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TRANSITION FROM A TEACHER-CENTERED TO A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH IN KAZAKHSTAN EDUCATION

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Annotation

Kazakhstan is currently going through the reforming of its educational system, as time demands new teaching approaches. Teacher-centered approach that was common in the Soviet education is still present in Kazakhstani education. Yet, modern tendencies in education dictate the need to shift from teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach, which encourages student autonomy and increases their responsibility in learning.

Key words: teacher-centered approach, learner-centered approach

Introduction

Since its independence, Kazakhstan has experienced rapid growth in all spheres including education. The increasing mobility of Kazakhstani people creates new challenges for its educational system that requires the immediate development of new approaches, particularly teaching approaches. As everything around is changing, teachers also need to improve and update their teaching methods in their classrooms to prepare students to face the modern world's demands [1]. Even though the Soviet legacy in education is still present in Kazakhstan, now teachers need to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach because it encourages student autonomy and increases their responsibility in learning.

According to Blumberg, student-centered teaching creates an active learning environment, in which instructors are viewed as facilitators and students as active learners [2]. We support the viewpoint of educators that a student-centered approach is superior to a teacher-

centered approach. Hence, this paper illustrates the value of using student-centered teaching strategies.

Correspondingly, in our paper we examine the following themes: 1) A teacher-centered approach through the prism of Soviet education; in this section we discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, and the implications of the Soviet education; 2) International overview of a learner-centered pedagogy, in which we analyze the effectiveness of this approach; 3) A learner-centered approach in Kazakhstani education reforms; in this section we focus on Kazakhstani educational reforms in teaching pedagogy; 4) Critique; in this section, we analyze and compare both approaches and express our position in relation to our topic.

A teacher-centered approach through the prism of Soviet education

This section does not intend to analyze the whole Soviet education system, but aims to touch on some significant features. Specifically, it

focuses on the teaching approaches of Soviet teachers. Soviet education was free at all levels for all students. There was to be no discrimination on the basis of religion, race, sex, nationality, or social status. There were to be no private schools. Education could be provided in the native language [3]. Furthermore, Soviet education eradicated massive illiteracy as in some parts of the country 98 % of population was illiterate [3]. As a result, Kazakhstan now has 99 % literacy and school enrollment rate [4]. At the same time, Soviet education across the country was almost the same due to an ideological commitment to equality, which did not take into account individual differences. This is due to the fact that the aim of education was to create a soviet person, who would not differ from others,

The systemic approach was used in all areas of Soviet education, namely in teaching subjects, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and organization of extra-curricular activities. Soviet education was a part of a greater system with the aim of holistic, all-around development of Soviet citizens [5]. The author claims that the preference was given to material values. Knowledge was seen as power, solid, and fixed in time. In terms of teaching and pedagogy, the teacher-centered approach was used universally. Rote learning and memorization assignments were common. A teacher at any level was responsible for the educational process as its active and main actor, while a student was viewed as a passive participant whose main task was to listen to the teacher. At the same time, Soviet teachers were highly respected and enjoyed a high status. Consequently, students showed discipline in class. Students were afraid to argue with a teacher, as his or her authority was unimpeachable.

and would hold to the same ideological beliefs.

Conversely, Fimyar in her study, revealed the participants' ambivalent attitudes towards the Soviet education: "We had Sputnik...but we lost our [Kazakh] language" [5, p. 185]. In fact, during the Soviet period, the titular languages suffered greatly as the language of instruction and the overall language of dominance and prestige was Russian. As a result, the Kazakh language was underdeveloped as a discipline since it was not practiced. The lasting soviet legacy of the neglect of the Kazakh language still continues to affect the quality of teaching and the easy availability of textbooks in Kazakh for schools [5].

The opposing views toward theory and practice were revealed in Fimyar's study [5]. Some participants in her research, for instance, claimed that theory and practice were integrated successfully. The material and technical base was supported by the Soviet authorities, such as laboratories being fully available and equipped, where students could practice and carry out experiments; whereas other participants argued that there was a disjuncture between theory and practice. As the curriculum was overloaded with theory, a teacher tried to fill students with knowledge [5]. As a result, students went to the university, then to work, and could not apply this knowledge independently as they did not know how to find the needed information from textbooks and other sources, and did not have the required skills.

