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ANALYSIS OF USAID/GEORGIA SUPPORTED BASIC EDUCATION PROGRAM FIRST CYCLE IMPLEMENTATION (AKAKI TSERETELI STATE UNIVERSITY PEDAGOGICAL FACULTY CASE)

Abstract: The article highlights Akaki Tsereteli State University's involvement and participation in wide school reforms to establish student-centered education in Georgia. School educational reform cannot proceed and succeed without the direct involvement of the universities which carry out teacher preparation programs. Unequivocally, there should be close cooperation and collaboration between these two institutions to reach the desirable and targeted outcomes. The purpose of the article was to present the results of the survey, which was intended to assess the effectiveness of training conducted by the university trainers during the first phase of the new school reform in Georgia which focused on achieving student-centered learning. The selected trainers from the eight partnering universities were supposed to cover 2075 schools throughout Georgia (373 schools in Imereti Region) to train leader teachers and help the institution to develop new instructional methods, more specifically, to develop a school curriculum based on constructivist educational principles and apply it into practice. The survey findings assisted Pedagogical faculty in identifying existing curriculum gaps and discrepancies and taking measures to bridge them by modifying and supplementing them with the necessary content.

Keywords: school reform, university involvement, student-centered teaching.

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1. Introduction

In partnership and close cooperation with Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport USAID developed the program supporting the Government of Georgia in its ambitious endeavor to reform and refine the country's education system¹. This is a four-year program promoting student-centered education in primary grades across the country, helping young people gain the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities. As it is suggested by the World Economic Forum, critical thinking and problem-solving will grow in prominence in the next five years and empower young generation to grow into successful professionals and engaged, responsible citizens².

USAID/Georgia Mission Director Peter Wieble pointed out that, this “modern, student-centered education system will help Georgia to advance in many directions and build resilience to foreseeable future”. This will empower and equip Georgian society with necessary skills and abilities to create its own agenda of development.

2. Background of the Study

Georgia's Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport (MOESCS) with the support of USAID/Georgia and RTI (Research Triangle Institute) launched USAID Basic Education Program with the “New School Model” initiated by the government, focusing on achieving student-centered learning. Last year in September, the program conducted a “Training of Trainers” course intended for 112 trainers, among them coaching professors from eight partner universities and two NGOs. It was a month-long course, which was carried out remotely in compliance with COVID-19 regulations. The course provided the trainers with valuable resources and findings of student-centered education curricula and methodologies, and new skills to be acquired by teachers and school administrators throughout Georgia.

Overall, the program duration is four years, which envisages retraining of 2,075 public school administrators and primary grade teachers and primary education 119 leader teachers by the trainers. The stated objectives of the program are: to support the education reform in Georgia, to advance student-centered education, to enhance literacy and mathematical skills, to promote critical thinking. To meet these objectives, trainers will be actively involved and have a hands-on approach while designing and delivering interactive curricula focused on literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills, inclusive and differentiated education.

1 <https://www.usaid.gov/georgia/news-information/news/georgian-education-system-taking-important-steps-forward-usaid-support>.

2 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them>.

The outcome of the program will be qualitatively new and refined national curriculum developed for the first time by teachers, who are given opportunity to talk directly about all the vulnerable and important issues of their interest at school. It should also be noted, that the process is carried out in conditions of cooperation. Teachers Learning Groups (TLG) are created where equal (unified) teams of teachers and administration (not a small number of elite teachers) look for ways to solve problems related to the introduction of the national curriculum.

Within the first cycle, the selected coaches (trainers) were supposed to acquaint school teachers and administrators with constructivist principles of teaching-learning and ways of creating a curriculum tailored to the interests and abilities of the students. From a methodological point of view, the conceptual side of program was reduced to the implementation of five principles in the classroom: 1. Activating student's inner motivation; 2. Constructing new knowledge based on the student's prior knowledge; 3. Interconnecting and organizing knowledge; 4. Learning to learn; 5. Enhancing three categories of knowledge (declarative, procedural and conditional). These five provisions distinguish the modern educational paradigm from the old one.

