A Constructivist Approach to Teaching and Learning: Rhetoric versus Reality in the Context of Ethiopian Secondary Schools

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Abstract: In this study, an attempt was made to examine the alignment of the teaching context in secondary schools in Ethiopia with a constructivist approach as emphasized in the education policy of the country. Constructivism underlies innovative approaches such as active learning, problem solving, and cooperative learning, and is often associated with quality learning outcomes. Nevertheless, it is believed that such an approach is less likely to lead to intended outcomes unless the teaching context is conducive. In light of this, by engaging teachers in a critical reflection, the alignment of their views and teaching context with a constructivist approach was examined. Data were collected from a class of 25 secondary school teachers. The results revealed that teachers have positive views about a constructivist approach to teaching and its introduction to the education system in Ethiopia. However, it is found that its realization in practice is more rhetoric than reality as the existing teaching practices are far behind the principles of constructivism. The traditional approach to teaching in which the teacher lectures and students passively listen is an established culture of teaching in schools and is unlikely to change as intended due to the overwhelmingly complex impediments to change in the education system. The students' poor background, top-down policies and curricula, poor administrative and physical infrastructure are among the impediments that are holding back its implementation. Therefore, a supportive environment that encourages teachers to adopt the intended approach is needed as mere policy changes do not guarantee improvements at grassroots level.

Keywords: A constructivist Approach; Critical Reflection; Reality; Rhetoric; Teaching Context

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1. Introduction

The education system in Ethiopia has undergone substantial reforms over the past two decades. The basis for the reformation laid in 1994 with the formulation of new Education and Training Policy (ETP) that claimed to ensure quality, relevance, equity and accessibility of education in Ethiopia (MoE, 1994). ETP emphasized innovative approaches to teaching such as active learning, cooperative learning, student-centeredness and continuous assessment among the most important strategies for enhancing the quality of education at all levels in Ethiopia (Derebssa, 2006). The reform marked a paradigm shift from the traditional approach (Knowledge transmission) which has inflicted the Ethiopian education system for centuries to the employment of innovative approaches to teaching which are in line with a constructivist view of teaching and learning. A constructivist perspective views teaching as facilitating learning whereby students develop knowledge individually and with others rather than just waiting for teachers to provide them with knowledge (Aypay, 2011). In accordance with this view and the goals of ETP, programs and curricula were reformed at different levels of the education system. In addition, as the agents of these changes, teachers were required at different levels to improve the quality of their teaching and eventually to become more innovative in their approach to teaching.

In light of the aforementioned calls for change, this study attempted to examine the alignment of the teaching environment in the secondary schools in Ethiopia with a constructivist approach to teaching and learning which is emphasized in the education policy of the country. Studies reveal that though a constructivist approach is often associated with quality learning outcomes, it is less likely to lead to intended outcomes unless the teaching environment is supportive (Gow and Kember, 1993; Varnava-Marouchou, 2011). In other words, teachers need to have a supportive environment to try out the changes in their teaching as intended by the policy and thereby for the policy to lead to the intended outcomes.

The study produced empirical evidence on teachers' views of a constructivist approach to teaching and the alignment of their teaching environment with this approach. Such evidence was felt to be useful to uncover strategies to align teachers' views and the teaching environment with the reform efforts towards innovative approaches to teaching. The following research questions were designed to seek empirical answer to the issues stated above. These are: (a) what are the views of teachers towards a constructivist approach to teaching and learning?; (b) what kinds of support exist in secondary schools to help teachers adopt a constructivist approach to teaching and learning?; (c) what practical challenges do teachers face in adopting a constructivist approach in their teaching?.

