

The Experience of Bahir Dar University Teacher Educators in Practicing Society-centered Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the practice of society-centered instruction in teacher education classrooms. Hence, a qualitative research approach focusing on phenomenological design was employed. Participants of the study were six teacher educators from the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Bahir Dar University. They were selected through purposive sampling technique. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data essential for the study. An adapted five-stage data analysis model was also used to analyze the data collected through the above methods. The findings of the study revealed that the experience of teacher educators in practicing society-centered teaching methods and assessment techniques was minimal. The study also revealed that the instructional processes in teacher education classrooms of Bahir Dar University were not satisfactorily interconnected with major issues of society. Towards the end of the article, the implications of these findings for classroom practices and policy initiatives are highlighted.

Keywords: Social reconstructionism, societal problems, society, society-centered instruction, teacher education

Introduction

Though the central purpose of education is still debatable, its role in alleviating societal problems and ameliorating life in society is indisputable. By preparing citizens who could actively participate in the multifaceted issues of society, education plays an indispensable role in sustaining the existence of societies and their cultural heritage. Its role in bringing about social justice and better social orders is also worth mentioning (Brameld, 1971; McNeil, 1996; Stanley, 1992).

Despite this, many countries today are besieged with lots of problems. For instance, global warming, ozone depletion, desertification, environmental pollution, and drought are among the challenges that are threatening the survival of mankind today (Desha & Hargroves,

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2014; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Quisumbing, 2002). Likewise, many societies around the world are suffering from absence of democratic socio-political systems. Racial, gender, economic, and political inequalities are pervasive problems in many parts of the world (Cogan & Derricott, 2000; Quisumbing, 2002; Schiro, 2013). Terrorism, according to many writers, has also become a challenge in many societies. In a nutshell, as Desha and Hargroves (2014) succinctly indicated, peoples of the 21st century are living in ‘urgent’ and ‘challenging’ times. Many educators (e.g., Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Schiro, 2013) contend that the societal problems that many societies have been experiencing emanated partly from the failure of educational and instructional practices to give adequate attention to society and societal issues. As many research findings revealed, the social function of education and the society-centered educational approach have been marginalized in the education system of many countries (Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Stanley, 1992). Overwhelmed by the progressive educational philosophy and the learner-centered instructional approach, many educational systems did not give society and societal problems considerable attention. Due to this, many societies are not benefiting much from the educational services they are delivering. For these scholars, rethinking the relevance and appropriateness of instructional practices is of paramount significance if educators are to meaningfully discharge their social and professional responsibilities.

It was with this general educational belief and concern of educators to society and societal issues that the present study was initiated. Of course, the absence of research on the place of society and societal issues in the teacher education programs of Ethiopia was the most important reason to undertake this study. As of the researcher's best knowledge, full-fledged research that aims at investigating these topics has not been conducted in the education system of Ethiopia. This study, therefore, aimed to understand the practice of society-centered instruction in teacher education classrooms focusing on the lived experiences of Bahir Dar University teacher educators. Reflecting this purpose, the present study is organized under the following two research questions: What are the experiences of Bahir Dar University teacher educators in practicing society-centered instructional methods? and What are the experiences of Bahir Dar University teacher educators in employing society-centered assessment techniques?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, Social Reconstructionism is used as a theoretical framework. Social Reconstructionism is an educational philosophy started in the United States of America in the first half of the 20th century (Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004; Stanley, 1992; Thomas, 2010). Nevertheless, ideas similar to this philosophy have been reverberating throughout the history of mankind. As the name of the philosophy suggests, Social Reconstructionism is much concerned with issues of society, societal problems, social reform, social justice, and social transformation (Belbase, 2011; Brameld, 1971; Ellis,

