptions is the fact that much of their knowledge about different components of teaching and learning is implicit or tacit and derives from experience rather than from conceptual frameworks (Fang 1996; Entwistle et al. 2000). To draw attention to this issue, Kagan (1992) noted, 'much of what teachers know or believe about their craft is tacit: For example, teachers are often unaware of their own

beliefs, they do not always possess language with which to describe and label their beliefs…' (77).

Another reason closely related to the former one is that there is not enough opportunity for teachers to examine or reflect on their deeply held beliefs and assumptions concerning teaching and learning. As evidenced by a large number of empirical studies, preservice candidates do have well-established personal beliefs and preconceptions about what it takes to teach and learn before they enter teacher education programs (e.g., Feiman-Nemser et al. 1988; Weinstein 1989; Kagan 1992; Korthagen 1993; Taylor 2003). 'These preconceptions are formed from thousands of hours of observation of teachers, good and bad, over the previous fifteen or so years' (Clark 1988, 7). While some of these pre-conceptions may be pedagogically meaningful, others may be meaningless, ill-conceived, and unproductive. If those personal pre-conceptions are not examined and evaluated by student teachers, they are quite likely to remain unchanged for years to come (Posner et al. 1982; Kagan 1992; Richardson 1996). As a matter of fact, student teachers 'tend to leave their university programs with the same beliefs they brought to them… rather than modifying their initial biases' because in part many of them are not urged to examine or evaluate their pre-conceptions and beliefs (Kagan 1992, 76).

If pre-service teachers are to become aware of their ill-conceived, incomplete, fragmented, and pedagogically unproductive pre-conceptions and beliefs, teacher educators should provide them with lots of opportunities to examine, evaluate, and question their deeply-seated, strongly held personal beliefs and pre-conceptions. By questioning and challenging those beliefs, teacher educators can also help pre-service teachers make their implicit conceptions explicit and open to criticism and reflection. To that end, pre-service teachers can be encouraged to keep a reflection log (journal keeping). In methods course, they can be asked to examine and reflect on important dimensions of teaching and learning in relation to their epistemic (views of knowledge), normative (views of roles, responsibilities, and relationships), and procedural beliefs (tactic and strategies used in teaching), all of which are considered to play a significant role in the development of a perspective on teaching (Pratt 1998). To facilitate that process, the following sorts of questions can be asked for pre-service teachers to reflect on:

- What are the purposes of schooling? Or what is school for?
- What should be the goals of social studies teaching? Or why teach social studies?
- What does teaching mean to you? Or how do you define teaching in relation to social studies?
- What does learning mean to you? Or how do you define learning in relation to social studies?
- What kind of relationship should exist between the teacher and students?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of the teacher in student learning?
- What kinds of learning environment best facilitate students' learning?

To become aware of their assumptions and tacit conceptions, in-service teachers can also make use of reflecting writing or journal keeping in which they can record what they thought and did when planning, implementing, and evaluating their instruction.

The study results also bring into attention the relationship between the nature of subject matter and the type of instruction. Even though previous

studies' examination of teachers' conceptions of teaching documented the constraints and dilemmas before the constructivist approach to teaching, the difficulty of teaching social studies through constructivist instruction has never been mentioned before. The participants of this study have pointed out that the constructivist approach to teaching is difficult to practise in social studies classrooms due to the difficulty involved in connecting students to the events in the past. From the constructivist perspective, teachers in the study see it quite challenging to have students see the impacts of the past events on their lives. Teachers can overcome this problem by employing historical empathy in their classrooms. Defined as 'the ability to see and judge the past in its own terms by trying to understand the mentality, frames of reference, beliefs, values, intentions, and actions of historical agents using a variety of historical evidence' (Yilmaz 2007, 331), historical empathy has a great potential to help students come to see the connection between the past and today. When exercising historical empathy, students need to delve into the complexity of individuals' backgrounds, characters, beliefs, values, intentions, and actions. Engaging with the past though this way helps students see the relevancy of history to their lives. Investigation into local history and the use of oral and family history projects in schools can also help surmount this problem.

Whether practising a constructivist approach is difficult for the other strands of social studies should be further investigated by follow-up studies. Since social studies is a composite school subject, teachers' views of constructivist teaching might also be elicited in relation to history, civics, geography, political science etc. To arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between teachers' views of learner-centered education and social studies, I would also suggest that the link between teachers' conceptions of social studies as a school subject and their views of LCI be examined.

It seems that LCI is used for different purposes within similar types of community and student population, rural and conservative. This study has found that the community and types of student have an impact on teachers' views of instruction. For instance, while one teacher employs LCI because it works quite well with his students who are used to experiencing things in their rural area, the other teacher uses the same paradigm of instruction because it enables her to introduce different world views to students who live in the rural conservative community and typically have one mind-set. So, this study suggests that research studies be designed to investigate more deeply the relationship between teachers' view of LCI and the type of community that schools are embedded in.

Lastly, there is a need to reconcile teachers' and educational scholars' perspectives on LCI. Almost all educational scholars are advocates of LCI. They demand that teachers keep in touch with up-to-date educational theories. But, teachers as practitioners do not always agree with their views. Teachers emphasise the importance of staying in touch with actual classroom realities and suggest that scholars pay attention to their situations. Needless to say, the ideas and theories produced by educational scholars or theorists get translated into classroom practices in the hands of teachers. A new study can comparatively examine these two distinct groups' views of LCI to account for both similarities and differences in their perspectives, whereby the disparity between theory and practice in education may be bridged.

Notes on contributor

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