A constructivist approach to teaching and learning asserts that knowledge is not transferred passively from a teacher to a learner; rather, it is constructed and reconstructed by the active involvement of the learner in the learning process (Aypay, 2011). According to Piaget (1952) whose theory is believed to lay the foundation of constructivism, an individual adapts to constantly changing situations or experiences through the processes of accommodation and assimilation. That is, if the experience

is familiar, the individual assimilates or incorporates it into an already existing framework without losing the cognitive equilibrium. However, if the experience is a new one, cognitive disequilibrium results, and, thus, the individual adjusts the existing knowledge structure to accommodate the new experience, which leads to re-equilibrium. Learning, thus, occurs as the learner attempts to build new experiences or knowledge or concepts upon the existing knowledge structure. For this reason, in the process of learning, the learner does not passively receive isolated facts from the teacher or from the text; rather, he/she actively constructs or reconstructs the existing cognitive structure to acquire new knowledge and understanding (Aypay, 2011; MacLellan and Soden, 2004; Mascolo, 2009).

The second instance of constructivism as forwarded by Vygotsky takes into account the role of social interaction in learning. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and discourse with others in the environment and is considered as a social process in which meaning is made dialogically. Learning is, thus, considered as a social process, which happens due to the learners' interactions with fellow students and teachers. Vygotsky (1978: 86) also theorizes that learning takes place in the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), which refers to "*the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers".* According to Vygotsky, the actual development level defines all the activities the learner can perform on his/her own independently without the help of others whereas the level of potential development defines all the things that the leaner cannot do alone as the functions for such things have not matured in the learner. These levels are determined through a problem that the learner can or cannot perform. So, if the learner can perform the problem independently, it shows the learner's actual development level whereas if he/she cannot perform it independently but only with the assistance of someone else, it shows the learner's potential development.

The zone of proximal development thus helps to define those functions which are not matured in the learner but in the process of maturation with the support of 'More Knowledgeable Others' (MKO) such as learners and peers through a process called 'scaffolding' (McMorrow, 2006). This means, in order for the student to acquire new experience and knowledge, teachers or peers that are more knowledgeable should provide scaffolds for the learning experience. During the scaffolding process, the MKO acts as a facilitator who stimulates knowledge construction, not as an expert, so that students freely collaborate with others to construct new knowledge and understandings. The scaffolding or the assistance can be withdrawn gradually when the students develop the required competence.

In general, based on Torenbeek *et al*. (2009), constructivism is established on the following predominant principles. First, constructivism maintains that learners construct new knowledge drawing upon their pervious knowledge structures. This view is in contrast to the traditional assumption that learners have very little knowledge to contribute to their own learning. The implication of this is that teachers

should take into account learners' previous knowledge when making learning decisions (Mascolo, 2009). Secondly, constructivism asserts that learners should be encouraged to construct knowledge both individually as well as with other students. This means learning is dialogical and involves learners in interaction with others so that they learn how to give and take information from others. Thirdly, constructivism establishes that learners should share responsibility for their learning in terms of goal setting, self-monitoring, self-assessment and feedback. In other words, they should not entirely be dependent on their teachers for their own educational processes; rather, they should be encouraged to plan, manage and monitor their learning. Finally, constructivism suggests that learning should be authentic or resemble real-life situations so that it stimulates learners' motivation for learning. This means learning is more motivating when it is purposeful and enables learners to deal with real-life problems.

Therefore, teaching based on a constructivist approach is student-focused and gives more attention to what students do in order to learn than what teachers do in order to teach. As a result, teachers should be encouraged to adopt a constructivist approach to teaching, which will in turn encourage students to adopt a deeper approach to learning (Trigwell *et al*., 1999). According to Trigwell and Prosser (1991), a deep approach to learning is highly associated with quality learning outcomes as it encourages understanding and applications of knowledge in contrast to a surface approach or a superficial approach which leads to poorer learning outcomes such as memorization and rote learning.