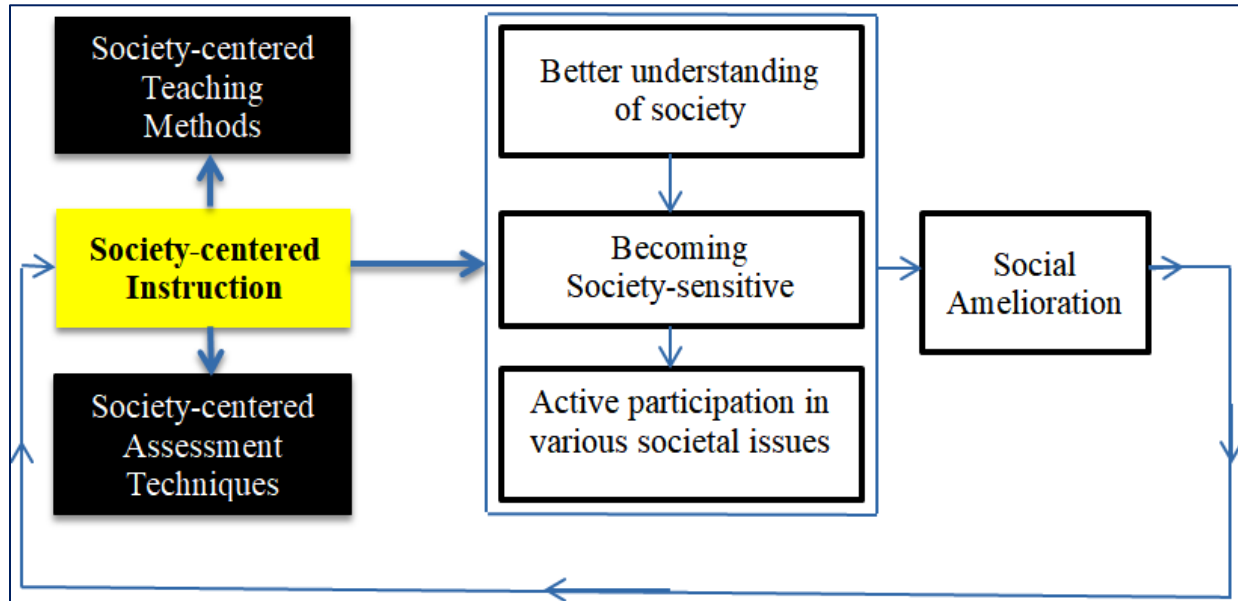
2004; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996; Stanley, 1992). Because of this, some educators (e.g., Ellis, 2004) use the phrase *society-centered educational philosophy* while referring to Social Reconstructionism. For many educators, Social Reconstructionism is a relevant educational philosophy for societies entangled with various societal problems. In line with this, Theodore Brameld, one of the founding fathers of the philosophy, described Social Reconstructionism as a crisis philosophy appropriate for a society that experiences social crisis (Brameld, 1971).

In Social Reconstructionism, teachers are expected to play many professional roles. These include (1) understanding the major foundations of the philosophy, (2) prioritizing society and societal issues in different professional endeavors, (3) using society-centered teaching and assessment methods, (4) exercising democratic teaching in the classroom, (5) developing students' social conscience, (6) envisioning better society, and (7) taking part in various society-related projects. Taking sides in favor of society, posing and discussing sensitive societal issues, acting as a social activist, and serving as an agent of social change are also among the duties of Social Reconstructionist teachers (Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006; Schiro, 2013; Stanley, 1992).

Of the above Social Reconstructionist duties, this study sought to investigate the practice of the society-centered teaching and assessment methods. The phrase society-centered teaching method refers to any teaching method that aims at developing students' understanding of the real nature of contemporary societies. For this purpose, teachers are required to utilize methods that encourage students to explore the community and figure out their problems. In other words, instead of employing traditional methods that aim at knowledge acquisition, teachers are expected to use methods that encourage students to learn and explore the community and its problems (Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Freire, 1970; Hill, 2006). In this regard, the use of such specific instructional methods as community service learning, community-related team projects, pageants, dramas, school assemblies, and school governments are considered important society-centered teaching methods (Ellis, 2004; McNeil, 1996).