3. Aim of the Study

The purpose of the survey was to analyze the Basic Education Program first cycle completion, which envisaged university professors' involvement as coaches (trainers). We aimed at getting tangible information on specific benefits or shortcomings of Pedagogical Faculty involvement, to find solutions for their improvement and ways of integration into the course syllabuses. We believe that thanks to this programme ATSU Pedagogical Faculty will be better prepared for the future challenges of upbringing a new generation of teachers equipped with innovative knowledge and skills needed for future-proof educators to bring up the new generation which will contribute to Georgia's social and economic development³. Moreover, it will provide the faculty with necessary information on creation of innovative courses, which will be in compliance with the new school curriculum.

4. Theoretical Basis of the Program - Constructivism

As mentioned above, „constructivism” was chosen as a theoretical basis for the Basic Education Program and New School Model, this latest catchword in educational circles applied both to how people learn and to the nature of knowledge (Hein 1991). According to this theory, learners construct knowledge rather than passively absorb information. Naturally, people experience the world and reflect upon their experiences, they construct their own representations and integrate new

³ <https://atsu.edu.ge/index.php/pedagogic-news>.

information into their prior knowledge (foreknowledge). Although constructivist ideas can be traced back to 18th century, it mostly emerged in the 1970s and has been recognized as a theory. In modern literature constructivism usually appears in a number of variants with two dominant subdivisions. The first theory, which is also known as personal constructivism or radical constructivism, is social constructivism derived from the works of Lev Vygotsky and extended in the works of Jean Lave, Allan Collins, John Brown. These theories suggest that knowledge is situation-specific and depends on the context and social environment and plays a major role in learning. Vygotsky (1980) introduced the idea of the “zone of proximal development” to explain how learning can be matched in some manner with the child’s level of development. In contrast to Jean Piaget’s understanding of a child development, he also stressed a fundamental role of social interaction in the process of cognitive development. He also indicated the importance of “more knowledgeable other”, anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, and could be a teacher, coach, an older adult, or even peer, and a younger person.

The second theory, also known as realist constructivism, is cognitive constructivism, presented in works of authors like Jean Piaget or Jerome Bruner. They argue that knowledge cannot be directly transmitted from person to person, and thus, it focuses on an individual’s knowledge construction and learning through discovery. Piaget’s (1952) Stage Theory of Cognitive Development represents a description of cognitive development as four distinct stages in children: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete, and formal. Bruner (1960) emphasized the role of the teacher and instruction, and defined cognitive structure as the mental processes which offer the learner the ability to organize experiences and derive meaning from them.

This paradigm makes emphasis on human relationships and on learning through participation in social contexts and interactions. The overall purpose of education is to help learners to co-create knowledge and form identities. Learning does not occur in vacuum, it happens continuously through collaboration between the person and the social context. It involves more than only knowing oneself but also being a member of a social group and culture.

A pragmatic constructivist educator and philosopher, John Dewey (1916), suggests a similar perspective to Piaget and Vygotsky saying that every individual “must grow up, in a social medium”. Dewey believed that human beings are capable of thinking, thus thinking becomes an instrument for changing our environment. Mayer (2008) notes that “Dewey and Vygotsky emphasized the role of cultural forms and meanings in perpetuating higher forms of human thought, whereas Piaget focused on the role played by logical and mathematical reasoning”.

Many schools have adopted this model in which a teacher or lecturer ‘transmits’ information to students. Based on Vygotsky’s theory, in which students play an active role in learning, teacher and student roles are shifted. A teacher should

collaborate with students in order to facilitate meaning construction in them. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience.

Constructivist principles have been widely applied in modern curriculum. Traditional and constructivist classrooms differ in several components⁴.