Despite all these benefits, many scholars argue that constructivism is the espoused theory (ideal) more than the theory-in-use (practical) (Biggs, 1996). It is asserted that although constructivism is a popular theory in education, its implementation into classroom realities may not be as such simple. It could also be more challenging in contexts like Ethiopia where teachers lack the basic resources for teaching. However, it is impossible to boldly conclude like this as it requires an empirical study that examines teaching practices in light of the principles of constructivism. Therefore, this study was initiated with this assumption and understanding to provide some empirical evidence on the realities of a constructivist approach in an impoverished context like Ethiopia.

2. Research Methods

This study is entirely qualitative in its nature and design. Accordingly, the research approach employed is critical reflection which refers to a process through which teachers examine their beliefs, practices, experiences and contexts to improve their own professional practice (Fook and Gardner, 2007). The approach has been adopted based on Day's (1999:31) suggestion that "*It is important … to place learning through reflection at the center of teachers' critical thinking and development.*" Taking this into account, a class of in-service program teachers was engaged in critical reflection on their teaching practices and school contexts during English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodology course taught by the author. The course focused on various educational theories and approaches to teaching whose

understanding is believed to shape teachers' thinking of learning and teaching and thereby improves teachers' understanding of how best students learn for better learning outcomes (Jordan *et al*., 2008). Group reflection in class and individual reflection after class were conducted to involve the teachers in critical reflection on their teaching. Data sources for the study were the notes taken by the researcher during the discussion in class and the written reflection notes produced by the teachers after class.

2.1. Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were 25 government sponsored in-service teachers attending a postgraduate summer program at Haramaya University in 2015/16 academic year. Data were collected for the study during ELT Methodology course taught by the author. The course dealt with various theories, approaches and methods underlying English language teaching and learning. As part of this course and as an effective approach to teaching, the teachers were engaged in reflective practice both in class and after class to examine their teaching practices in light of the knowledge they have gained from the course. All of the teachers have bachelor degrees and teach English in different public secondary schools (Grades 9-12). Their teaching experiences ranged from 3-20 years. Their class size ranged from 50-80.

2.2. Data Collection Procedures

To create a common understanding about reflection and the purpose of the study, the following procedures were applied before engaging the teachers in the activity. First, the purpose of the study was explained. Second, the teachers were given some orientations on the concept, purpose and procedures of reflection. After this, they were given some guiding questions that served as a basis for examining beliefs and practices. Next, groups were formed for the reflection in class and for the individual reflection after class, instructions were given. The teachers were encouraged to express their viewpoints freely based on the knowledge and experiences they have gained from the ELT Methodology course taught by the researcher. The guiding questions comprised the following: (a) does a constructivist approach to teaching and learning fit with your current attitude towards teaching? Why?; (b) are you able to apply a constructivist approach to teaching in your classroom? Why?; (c) what kinds of support or resources exist in your school to help you apply a constructivist approach to teaching and learning?; and (d) what practical challenges or obstacles do you face in adopting a constructivist approach to teaching in your classroom?.

2.3. Method of Data Analysis

Data gathered for the study were analyzed qualitatively using content analysis. This involved reading in an iterative manner all the field notes taken during the group reflection in class and the reflection notes written by the teachers after class to carefully extract the teachers' views of a constructivist approach to teaching and their evaluation of their teaching context in light of the approach. Following this, relevant concepts were identified and categorized based on the research questions. To

illustrate the concepts/themes developed, reflections of the teachers were extracted verbatim from their written reports. In such cases, codes (e.g., T_1, T_2....T_{25}) were used to keep the anonymity of the teachers.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the study were presented based on the research questions and subsequently discussed in light of the related literature. In this way, first, teachers' views of a constructivist approach to teaching are presented. This is followed by teachers' evaluations of their current teaching practices in light of a constructivist approach to teaching. Next, teachers' reflections related to the support and resources available to help them implement a constructivist approach to teaching are presented. Finally, the challenges impeding teachers in applying a constructivist approach in their teaching are presented and discussed.