Also in Social Reconstructionism, teachers are expected to employ society-centered assessment techniques. Society-centered assessment is an approach of assessment that encourages students to take active part in various society-related activities (Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996; Stanley, 1992). It includes assessment techniques that encourage students to apply the knowledge they acquired to solve various practical problems of the society and to contribute their parts in the social reconstruction process.

Teachers' practice of society-centered instruction, i.e., the use of teaching and assessment methods directly related to society and societal problems, plays a crucial role in developing students' understanding of their society. Its contribution in making students society-sensitive and active participants in diverse issues of their society is also very important. In Social Reconstructionism, all these student behaviors embrace a central position in the process of social amelioration and, indeed, in establishing better social orders.

Figure 1*Conceptual Framework*

This study, therefore, aimed at examining the experience of Bahir Dar University teacher educators in utilizing instructional methods that center society and employing assessment techniques that enhance society-centered learning.

Method

The present study employs phenomenological research design. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explained, phenomenology is a research design that aims at understanding people's lived experiences within a specific phenomenon. In this study, phenomenological design was found to be more appropriate because the purpose of the study was to explicate the lived experiences of teacher educators in executing one major role of a Social Reconstructionist teacher. The research site for the present study is Bahir Dar University (BDU). BDU is one of the public universities in Ethiopia. It is located in Bahir Dar, the capital city of the Amhara National Regional State. Currently, BDU is one of the largest higher education institutions in Ethiopia. College of Education and Behavioral Sciences (CEBS) is one of the oldest colleges of the University. At present, the college enrolls students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Participants of the study were six teacher educators who were teaching at Bahir Dar University. They were selected from three departments within the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. The sampling technique used to select them was purposive sampling. Willingness to research participation and experience of teaching at teacher education institutions were the criteria used to select the research participants. In this regard, the teacher educators who participated in this study had an experience of teaching that ranges from 10 to 16 years. In terms

of academic rank, four of the participants were Lecturers while the remaining two were Assistant Professors. Sex wise, all of them were males.

To obtain data essential for the study, semi-structured interviews and document analysis methods were used. The interview schedule, the major data gathering method, had eight open-ended questions. Using these items, several related probes and follow-up questions were posed. In the data gathering process, each participant was interviewed in a session that lasted from 40 to 55 minutes. The document analysis method, on the other hand, was used to complement the data that were obtained through interview. In this regard, teacher-educators' course guidebooks and assessment records were critically analyzed.

The process of qualitative data analysis, according to Huberman and Miles (1994), involves the following three interrelated steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Creswell and Poth (2018) argue that data analysis in qualitative research is a four-step process involving data management (organizing data into file folders, index cards or computer files), reading and memoing (getting a sense of the whole database), describing, classifying and interpreting data, and presenting the data in text, tabular or figure form.

Bearing these ideas in mind, an adapted five-stage data analysis model was used. Using this model, the following five steps of data analysis were passed through: data reduction, data organization, getting a sense of the data organized, data display, and data description and interpretation. The task of data analysis was made on two themes that reflect the purposes and leading questions of the study. While analyzing the data, such specific techniques as description, narration, and verbatim citation were employed.

Results

This part presents the results of the study under the following two themes: teacher educators' experience of utilizing society-centered instructional methods and teacher educators' experience of using society-centered assessment strategies. The themes emanated from the two research questions indicated earlier.

Teacher Educators' Experience of Utilizing Society Centered Instructional Methods

If education in general and teacher education in particular is to facilitate the process of social reconstruction, instructional methods that aim at developing students' understanding of the real nature of contemporary societies need to be employed. In this regard, teachers are required to utilize teaching-learning methods that encourage students to explore the community and figure out their problems.

