

**STUDENT VOICE; DOES IT MATTER IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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ABSTRACT

This review paper explores the potential value of recognition of student voice in curriculum development in higher education. The issue of learners as active participants in curriculum design and development is of interest in education forums. Different views have emerged over the value of involving learners in curriculum development matters. This review paper explores the potential value of recognition of student voice in curriculum development in higher education. Desktop review of literature was used as the main data collection method and relevant literature search from Google scholar was conducted to identify sources that tackle this subject. The aim was to understand what student voice is and what it means to recognise student voice in curriculum development. The paper also outlines benefits of recognition of student voice on curriculum issues. It further highlights some strategies institutions can engage to incorporate student voice in curriculum development. Guided by constructive learning theory that knowledge is gained as a result of active participation, reflection and construction, this paper discusses relevant literature on the value of student voice in curriculum development. The main finding from literature shows that there is value that goes with active learners' participation in curriculum development. The paper concludes by advocating for robust means to recognise learners as legitimate stakeholders in curriculum development at higher education as their experiences are critical in shaping the curriculum to meet their evolving needs and contribute to sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Learners' voice, curriculum design & development, higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Being an education practitioner in Eswatini for two decades has aroused my interest in the area of curriculum design and development. I have observed how the government goes about with the curriculum development process for schools through the National Curriculum Centre. However, in higher education, there seems to be no clear policies articulating the role of learners on issues of curriculum development. Literature reviewed shows that the subject of student voice in curriculum development has gradually gained attention in education research. Countries prioritise learners' learning but there is very minimal involvement of learners in developing what directly concerns them. Policy makers, administrators, curriculum designers and teachers take prominent roles in developing the curriculum in schools with very minimal student involvement, and the same is observed in higher education. The key question is; for whom is the curriculum developed? If it is for learners, is there a role they should play in the development of their own curriculum.

In higher education, it is common practice to have learners' representations in different university structures; faculty, senate and even at council but it is not clear how much influence they have in the development of what directly shapes their lives, the curriculum. In some institutions, learners are merely considered for consultative roles and the extent to which they are involved in making decisions on issues that impact their teaching and learning is limited (Klemencic, 2014; Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry, 2016). This paper explores the role of learners in the development of curriculum at higher education level as advocated by Trowler and Trowler (2010) who noted that there is a need for more studies of direct student engagement in shaping the design and delivery of the curriculum. The author hopes to share insights into the value of collaborating with learners in the co-creation of their learning in higher education and possible strategies to use in order to achieve this noble exercise.

REVIEWED RELATED LITERATURE

Defining student voice

To put readers into perspective, it is important to give a working definition of student voice as used in this paper especially because student voices can mean different things to different people. Cook-Sather (2006) refers to student voice as student participation and decision making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experiences. This is concerned with the ideas learners can contribute in making decisions about how learning should occur, it goes far beyond classroom participation but it hinges on decision making processes about their learning. Cook-Sather (2006) further observed that change grounded on what learners say is more significant and is able to challenge long-held philosophies of learning and teaching.

This ideology seeks to elevate the status of the student from being a mere recipient of an already crafted curriculum to being an important role player in taking decisions pertaining learning outcomes, learning experiences, delivery of learning and assessment of learning (Deeley & Bovill, 2017). In the same vein, Seale (2016) describes student voice as an act of "listening to" or "valuing of" learners' views regarding their learning

experiences. This does not mean appreciating what learners have to say about the curriculum but is taking into consideration ideas projected by learners in relation to what should be included in the curriculum, how it should be delivered and how it should be assessed among other things.

Bovill and Bulley (2011) present the concept of student involvement in the form of a scale. They use Arnstein's ladder of participation to show different levels of learners' involvement in curriculum design to shape their teaching and learning. Similarly, for Tuhkala, Ekonoja and Hamalainen (2020), student voice means giving learners a legitimate role among staff design teams where they will make an input towards programme or course design. It does not refer to learners responding to a survey to collect feedback on a course or mere consultation of learners' association on certain issues. It is deeper than that; it rests on meaningful contribution on what to be learnt and how it should be learnt. In essence, student voice means learners sharing responsibility with the teaching staff in making decisions on the process of learning, having significant control over the learning process.

As much as there are several roles learners may be engaged in to improve the education system, such as; consultants, co-researchers, and pedagogic co-designers, it is important to get their views and include their experiences in the curriculum for teaching and learning to be meaningful to them (Mercer-Mapstone. et al., 2017). Student voice in the context of curriculum design goes beyond listening to their concerns but it refers to partnership with learners in co-designing the curriculum; engaging learners as active participants in designing what they want to learn (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016).