3.1. Teachers' Views of a Constructivist Approach to Teaching

A constructivist approach to teaching requires teachers to move away from, as Weimer (2002) notes, from the "sage on the stage" to the "guide on the side" or "fellow traveler" who helps students in their intellectual development and change. In other words, teachers are expected to play a facilitative role and to create opportunities for students to learn independently drawing on their prior experiences and through interaction with one another. Nevertheless, this has not been the case in an Ethiopian context in the past as the conventional teacher-centered approach to teaching has been the dominant mode of instruction. Therefore, engaging teachers in critical reflection on their views of teaching is assumed to be a paramount importance to enable them to interrogate their views and adopt new ideas in their teaching. Based on this assumption, teachers under consideration were encouraged to reflect on a constructivist approach to teaching through group discussion in class and individual reflection after class. From this, two categories of teachers were identified. The first categories are those who are positive towards a constructivist approach and feel that it is applicable in their teaching. Here are some of the excerpts that illustrate the teachers in this category. "A constructivist approach to teaching as we learned in the course is... useful and innovative and can be applied in practice" (T_{21}).

In a similar way, another teacher stated: "In the past, I used more of a teacher-centered approach in my teaching. But after learning about constructivism, I would like to change it to a constructivist approach that increases my students' creativity or discovery of knowledge by themselves" (T_5).

Like the teachers in the first category, the second category of teachers are also positive about a constructivist approach; however, they do not think that such an approach is practically applicable in their teaching context due to various practical challenges they are currently facing in their schools. Here are some of the excerpts that illustrate the views of teachers in this category. "The approach enables us to make our teaching active learning, but we are unable to practice it due to our poor teaching context, such as large class and lack of resources" (T_3).

In a similar way, another teacher noted:

> Constructivism is interesting in that it encourages students to discover knowledge by themselves while the teacher acts as a facilitator, an advisor, organizer, etc. but the reality in my school is different because students expect everything from their teachers. Their goal is to pass the national examination. Thus, I do not think I can implement it in my classes (T_{11}).

The reflections of the teachers in the second category is supported by Biggs (1996) who stated that despite all its benefits, constructivism remains the espoused theory (ideal) more than the theory-in-use (practical). In other words, though constructivism has become a popular theory in education, its practical applications are still far from a reality in some teaching contexts. This is particularly true in contexts where teachers suffer from large classes, poor administrative support for teaching, centralized curricula, etc. as in an Ethiopian context. Nevertheless, if quality-learning outcomes are sought, constructivism seems to be the way forward as students' learning is of a high quality when they actively construct knowledge on their own rather than when knowledge is lectured to them by others (Trigwell and Prosser, 1991).

3.2. Teaching Practices in Light of a Constructivist Approach to Teaching and Learning

One of the objectives of this study was to engage the teachers to recall and interrogate their teaching practices in light of a constructive approach to teaching. As the policy towards a constructivist pedagogy has been in place for more than two decades, the teachers were asked to reflect on the implementation of this policy in their classroom context based on the knowledge they have obtained during the course of this study. Accordingly, a few teachers claimed that they are making efforts to teach in the way the policy demands, i.e., a constructivist approach to teaching. For instance, one of the teachers acknowledged: "I use the principles of constructivism in my teaching to some extent. For instance, I organize students in groups and motivate them to discuss and share ideas related to the topics taught" (T_{20}).

Another teacher expressed: "I believe my teaching is more or less student-centered as I encourage students to ask questions and discuss on the topics taught in pairs and groups" (T_{24}).

However, the majority of the teachers expressed that their actual teaching is still predominately lecture-based or the conventional way as this has been the way they were taught and trained. In this regard, T_7 stated: "I was taught and have been teaching through the traditional approach." Likewise, other teachers expressed that they were forced to revert to the old method due to circumstances such as content coverage. Supporting this, T_{14} stated: "We are obliged to carry on the familiar method {teacher-centred} even if the current teaching method demands us to teach through a student-centred approach because of the students' poor background and fear of loss of content coverage" (T_{11}).