To understand teacher educators' experience of using society-centered instructional methods, data were collected through interviews and document analysis. The data obtained through these methods are presented as follows.

According to the data obtained through interviews, the research participants had no satisfactory experiences of using society-centered instructional methods. The following response of Daniel² is a good example in this regard.

The teaching methods that I frequently use are more teacher-centered. Society-centered pedagogy, I believe, is possible in fields such as Public Health and Adult Education.

Similarly, Abay forwarded the following ideas.

My teaching methods are more teacher-centered. Nearly 70% of the teaching methods I use are teacher-centered while 30% of them are student-centered. In short, I do not have the experience of using methods that are directly centered on society. For instance, I did not employ the service-learning method so far.

Hussein explained his experience as follows.

The instructional methods I repeatedly employ are not far from the “chalk and talk” approach. In other words, they are traditional and teacher-centered. On rare occasions, I try to employ some active learning methods.

From the above responses, one can easily understand that the instructional methods frequently used by the research participants were teacher-centered.

Other participants, on the other hand, were using a mixed type of instructional method. Let us see the responses of the following two participants.

Adam's instructional methods had the following features.

In the classroom, I use teaching methods that range from gapped lecture to some student-centered instructional strategies. Most of the time, I initiate an issue first. Then, I brainstorm and motivate students to talk on the issues that I raised. After listening to their reflections, I will make lectures. However, I do not have the experience of using specific society-centered instructional methods like the service-learning method.

Fasil had also a similar experience.

They are a mixture of student-centered and teacher-centered. I intend to deliver student-centered instruction. I always believe that the role of the teacher is to facilitate instruction and to ignite students' learning. My course guidebook, in particular, is student-centered. However, students are not interested in this instructional approach.

² All participant names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Generally, the interview data presented above imply that the research participants had been using either teacher-centered or student-centered instructional methods. Their responses entail that they had no satisfactory experiences of using society-centered instructional methods.

In the interview sessions, participants of the study were asked to list the top five instructional methods they frequently used in their classrooms. Their responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The Top Five Instructional Methods Frequently Employed by Teacher Educators

Participant	Frequently Employed Instructional Methods
Fasil	Lecture, group discussion, reflection, individual assignment, and group assignment.
Daniel	Lecture, group discussion, demonstration, individual work, and reading assignment.
Abay	Lecture, group discussion, presentation, individual assignment, and a reading activity.
Adam	Lecture, discussion, brainstorming, independent reading, and project work.
Michael	Gapped lecture, group discussion, independent work, project work, and brainstorming.
Hussein	Gapped lecture, brainstorming, pair work, group work, and question- answer.

The data presented in Table 1 is somewhat consistent with the one already presented above. According to these data, the teacher educators were frequently using instructional methods that were either teacher-centered or student-centered. For instance, the lecture method was found to be at the top of the instructional methods used by Fasil, Daniel, Abay, and Adam. The other version of the lecture method, the gapped lecture method, was also found to be the number one instructional method for the remaining two participants, i.e., Michael and Hussein. This implies that there was a tendency to use traditional instructional methods. Many of the remaining methods reported by all of the research participants (e.g., group discussion, individual work, brainstorming, presentation, and question-answer) suggest that the student-centered or active learning methods were also important in the instructional process of teacher education classrooms.

To substantiate the above results, additional data were collected through document analysis. In this regard, an attempt was made to critically analyze the participants' course guidebooks focusing on the instructional methods they planned. Data obtained through this method are presented in Table 2.

Table 2*Instructional Methods Planned in Participants' Course Guidebooks*

Participant	Instructional Methods
Fasil	Brainstorming, peer discussion, group discussion, lecture, article review, group assignment, and presentation.
Daniel	Brainstorming, lecture, buzz group, independent reading, group discussion, reflection, and debate.
Abay	Lecture, classroom exercises, discussions, independent reading, independent assignments, group works/assignments, projects, practicum, case studies, and fieldwork.
Adam	Lecture, small group discussion, presentation, gapped lecture, debate, reflection, group assignment, and individual assignment.
Michael	Lecture, review of reading materials, group discussion, presentation, reflection, project work, and case study.
Hussein	Lecture, group discussion, presentation, reflection, debate, question-answer, and interviewing of professionals.