Curriculum development

Earlier curriculum theorists such as Ralph Tyler (1949) in Wraga (2017) presented curriculum as a product that operated in a linear process. This product had four guiding principles; defining learning objectives (goals); stating learning experiences (content); identifying means or learning experiences to achieve these goals (teaching-learning methods); and evaluating the process and revising areas that were not effective (assessment). This theory has been criticised for being mechanical and narrow in its view of education (McKernan, 2013). A broader perspective on education viewed curriculum to be a means of instilling into the learners certain knowledge, skills and beliefs that they could use to navigate the ever changing society. This view was also in line with that of European higher education that underscores the development of highly skilled, competent and innovative personnel that would function effectively in the global competitive society (Mulenga, 2019). In essence, curriculum is the heart and soul of any educational institution regardless of the context; it guides the smooth operation of an institution as it details what to be done and how it should be done in that institution. Ideally, the curriculum should also state how all activities will be quality assured. In view of this perspective, learners are expected to be at the centre of curriculum development. The focus is to develop full rounded learners who are able to think creatively and solve emerging problems within their societies. Mulenga (2019) also highlights interesting issues, such as knowing what curriculum is, its impact on development, and the processes involved in its quality assurance in higher education. This dictates who



should be involved in the curriculum development and why they should be involved. If the curriculum is for the learners, a deliberate effort should be made to include them in the development process.

Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) bring to the fore two ways in which curriculum can be viewed; first as a product oriented and second, as process oriented. On the view of curriculum as product, Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) follow on Tyler's (1949) perspective. They view the curriculum as a document that outlines learning goals, content, teaching method and assessment for a course or a programme. And from the process-oriented perspective, they viewed the curriculum as a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both the teacher and the learners. One would argue that if both teacher and learners have an opportunity to learn from each other, learners then deserve a legitimate place in curriculum development.

Among the four overlapping areas that conceptualises learners as partners in teaching and learning in higher education are; 1) Learning, teaching and assessment, 2) Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy, 3) Subject-based research and inquiry, 4) Scholarship of teaching and learning. Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy is the least area where student engagement is observed, in fact, learners have been excluded in this area (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). Consequently, the issue of learners' engagement has become an area of interest in most countries.

The constructive learning theory and its implication on curriculum development

The constructive learning theory was used to try and understand the place of student voice in curriculum development at Higher education. It is however important to acknowledge that the constructive learning theory is multidimensional as it draws from interdisciplinary perspectives; psychology, sociology of knowledge, philosophy and critical educational theories. For the purpose of this paper, we will just outline the key principles of the theory from an educational perspective and how they impact curriculum development. Earlier proponents of the constructive learning theory hold that learning on its own is an active process and learners are viewed as active participants in the learning journey (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Recent scholars such as Kurt, 2021 and McLeod, 2019 subscribe to that same ideology, they place the learner at the centre of learning and teaching. For these scholars, it is the learners who interact with their environment and thus gain a clear understanding of the concepts and constructs presented to them and this flags the social construction of knowledge (Kurt, 2021; McLeod, 2019). For constructivists' scholars, knowledge acquisition is an active and strategic process that occurs as a result of constant interaction between learners and teachers, each bringing into the fore their diverse experiences and interpretation of the environment. This collaboration therefore develops a community of inquiry with increased growth in knowledge and critical view of the environment.

This resonates well with Schwab's ideology of putting deliberation at the heart of curriculum development and implementation. In essence, higher education needs to strategically place learners, the main recipients of the curriculum, at the centre of curriculum development to ensure that they tap into their diverse

experiences. This however, needs time, effort and careful deliberation on the ideas of learners before they can be integrated into the curriculum.

Ngussa and Makewa (2014) in their work on student voice in curriculum change argue that learners also have their own knowledge and skill that they have acquired as a result of diverse learning experiences and this is the very thing that empowers them to be active participants in curriculum development, they are well equipped to take decisions on what to learn and how to learn it. They also hold on to Vygotsky's (1978) ideas that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions with social and cultural environments. The interaction between relevant stakeholders therefore can yield positive results on curriculum development since social interactions have the potential to mediate the construction of knowledge.

Benefits of involving learners in curriculum development

Research has shown that learners' involvement in curriculum development is a worthwhile exercise. If learners have to play an active role in the dynamic world context and make an impact, their voices need to be heard at preliminary stages of curriculum development (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Bron & Veugelers, 2014). Policy makers in the education sector always talk about the betterment of the learners without involving them in the planning and implementation of the curriculum (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Bron & Veugelers, 2014; Jagersma, 2010). This is evident even at higher education level where learners only sit in committees as a matter of protocol without having contributed to the curriculum offered and how they want to learn. Engaging learners as partners in curriculum development actually has a potential to totally transform higher education by transforming the learners' perception about learning and teaching as they get to understand their role and responsibilities in the entire learning community (Cook-sather, Bovilli & Felten, 2014). The student voice further brings useful insight into the teaching and learning that informs teachers' instructional practices.