Another teacher also admitted: "I rarely used a constructivist viewpoint in my teaching. I teach mainly to cover the textbook as this is what is required by the school administration" (T_{13}).

From these reflections of the teachers, it can be deduced that teaching practices in schools are more or less under the repression of the conventional method regardless of the policy demands towards the employment of an approach, which is built on constructivism. This reveals that the policy reforms have remained more ideal than practical though they have been introduced to the education system for over two decades. Teachers were unable to translate the changes for the reasons beyond their control as meaningful attempts have not been made to align the teaching environment in line with the principles of constructivism on which the policy reforms were founded. This finding is supported by Derebssa's (2006) study, which revealed the dominance of the traditional lecture methods in which teachers talk and students listen in most Ethiopian elementary classrooms although the education policy emphasizes the employment of innovative approaches to teaching.

3.3. Availability of Support and Resources in Schools to Implement a Constructivist Approach to Teaching

A supportive environment is vital for teachers to adopt a constructivist approach to teaching. As Kahl and Venette (2010) argue, teachers normally teach the way they were taught; therefore, it is unfair and unrealistic to expect them to implement a new approach in their classes without providing them with the necessary support such as training on the approach. Johnson *et al*. (2009) also suggest training as an important element of supporting teachers who wish to teach in a non-traditional style. They state that teachers should first internalize their new roles and expectations as a prerequisite for the successful implementation of the new approach in their context.

In this regard, from the reflections of the teachers, it is understood that the government has introduced some professional development activities to enable teachers to adopt innovative approaches in their teaching. One of the strategies introduced is Continuous Professional Development (CPD), which has been in place since 2005 with the aim of helping teachers develop their professional knowledge and skills continuously and thereby bringing about improvements in student learning and achievement (MoE, 2009). It was also intended to promote innovative approaches to teaching such as active learning, problem solving, and student centered teaching methods that were lacking in the education system for decades.

Teachers explained that they are positive about the introduction of CPD activities for their own professional development as well as for improving student learning. For instance, one of the teachers expressed: "There is CPD in my school. Its objective is to discuss on the major problems that we each faced in the teaching-learning process and to give immediate solution to the problems as much as possible. We performed this activity two hours a week and it is led by a coordinator and the school director" (T_1).

Likewise, Teacher $_{19}$ noted: "I have participated in CPD program in our school. We were required to take part in it for at least 60 hours per year. We prepare portfolios and discuss our roles and responsibilities in improving teaching and learning in our school."

From these reflections, it is evident that professional development activities have been in place to improve teachers' professional growth and practice. Although this is the way forward, the majority of the teachers were critical of its implementation in their schools due to various constraints related to budget and other human and material resources. The teachers explained that CPD activities are planned every year in their schools, but they were unable to materialize any of these activities due to lack of budget and resources. In connection to this, one of the teachers reflected "CPD is a pseudo program as there is little support available in schools to practice it as intended" (T_5).

In a similar way, another teacher stated:

> Even though CPD is important for teachers to share their experiences and challenges in the teaching-learning process, the main problem is that inadequate budget is allocated for the implementation of CPD activities. As a result, the CPD program does not often go beyond a planning stage. We cannot implement our plans in our teaching due to lack of resources and close follow up (T_9).

From the above discussions and reflections, it is possible to conclude that though attempts are there to introduce professional improvement activities such as CPD in the education system, there are no relevant and significant engagements at school level due to lack of resources and attention for such activities. As a result, CPD program does not seem to bring changes on teacher effectiveness and student learning. Supporting this, Dereje (2015), in his study on CPD practices in general secondary and preparatory schools in Bahir Dar town found that the program is not achieving its objectives of improving the classroom practices of teachers and student performance. Thus, as CPD is a key for teacher development and overall school improvement initiatives (Girmaw, 2016), it has to be a regular and continuous activity with adequate support and monitoring from the school administration.