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that at a course guidebook level, different instructional methods were planned by the research participants. Both traditional (e.g., lecture) and modern (e.g., reflection and debate) methods were planned to be employed in classrooms. Methods such as projects, case studies, fieldwork, group discussions, reflections, debates, interviewing, and article review could be considered relevant society-centered instructional methods provided that they were focused on society and societal problems.

Teacher Educators' Experience of Using Society-centered Assessment Strategies

The present study also attempted to understand the experience of teacher educators in using society-centered assessment methods. For this purpose, data were collected through document analysis and interviews. The data obtained through these two methods are presented as follows.

Table 3*Assessment Techniques Planned in Course Guidebooks*

Participant	Assessment Techniques and Weight
Fasil	Participation (15%) Assignment (20%) Mid Examination (25%) Attendance (5%) Final Examination (35%)
Daniel	Individual Assignment (11%) Quizzes (12%) Group Assignment (12%) Mid Examination (25%) Final Examination (40%)

Adam	Group Assignment (12%) Quiz (11%) Individual Assignment (12%)	Mid Examination (25%) Final Examination (40%)
Abay	Quizzes (12%) Test (11%) Mid Examination (25%)	Group Assignment (7%) Presentation (5%) Final Examination (40%)
Michael	Group Discussion & Presentation (20%) Case Study Report & Presentation (20%)	Project Work & Presentation (20%) Final Examination (40%)
Hussein	Group Assignment & Presentation (30%) Reading Assignment (10%)	Mid Examination (20%) Final Examination (40%)

As can be seen from Table 3, the research participants had planned some assessment techniques in their course guidebooks. One problem that could be understood from the above data, however, is that the assessment techniques they planned were limited in number. In this regard, the first three research participants planned only five assessment techniques while the fifth and sixth ones planned only four. Another major problem that could be understood from the same table is that the major concern of participants' assessment was tailored to knowledge mastery. This is because much weight was given for quizzes, tests, and mid and final examinations. For example, the assessment weights that Daniel, Adam, and Abay assigned to these techniques were 77%, 76%, and 88% respectively.

To obtain further understanding of teacher educators' assessment techniques, data were gathered through interviews. The responses of the participants, however, revealed that they had no meaningful experience of using society-centered assessment methods. The responses of the following three participants epitomize this contention.

Abay briefly described his assessment experience as follows.

To tell the truth, my assessment methods are not directly related to society. Mostly, they aim at checking students' mastery of course contents.

Adam's experience was also not different.

Generally, I do not use assessment methods that aim at enhancing students' participation in the community. This is because of the transportation problem at our university. It is also very difficult to practice this assessment concept.

Similarly, Michael forwarded the following ideas.

Generally, I prefer subjective questions than objective ones. I encourage my students to reflect on different issues. For this purpose, sometimes I allow them to write whatever they think is relevant. Coming to your question, I do not have any experience of using an assessment that aims at enhancing students' involvement in the community.

From the above data, it is possible to understand that the research participants had no adequate experience of using assessment techniques that aim at enhancing students' participation

in society. As can be seen from their responses, most of the assessment techniques they used were traditional. Though not different from the experiences of the above three participants, the following two participants reported that they were making some efforts to make society-centered assessments. In line with this, Abay described his experience as follows.

Sometimes, I tried to give tasks that require students to make observations in public institutions. For instance, once I gave my students an assignment that requires data gathering from the nearby schools. However, that task was not satisfactorily accomplished. For Abay the reasons behind this problem were the following.