In a nutshell, there were many advantages and disadvantages in Soviet education. On the one hand, Soviet students had all-around and encyclopedic

knowledge with a solid base. Soviet education was equal and accessible for all. On the other hand, the teacher-

International overview of a learner-centered pedagogy

In the 20th century, teacher-student interaction might be seen as little more than a teacher with a chalk in front of the classroom. The current views of the classroom have replaced the chalkboard with a projector screen, although the teacher is still seen in front of the classroom giving information to the students. Some scholars claim that such a classroom where the student is a passive learner maybe unlikely to create an active learning environment [2]. Weimer supports the notion that a teacher-centered approach views students as passive learners, whereas a learner-centered approach views students as active ones [6].

Blumberg states that in a teacher-centered classroom, students often memorize material for which they have no understanding [2]. Thus, many students often do not remember the material they studied earlier. There are many disadvantages in teacher-centered approaches. For instance, graduates are not prepared to solve real-world problems and lack appropriate skills. Conversely, learner-centered techniques presented by Sperber and Center for Teaching and Learning show that learner-centered teaching motivates individuals to learn, improves interaction skills, and integrates concepts from the classroom into their careers [7]. As a result, interactive learning strategies allow students to become more motivated learners, and furthermore, they are better prepared for their professional and personal adult lives.

According to Schroeder, active learning should be merged with learner-

centered approach employed by teachers was inefficient as it made students passive participants of the educational process.

centered techniques, so that students can enjoy different experiences and take a more active role in class [7]. Moreover, the author claims, "if students are not aware of how they think, act, or react while learning, these skills remain invisible" [7, p. 219]. Students need to be supported and challenged by the instructor, so they can become aware of how to act and react while learning.

Weimer defines five dimensions that should guide the implementation of learner-centered teaching [6]. They are the function of content, the role of the instructor, the responsibility for learning, the purposes and processes of assessment, and the balance of power. The author emphasizes the key practices that should be taken into consideration: "the role of the teacher towards facilitation of learning rather than transmission of knowledge; a shift in the balance of power in the classroom; faculty attitudes towards content; facilitation of increased student responsibility for learning; faculty attitudes towards the purposes and processes of evaluation" [6, p. 127]. Weimer also points out that one of the pivotal ideas of learner-centered teaching philosophy is education that focuses not only on learning a specific area of expertise, but on more importantly on learning to learn [6].

Altogether, in learner-centered teaching, teachers should concentrate on the function of content, their role as facilitators, and the purposes of assessment around the needs and abilities of the students. The key idea is that when learning requirements and objectives meet the students' needs and interests, learning

becomes meaningful. The students do not just memorize material, but they are engaged in an active learning environment.

A learner-centered approach in Kazakhstani education reforms

This section focuses on a learner-centered approach and its use in the Kazakhstani context. This approach is now being applied in Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), which serve as a model for mainstream schools, and which are aimed at experimenting and piloting innovative teaching approaches. It is important to define a learner-centered approach as it is one of the main focuses of this paper. McCombs and Whisler define learner-centered education as “the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs, and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners)” [8, p. 1]. Thus, learner-centered education has a dual focus on the learner as an individual, and on learning itself.

Kazakhstan is currently going through a period of major development of reforming and modernizing its education. Teachers as agents of education are being trained and prepared first. The Centers of Excellence (CoE), an affiliated organization of Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), are responsible for this task, and are intended to train teachers from mainstream schools. The content of the program involves seven areas such as: new approaches to teaching and learning, learning to think critically, assessment for

and of learning, using ICT in teaching and learning, teaching talented and gifted children, responding to age-related differences in teaching and learning, management and leadership of learning [9]. Hence, such programs facilitate students’ critical thinking and independent learning, and make available a platform by which teachers have an opportunity to differentiate and modernize their teaching approaches.

Fimyar analyzed the official video of the CoE program uploaded on YouTube [9]. The video, in three languages, tells the story of the establishment and practice of CoE. In the video, it is stated that teachers, for decades, could teach outdated subjects without updating their material. However, this approach does not meet current demands. Therefore, innovative technologies, multimedia classrooms, and other IT resources are being introduced in the modern schools. Students now are exposed to modern technologies and the internet, and are able to study independently under an experienced mentor [5]. Times have changed, and many students now learn how to use technologies and the internet at home from an early age. They already know how to use them; therefore, a teacher is no longer the only source of information. Thus, it is important to create an educational environment in which teachers could continuously upgrade their professional competencies.