Educational researchers agree that there is great value in hearing diverse student voices in the design and development of the curriculum as they are the main recipient of the curriculum. In the context of curriculum development, learners' voice refers to giving learners an opportunity to share ideas and make contributions on what learning experiences should be included and how learning itself, should occur, stating how they desire to learn (Jagersma, 2010; Bron & Veugelers, 2014; Lac & Mansfield, 2018). Bron and Veugelers, (2014) posit that student voice is an effective way of ensuring a long-term investment in their success academically and in life in general. Their involvement in decision making pertaining what and how to learn inculcates a deep sense of ownership of the curriculum and instils critical democratic values they need to function effectively as citizens of any country. Moreover, learners have unique perspectives on learning and teaching; therefore, giving them an opportunity to contribute could enhance the learning and teaching process as they could influence how the learning experiences can be realised in a meaningful way to them (Manca, et al, 2017).

Another important value of student voice in curriculum development is the fact that it builds their sense of academic self-efficacy, which is a critical ingredient to inspire learners to engage critically with more challenging academic tasks (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Bron & Veugelers, 2014). This view was also held by earlier theorists on curriculum development such as Tyler (1975, p. 28) who wrote:

“If a school activity is perceived as interesting and or useful to his purpose, he enters into it energetically, whereas if it seems irrelevant or boring or painful, he avoids it or limits his involvement as much as he can....”

The gist of Tyler’s argument is that learners’ engagement increased when their voices were heard. Later researchers’ work corroborated this view, Carini, Kuh and Klenin (2006) observed that there was a strong correlation between student engagement and desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and creativity. They argued that if the goal of education is to improve the outcome of schooling, the student should take part in the development of his own curriculum. Dykes, Furdyk, Hassan and Corriero (2013) are of the view that student voice creates a link between in school and out of school experiences, and also gives insight on the relevancy of their education to their daily lives. This further develops a critical reflective mind in the learners as they engage with the curriculum that also talks to their lived experiences. Listening to student voices, therefore, is an important aspect in improving learners’ engagement with the curriculum because they will have a sense of ownership and motivation to tackle challenging tasks. The most remarkable output of all this is the holistic development of the learners who will eventually be an effective problem solver in the workplace and in life generally.

On the same vein, Lac & Mansfield, (2018) argue that involving learners in curriculum development is feasible and beneficial in implementing a well-fitted curriculum that addresses the needs and interests of the learners. One can say that it is only through capturing learners’ voices that curriculum designers are able to craft a curriculum that talks to the learners’ lived experiences and aspirations. Their voices are the best and accurate source of reference. Their involvement gives an authentic picture for consideration on the learning experiences to include in the curriculum. Cook- Sather (2014) shares a similar view, she holds that encouraging student voice could create a useful dialogue between faculty members and learners leading to a clear perspective of each other’s needs and interest.

Another view in support of student voice in curriculum development shows that it has a moderate positive effect on learners’ life skills, self-esteem and social status (Mager & Nowark, 2012). Involving them in curriculum development therefore, has a potential of boosting their psychological needs and giving them a sense of accomplishment. Literature reviewed shows that there has been some positive report recorded on learners’ involvement in developing a pharmacy curriculum of an inaugural class at Manchester University College of Pharmacy in Fort Wayne, India. The learners had an opportunity to evaluate some of their courses and voiced out constructive criticism to enrich their developing programme. For instance, learners were able to identify difficult topics from a previous semester course; Drug literature and incorporated them into a new semester to further gain clarity on those concepts.

As this was a project, learners were able to bring remarkable input on a number of courses for this programme. This had a positive impact as it gave learners a sense of course ownership, prior knowledge of the course content and deeper engagement with the content when tackled in class. The shared responsibility worked positively to motivate learners' interest in the programme and allowed them to explore varied career paths in pharmacology as they become resourceful through working with various experts in the field.

Furthermore, student voice could be very useful in clarifying, challenging and redefining the expert's approach to curriculum development. It could further enhance the development of new approaches to teaching based on a clear understanding of learners' experiences (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone, (2019) corroborate this view; they hold that partnership with learners in curriculum development can lead to a "vibrant exchange of ideas" and a more "flexible pedagogic culture" (p. 10). For Gravett and colleagues, the partnership is a valuable approach to learning.

Challenges of involving learners in curriculum development

Failure to involve learners in curriculum development has serious repercussions as they become a barrier to their own learning through disruptive behavior because they feel disconnected to what they are learning (Mager & Nowak, 2012). This therefore can affect the education system negatively as the teachers may not know the kind of challenges learners have with the learning approaches used and how best to solve problems they may have. Consequently, it is imperative for education practitioners to incorporate student voice into contemporary approaches to teaching and learning and watch the results.