3.4. Challenges of Teachers in Implementing a Constructivist Approach in their Teaching

Though a constructivist approach to teaching is associated with high quality learning outcomes characterized by better learning and in-depth understanding of the subject of the study, its practical realities are not without challenges which many writers characterize as natural and inevitable (Felder and Brent, 1996; Mascolo, 2009; Weimer, 2002).

Supporting this, as Johnson *et al*. (2009) explain challenges are anticipated from multiple sources when change is introduced in an established routine. This is true in the context where teacher-centred approach to teaching is a tradition as in an Ethiopian context. However, as Felder and Brent (1996: 43) illustrate, this does not mean that the new approach "does not work... but the problem is that although the promised benefits are real, they are neither immediate nor automatic". In view of this, the challenges that the teachers face in implementing a constructivist approach to teaching were identified in this study. From the reflections of the teachers, numerous challenges that hamper the implementation of a constructivist approach emerged. The predominant ones include resistance from students and poor administrative and physical infrastructures.

3.4.1. Resistance from students

The teachers explained that though they are positive about a constructivist approach to teaching, they do not think that their students will positively welcome the approach as they may perceive it demanding and against their previous learning experiences. The following excerpts illustrate these viewpoints: "I don't think I can apply this approach in my teaching because my students want me to tell/lecture them everything rather than trying to learn by their own efforts" (T_{13}).

"Our students' prior experience does not correlate with the constructivist principles such as taking responsibility for one's own learning. They are accustomed to the established way of receiving information from the teacher in the form of lecture notes. As a result, they will complain if we change this tradition" (T_8).

Teachers also explained that their students are exam-oriented and want their teachers to focus on exam-related issues more than engaging them in quality learning. To support this, one of the teachers stated: "Our students want us to give special attention to those aspects of learning which enable them to succeed on examination more than quality learning. As a result, they resist to anything that goes beyond these immediate needs" (T_{18}).

From these excerpts, it is understood that teachers felt that they may face resistance from their students if they change their teaching approach as students prefer the conventional approach to teaching, which is lecture based and surface learning merely for passing examinations. As a result of this, students may consider the new experience such as actively participating in class discussions, assessing one's own learning and doing various forms of reading frustrating, demanding, threatening and unfamiliar. In connection to this, Felder and Brent (1996) state that students may get frustrated when the tradition of getting everything effortlessly from the teacher is broken. Similarly, as Fox (1983) further reveals students may consider active learning as "a waste of time because they know that the information transferred in such procedures can be transferred much more rapidly in lectures and duplicated notes". This phenomenon thus leads them to resist openly or passively showing their preference to the way things used to be (Weimer, 2002).

Therefore, in such cases, as Fox (1983) suggests, teachers should carefully handle student resistance rather than being frustrated and reverting to teach in the way students prefer to learn. It should be noted that student resistance is temporary and is likely to change after they understand the rewards attached with taking responsibility for their own learning. The best approach for doing this, as Weimer (2002) notes, is through the teacher involving students in open and free discussion. The teacher should convince and tell students regularly about the benefits they get from a constructivist approach to teaching. In other words, the teacher should inform students how the method works and what merits they gain if they learn in this way. In addition, he/ she should reward students for their attempts to take responsibility for their own learning and should not ridicule them for making mistakes.

3.4.2. Poor administrative and physical infrastructure

As described by Johnson *et al*. (2009: 148), administration refers to *"those personnel, policies and procedures that are currently in place in a school that establish and govern the process and direction of education".* The administration is expected to be supportive for teachers to adopt new ideas and changes in their classes. In addition, the physical infrastructure should also be conducive. For instance, the classroom conditions should be reconfigured to suit to the change (Johnson *et al*., 2009). A good instance of this is replacing desks by seats, which are movable and conducive for cooperative learning. Another way of doing this is minimizing the number of students in class so that it becomes optimal for active learning.