First of all, there is no enabling environment. For instance, students themselves are reluctant to perform these kinds of challenging tasks. The school personnel are also not cooperative in providing data essential for the tasks.

Fasil had also a similar experience.

Sometimes, I give students assignments that require data collection from such institutions as secondary schools, economic development bureaus, education offices, technical and vocational institutions, and social affairs bureau. However, I do not have the experience of using assessment methods that involve students in the local community.

The responses of the above two participants imply that these educators had attempted to use assessment techniques that encourage students' involvement in some public institutions. From their responses, however, it is possible to understand that they did not employ assessment methods that enhance students' engagement in the community.

Discussion

The desire to make education a means of social amelioration depends on the utilization of relevant instructional methods that are centered on society and various societal issues. In this regard, instructional methods need to be configured to students' understanding of the real nature of contemporary societies. For this purpose, teachers are advised to use methods that help students to learn and explore the community and its problems (Freire, 1970; Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006). Encouraging students to take part in projects related to the community, and most importantly, utilizing instructional methods like community service learning are also considered to be important teacher duties. Based on the above pedagogical principles, this study tried to understand the experience of teacher educators in practicing various society-centered instructional methods. However, the results of the study revealed that they had no satisfactory experiences on this professional duty. From the experiences of some participants, it was understood that the instructional methods they frequently used were teacher-centered. As the findings of the study revealed, traditional instructional methods that were less relevant for social amelioration and Social Reconstruction were dominating the teaching-learning processes.

The experiences of other participants, on the other hand, showed that they were using a mixture of teacher-centered and student-centered instructional methods. Stated another way, these teacher educators were using either teacher-centered or student-centered instructional methods. However, they failed to employ methods aimed at enhancing students' involvement in the community.

Though some useful instructional methods were explored in the participants' course guidebooks, their implementation in the classrooms was unsatisfactory. As the teacher educators reported, their experience of integrating instructional methods with society and societal problems was inadequate. Most importantly, basic instructional methods advocated by the Social Reconstructionist educators (e.g., community service learning) were not practiced by any teacher educator.

Therefore, at this point, it is plausible to conclude that the experiences of teacher educators in utilizing society centered instructional methods were inadequate. Their relevance to realize the vision of establishing better social orders through education was also found to be questionable.

The above finding is not in line with the positions of many Social Reconstructionist educators (Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006). For instance, the advice of Ellis (2004) on the importance of such participatory society-centered instructional methods as pageants, dramas, team projects, school assemblies, and school government were not practiced. Likewise, the suggestion of McNeil (1996) to involve students in different community-related activities was not given due attention. According to this educator, involving students in the community is vital to help them learn how to solve various societal problems practically and intelligently. Though further studies may be needed to understand the reasons behind the above result, it seems appropriate to forward some possible factors at this moment. One possible reason for teacher educators' poor performance in using society-centered instructional methods, I argue, is related to their understanding of the Social Reconstructionist educational philosophy. As indicated by Mulugeta (2016), the familiarity and understanding of many teacher educators on the multifaceted issues of the philosophy were inadequate. Without an adequate understanding of the philosophy, teacher educators are less likely to conduct Social Reconstructionist instructional practices. Put differently, as Fullan (1991) convincingly indicated, teachers cannot teach what they do not know.

The failure of the Ethiopian education policy to give due attention to the Social Reconstructionist educational philosophy would also contribute to teacher educators' failure to practice society-centered instructional methods. As Mulugeta et al. (2018) pointed out, the place of society and societal problems in the education policy of Ethiopia is too low. Due to this, the utilization of society-centered instructional methods is less likely to get adequate attention at various educational, curricular, and instructional practices. Many educators unanimously contend that both traditional and standardized assessment methods are less relevant to the success of Social Reconstructionism. Hence, they advise teachers to employ assessment techniques that aim at developing students' social conscience and those that encourage students' engagement in

various societal problems (Ellis, 2004; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996; Stanley, 1992). For them, assessment should also encourage students to apply the knowledge they acquired to various practical efforts that aimed at social amelioration.