- If a traditional curriculum starts with the small chunks of the whole and focuses on basic skills, a constructivist curriculum emphasizes big concepts, begins with the whole, and gradually (considering students learning pace) expands to incorporate the parts.
- A traditional curriculum highly values strict adherence to the fixed curriculum, while a constructivist curriculum promotes the pursuit of student questions and interests.
- Materials in a traditional curriculum are primarily textbooks and workbooks, while in constructivist curriculum materials include primary sources of materials/media.
- Learning in a traditional curriculum is basically constructed by repetition, information is packaged, however in constructivist curriculum learning is interactive, building on what the student already knows, information is discovered and questions are asked.
- In traditional curriculum students are recipients of knowledge as teachers disseminate information to students, however in constructivist curriculum teachers have a dialogue with students, supporting students construct their own knowledge.
- Teacher's role is directive, authoritative in a traditional classroom, although in a constructivist curriculum teacher's role is interactive, rooted in negotiation, a teacher is a facilitator/guide rather than an expert model.
- Assessment is carried out through testing and correcting answers in a traditional curriculum, but in a constructivist curriculum, the assessment includes student works, observations, and points of view, as well as tests. The assessment process is as important as the product.
- Knowledge is perceived as inert in a traditional curriculum, while in constructivist curriculum knowledge is dynamic, continually changing with our discoveries and experiences.
- Students' individual work is promoted in a traditional curriculum, while students work primarily in groups in a constructivist curriculum.

We may conclude that in a constructivist curriculum emphasis is on the student, not on the teacher. Students construct their own knowledge structures by discovering, checking, and comparing new information against old and transforming it. Students' background knowledge plays a major role in their knowledge construction process, or in shaping new conceptual understandings. Another important aspect of constructivist learning is cooperative learning through

4 <http://teachinglearningresources.pbworks.com/w/page/19919544/Constructivism>.

the interaction of the learner with others (teachers, peers). The next key factor is metacognition in learning, which infers that information is ideally acquired through self-regulated learning, which comprises goal setting, self-motivation, self-monitoring, self-assessment. This way learners can exercise control over their learning experiences and feel responsible for their own performances. Students are offered authentic learning tasks and situations similar to those they will encounter in real life. This encourages them to think creatively and critically and solve problems emerging in a fast-changing environment.

Earlier, in 2018, MOESCS of Georgia launched the Georgian project „New School” model, which aims to improve the quality of education in general and to transform the internal school culture of each public school for the sustainable development of schools. The result of the project would be the implementation of the third generation of the National Curriculum (2018–24). It focuses on the construction of solid, thorough knowledge in the classroom. New structural units have been introduced in the content of the standard: concept, indigenous ideas, key questions, complex assignments, and mandatory topics.

Within the framework of the implementation of the new school models, subject or methodological guides for complex tasks were developed, principles of five-level solo taxonomy were incorporated (Biggs 2011), enabling teachers to assess students’ work in terms of its quality, not quantity; instructions for conducting the online learning process were created⁵. Every schoolteacher collaborates to develop the unique curriculum she/he needs and shares her/his ideas with other schools. This provided the solid ground for the USAID Basic Education Program to involve Universities as partners to participate actively in the process of school education process.

5. Research Methodology

In order to check the effectiveness of the university professors as coaches (trainers), we conducted the survey. For the first phase, the questionnaire was developed with 12 questions and participants (school teachers) were asked to fill in the online forms. The survey was anonymous and teachers were encouraged to express their attitudes freely and rate their trainers (from 1 to 4 points). The purpose was to get some valuable information on how well the university coaches coped with the task of selecting the proper training materials and meeting participants’ needs. The survey was conducted during November and December 2020 and 886 teachers of Georgian language and Math participated in the survey.

The second phase of the research was conducted in the form of interviews with the participant university trainers (twenty participants) in February 2021. This time,

5 <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/learning-teaching-university/o/steps/26410>.

our aim was to find the gap between Pedagogical Faculty “Teacher Preparation Program” curriculum and the new National Curriculum.

6. Research Analysis

The presented figure (fig. 1) vividly indicates the effectiveness of the training and professionalism of the professors. They proved to be active problem-solvers, highly competent, and good communicators. Though Covid-19 was the real challenge for the program and participation in on-line training appeared to be rather challenging (due to technical problems) for several school teachers, with the persistence of university coordinators and readiness to help them this problem was solved. However, not all the final comments were positive. As most training sessions were online many participants complained about the timing and duration. For some, it appeared to be insufficient, and even complained about the heavy load of assignments. They consider, that it is important for trainers to go through the great length of completing rather complex activities to fully understand the frustration and challenges of school teachers as they try to complete instruction units.