An absence of the student voice in the curriculum leads to a mismatch between perception and reality. This assertion is corroborated by the findings of the works of Broomen, Darwent, and Pimor (2015) who observed that including learners in the redesign of a Law course helped to realign curriculum development with recommendations in existing literature. Failure to include student voice therefore, widens the gap between reality and perceptions. Another setback of excluding learners in designing a curriculum that they will engage with is depriving them of an opportunity to contribute in their own learning.

Strategies to involve learners in curriculum development

There are some strategies that can be engaged in an effort to integrate learners' voices in curriculum design at higher education level. Institutions of higher learning can from time to time hold national discourse in the form of education seminars to address important subjects in educational development such as curriculum, policies, and administrative issues as they all impact the lives of the learners and the education system. Such educational gathering should comprise different stakeholders including employers and diverse learners' population. This could allow the stakeholders to share contemporary ideas and latest trends that will help to shape the future of the society. Flynn (2013) has seen that it is important to pay attention to student voices from such gatherings as they articulate what directly affects them and what they would like to see in their curriculum. This is one strategy that has helped Hong Kong and other Chinese societies develop their



education system especially at higher education (Ip & Fok, 2010). An important aspect to observe is to ensure that student voice is well captured; it clearly articulates their opinions without diluting it with adult ideas of 'adulteration' as Flynn (2013) advises.

Similarly, Seale (2016) holds that student voice can be enacted through a number of ways that includes but not limited to course evaluation, student/staff committee meetings, formal reports, institutional surveys, and teaching and learning excellence metrics. On the same subject, Ying Lu, Nguyen and Ersin (2015) advise that it is even more beneficial to involve learners in the early stages of curriculum design where they will contribute in formulating the course objective, suggest topics to be covered and learning experiences and case studies for learners to do. They argue that sharing the driver's seat with learners encourages them to be resourceful and knowledgeable in course content prior to starting the course thus having insightful and deeper class discussions. Student voice can also be incorporated in more formal means such as in collective decision-making processes when dialogue between them and other stakeholders is held.

Focus group discussion with learners is one way of soliciting student voice. A study conducted by Broomen, Darwent and Pimor (2015) in redesigning a Law course that was earlier perceived as very challenging and learners used to fail, used a focus group method to redesign the course. This yielded a positive outcome as improved mean marks and pass rate and learners' perception of the course were observed. Even the number of learners who desired to enrol in the course improved as well as the learners' attendance in class. Broomen et al. (2015) concluded that focus groups were essential and effective in identifying learners' perspectives in curriculum. This approach further challenged the staff assumption about the process of teaching and learning. In short, the focus group method was a useful tool to gather evidence to inform curriculum change.

Major Findings

This review paper showed that as much as there are some challenges in fully integrating learners' voice in curriculum design and development, many scholars advocate for the recognition of learners as legitimate stakeholders in all curriculum reforms as they are the main recipients of the curriculum. This paper holds that it is difficult to get a balanced view on the problematic issues in the education system and how best to address them if the student voice is ignored. It came out clearly that education policy makers and institutions of higher learning need to engage more robust measures in ensuring that the evolving needs and desires of learners are given priority. The literature underscores the need for the student voice to be heard in different platforms to spell out what experiences they value in the education system they receive, how best they would like to receive instruction and how they desire to be assessed. The literature further showed that full recognition of student voice is one way of ensuring a pathway of success in school, career and life to ensure sustainability. The partnership approach as suggested by many scholars can bring about a new culture of trust and stronger links between academic staff and learners. It could further help in minimising previous mistakes in curriculum development as the recipients of the curriculum would be part of the curriculum design team.

Recommendations

Following an exploration into the subject of student voice in curriculum development in higher education, the following recommendations were made: learners' voices should be prioritised and not treated as an illusion. Furthermore, higher education institutions should have clear structures and documentation outlining the methods for incorporating student voice into curriculum development. Moreover, a record of classes and programmes in which learners participated in curriculum development should be kept, and the result evaluated to identify the level of efficacy of student involvement in those courses and how to improve it.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, incorporating students' voice into the curriculum development process at higher education institutions is more than just an issue of inclusivity; it is a necessary step toward building an environment that promotes effective learning, engagement, and innovation. Educators may create more relevant, meaningful, and effective curricula by taking into account students' different viewpoints, experiences, and needs. Finally, promoting students voice allows them to take ownership of their education; this provides them with the skills and information needed to survive in an ever-changing world. As we continue to negotiate the complexity of education, let us keep it in mind that the true essence of learning is found in listening to those who are at its heart: the students.

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