Based on this, teachers were asked to reflect on whether the administration and the physical infrastructure in their schools are conducive to implement a constructivist approach to teaching. Unfortunately, the majority of the teachers stated that their implementation of the constructivist approach has been hampered by lack of support from the administration and poor classroom conditions. In this regard, Teacher $_{17}$ stated: "There is no support from the school administration or other concerned body for effective teaching and learning. The administration in the school gives priority to routine school activities more than quality education that prepares students for quality life."

In a similar way, Teacher $_{23}$ expressed:

> As the textbooks are prepared centrally by the Ministry of Education, we do not have control over the contents. These textbooks are often too bulky and difficult to cover within the time given. We are forced to rush to cover contents more than quality learning as we are evaluated based on content coverage. That is, there is no adequate time for engaging students in active learning.

From these excerpts, it is clear that teachers rush to cover the contents of textbooks, which is given a priority at schools to engaging students in quality learning. As stated, the curricula, syllabi, textbooks and examinations (Grades 10 and 12) in Ethiopia are centrally designed by the Ministry of Education. Teachers do not have a voice in all of these processes rather than implementing them in their schools. What is more, the textbooks are often designed to contain a lot of topics to be covered. As a result, teachers do not have time to engage students in cooperative learning exercises rather than just rushing to cover them. In relation to this, Johnson *et al*. (2009) state that if the curriculum is traditionally designed, teachers struggle to cover the content and have very limited time to involve students in active learning. As a result, their teaching becomes content-oriented than student-focused.

Teachers also reported that the infrastructures in their schools are not aligned with the principles of constructivism. They stated that the classes are large and contain immovable desks. For instance, one of the teachers reported: "Constructivism is problematic in my classes, which contain 70 students. The desks are also immovable so that it is difficult for students to move around and interact with others."

In general, teaching large classes is the common problem for all teachers as the number of the students they teach in their classes ranged from 50-80. Thus, they are likely to find it challenging to implement the demanded approach in such conditions. A study by Prosser and Trigwell (1997) also reveals that teachers are more likely to

adopt a traditional approach if they perceive that their class sizes are too large and departmental support for teaching is lacking.

4. Conclusions and Implications

Constructivism is believed to be a popular theory in education and is often associated with quality learning outcomes. Many of the principles of constructivism such as student-centeredness, active learning, continuous assessment and cooperative learning have been in place in the education system of Ethiopia for more than two decades. Despite the policy reforms, teaching and learning in Ethiopia has been under the influence of the traditional approach to teaching and, as a result, a significant progress has not been made to improve the quality of education in Ethiopia. In this study, an attempt was made to introduce in-service teachers to the principles of constructivism as part of a Subject Area Methodology course and thereby to engage them in a critical reflection through which they examine their views and contexts to improve their professional practice.

The outcome of the study revealed that teachers are positive about constructivism and its introduction in the education system in Ethiopia. However, it was found that its classroom realities in Ethiopian context are more rhetoric than reality as the existing teaching practices and contexts are far behind the principles of constructivism. The traditional approach to teaching in which the teacher lectures and the students passively listen has become an established culture of teaching in Ethiopia and is unlikely to change easily due to the overwhelmingly complex impediments to change in the education system.

Poor background of the students, top-down policies and curricula, poor administration and physical infrastructure are among the hurdles holding back its implementation as intended.

To reverse these conditions, it requires the participation and the concerted effort of all stakeholders who have the stake in the education system. Implementing change should not be left for teachers alone, who are often the scapegoats for the deterioration of the quality of education in the country. The teaching context (classroom conditions, class size, etc.) should be aligned with the principles of constructivism for the policy reforms to lead to intended outcomes. The administration (policies, personnel, and procedures) in schools should be a supportive enough for teachers to safely experiment with new ideas in their teaching and ensure quality learning for students.

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