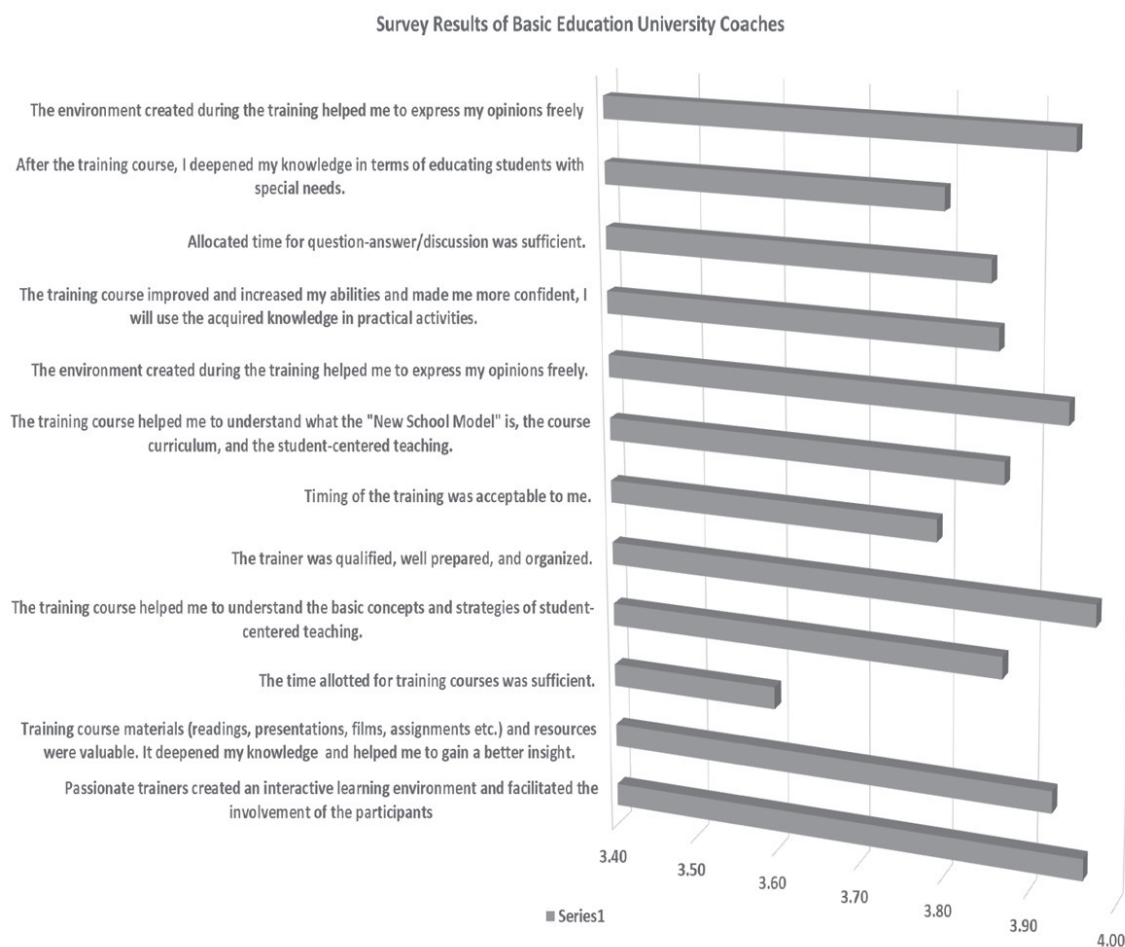


Figure 1.

The second phase was structured interviews with the university trainers as part of a qualitative study. Participants were asked close-ended and open-ended questions and the answers were recorded. The aim of the interviews was to get in-depth information about trainers’ experiences. The answers to the close-ended questions were summarized in the following figures.

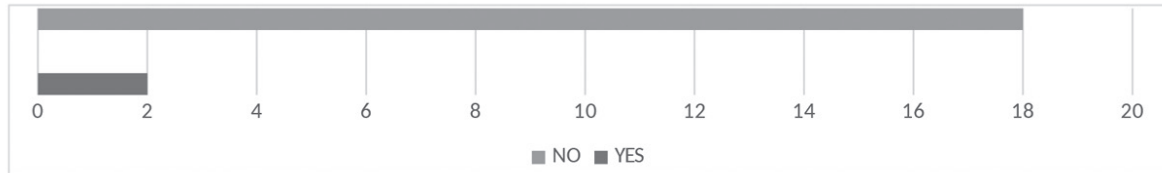


Figure 2. Was the time allocated for the training sessions sufficient to fully cover the topics envisaged by the program?