Bearing these ideas in mind, the present study has attempted to understand teacher educators' experience of using society-centered assessment strategies. Nevertheless, the results of the study revealed that they did not satisfactorily materialize this Social Reconstructionist professional duty. From the data collected through document analysis and interviews, it was understood that they had no adequate experience of using society-centered assessment strategies that aim at enhancing students' understanding of and participation in the community.

The reasons discussed in the instructional methods section, I believe, were important behind this problem. Whatever the reasons might be, teacher educators did not satisfactorily employ assessment techniques that encourage students to observe and understand the real nature of society, to take part in different affairs of the community, and to apply the knowledge that they acquired to solve societal problems. This, in turn, indicates that the ideas of many Social Reconstructionist educators (Brameld, 1971; Ellis, 2004; Freire, 1970; Hill, 2006; McNeil, 1996) on the issue under discussion were not materialized in teacher education classrooms of Bahir Dar University. As many educators contend, knowledge for the sake of knowledge has little or no relevance in the process of social reconstruction. Instead, knowledge acquired should be applied to solve the problems of society. Assessment methods and procedures, therefore, should be geared towards ascertaining whether or not this important educational idea was materialized on student-teachers.

Conclusions

This study sought to examine the experience of Bahir Dar University teacher educators in implementing society-centered instructional methods. It also aimed at understanding their experience of using society-centered assessment techniques. Accordingly, the study came up with the following findings. The first finding of the study indicates that the teacher educators under consideration had no satisfactory experiences of using society-centered instructional methods. Instead, traditional instructional methods that were less relevant to social amelioration were dominating the instructional processes of the university's teacher education classrooms. Their experience of integrating instructional methods with society and societal problems was also inadequate. Above all, basic instructional methods advocated by the Social Reconstructionist educators (e.g., community service learning, pageants, dramas, and team projects) were not implemented by the teacher educators.

The second finding of the study also revealed that the teacher educators had no adequate experience of using assessment strategies that aimed at enhancing students' understanding of and participation in the community. In other words, they did not employ assessment methods that were relevant to the social amelioration and social reconstruction educational agendas.

Overall, from the above findings, it is possible to deduce that the experience of Bahir Dar University teacher educators in practicing society-centered instruction was inadequate and

unsatisfactory. The instructional methods and assessment strategies they used were not tailored to society and societal problems. Their relevance for the social amelioration and social reconstruction educational agendas were also found to be low.

Implications

The findings of this study have some important implications for the education system of Ethiopia. First of all, it implies the need to give topics of society-centered educational approach and Social Reconstructionism a substantial place in various professional development initiatives. As understood from this study, teacher educators' experience of using instructional methods and assessment strategies that focused on society was low. In this regard, it seems advisable to teacher education institutions to organize training or professional discourse forums centered on the topics at hand. In doing so, the relevance of the society-centered instruction and the Social Reconstructionist educational philosophy needs to be emphasized. Specific teaching and assessment methods relevant for the implementation of society-centered education also need to be at the heart of these professional forums. Second, as understood from the present study, society and societal issues were not given a substantial place in the education policy of Ethiopia. Hence, it is important to revitalize the country's national educational philosophy. In doing so, the relevance of the Social Reconstructionist educational philosophy, and most importantly, the role it plays in social amelioration and social reconstruction needs to be deliberated.

Limitations of the Study

This study tried to investigate the lived experiences of only six teacher educators selected from one college at Bahir Dar University. The study also did not employ the classroom observation method that could bring more valuable data concerning the experience of teacher educators in practicing society-centered instruction.

The study would have been more successful in portraying the full picture of the society-centered instructional practice at the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Bahir Dar University, provided that the above limitations could have been dealt with. The conclusions of this study, therefore, need to be used cautiously.

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