Timing for training sessions appeared to be insufficient for the university trainers as well. They complained about the vast training material they had to go through in a rather short period of time and compress it reasonably to cover all the topics sufficiently.

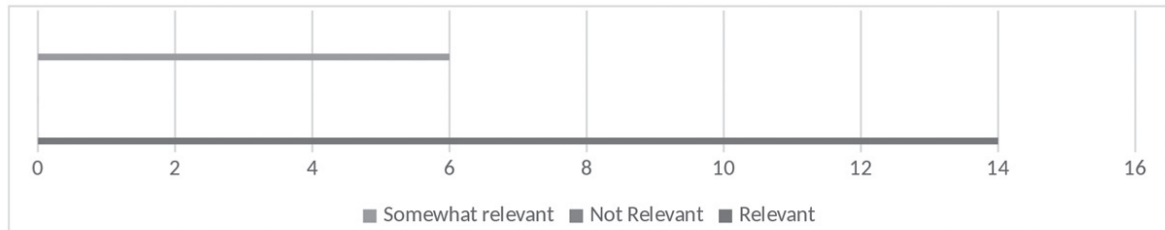


Figure 3. Were the training materials provided by the program relevant to the school teachers’ requirements?

Recourses were diverse, innovative, facilitating trainers in meeting the program objectives. A huge number of visuals, educational videos/films and practical tasks were provided. Moreover, it was clearly pointed out by school teachers as well, that

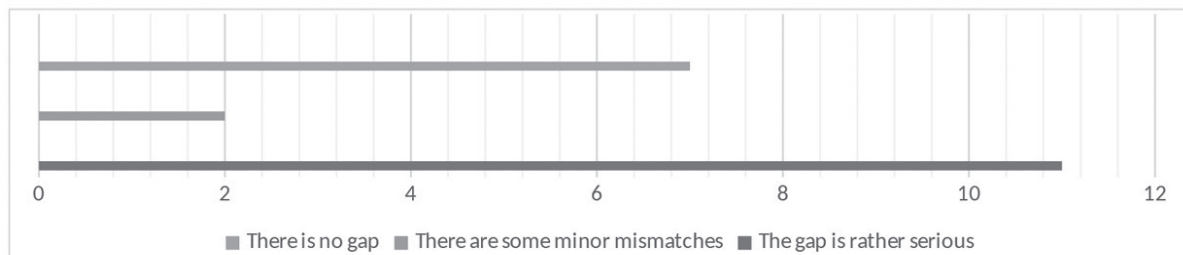


Figure 4. Do you consider that there is a gap between “Teacher Preparation Program” courses and school curriculum?

the provided resources thoroughly helped them to master the skills of student-centered teaching and learning.

Thus, it is absolutely clear, that the gap between the university “Teacher Preparation Program” courses and the new school curriculum really exists. Universities in Georgia, having teacher preparation programs face the urgent necessity of modifying their courses to face the challenges of the New National Curriculum requiring teachers to design their personal curriculum and make teaching more student-centered.

7. Conclusions

The survey concluded, that the positive outcome of the program was the university trainers’ readiness to cope with the new challenge of selecting the proper theoretical and practical materials to facilitate school teachers in enhancing their knowledge. Initially, the program supervisors considered a better possibility for the trainers to make choices from the diverse sources and, as a result, too much material was provided and trainers were asked to compress it. University trainers managed to successfully classify the materials in a rather short period of time and even prepared video resources easily and efficiently. Some of the trainers even made valuable contributions in terms of their consideration to include several important topics not envisaged by the program but considered to be crucial for the school teachers. One of them was the creation of an on-line platform and the organization of materials according to training topics. Program trainers brought up a lot of issues to address, to bring closer university curriculum and school practice and conducted webinars to share their experience with the faculty staff. It is obvious, that universities should modify and develop new courses to meet the requirements of the new framework of schools.

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