As opposed to the Soviet education that suited the scientific and technocratic paradigm, the NIS model is intended to suit a humanistic model in which learning is power [5]. Knowledge, in this model, is seen as fluid, multiple, and constructed. As for teaching and pedagogy, a student-centered approach and activity-based experience are utilized in class. Unlike

Soviet students, who were passive participants of the educational process, students in a NIS model are able and encouraged to argue, interpret, synthesize, and evaluate [10].

Overall, the NIS model is an experimental platform for piloting best innovative teaching approaches, whose experience will be further transferred to the Kazakhstani mainstream schools. Times have changed, and now teachers are required to be highly competent in IT and act more as guides and mentors for students rather than the source of information.

Critique: Comparative analysis of both approaches

This section concentrates on the benefits and drawbacks of teacher-centered and learner-centered approaches in the context of the Kazakhstani education. In spite of the fact that Kazakhstan has been politically independent from the Soviet Union for 26 years, education in the country mostly remains a legacy from the Soviet system, that of a teacher-centered approach. This situation is evident in most mainstream schools and universities apart from Nazarbayev University, Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools, and several western-style educational institutions. These flagship institutions adopt student-centered learning approaches that enable students to acquire the cognitive and creative thinking skills for the benefit of their future careers.

Currently, an educational landscape in the country presents a combination of old and new, national and international. On the one hand, Soviet education was systemic and gave solid knowledge; eradicated almost universal illiteracy in most parts of the country; it was free at all levels for all students; there

was a high level of investment in education; and gender-equal participation in education. On the other hand, international standards such as the Bologna Process, international examinations PISA and TIMSS are becoming drivers for educational reforms.

We ourselves are witnesses and participants of these models. Thus, we are able to compare the old and new education models. Having been bachelor students, we had an experience of learning through the old teaching methods, and being master's students, we were learning through a student-centered approach. This experience allows us to see the difference between these approaches and assess which method is more productive and effective. From our perspective, the learner-centered approach appears to improve our learning experience and skills. More specifically, being involved in group work and projects facilitates our collaborative and communicative skills, and team-building skills; critical responses and essays improve our writing and analytical skills, and our ability to work individually; oral presentations enhance our public speaking skills, self-confidence, and interactive skills. It is also important to emphasize mini-scale research, which enables us to apply our theoretical knowledge to practice. Unfortunately, we did not have an opportunity to conduct research during our undergraduate studies. We support the idea that learner-centered teaching helps create a more comfortable learning environment. Comparatively, during our studies in the bachelor's degree program, we were mostly exposed to lectures, rote learning, and memorization assignments. During lectures, only attendance and taking notes were required, but there were no active participation and discussion.

According to Weimer, one of the dimensions that should guide the implementation of learner-centered teaching is assessment [6]. In comparison to the old model, a new model involves a combination of formative, summative, and peer assessment. The focus is on what students already know, not on the gaps in their knowledge. Furthermore, teachers provide constructive feedback for students' work. As opposed to the new model, assessment in an old-style teaching identified 'gaps' in knowledge, where the lack of knowledge led to inadequacy, incompetence, and weakness [5]. Consequently, students became discouraged from learning due to daily assessment, which led to learning for marks and students' constant pressure.

In transition from the inherited Soviet system of teacher-centered to a Western-based student-centered learning approach in Kazakhstan, best practices of both approaches should be taken, modified, and adapted to our national educational system. The teacher-centered approach cannot be eradicated from our educational system completely. It should not dominate in teaching either, but should be integrated with new model approaches. The eclectic approach that combines various approaches and methodologies would be best suited in the Kazakhstani educational system. Furthermore, not only approaches, but also teachers' perceptions and attitudes to education should be changed.

To sum up, the combination of old and new, national and international is important for educating citizens who are brought up with national values, and at the same time are prepared to succeed in the global arena as well.

Conclusion

Having analyzed the discussions on teacher and learner-centered approaches, namely concentrating on their benefits and drawbacks, and juxtaposing the Soviet educational system and current educational reform in Kazakhstan, we tend to think that the approach, concentrated on learners, is highly valuable in developing of students' autonomy and increasing their responsibility towards learning.

Almost twenty-six years have passed since Kazakhstan gained independence. However, education in the country mostly remains a legacy from the Soviet system of a teacher-centered approach. On the one hand, Soviet students had all-round and encyclopedic knowledge with a solid base. On the other hand, a teacher-centered approach employed by teachers is now inefficient as it views students as passive learners. Conversely, learner-centered approaches that use active learning strategies allow students to be engaged directly in the learning processes, and most importantly, in developing their learning skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, communicative and interactive skills. Therefore, teachers should not only give lectures and force students into a passive role. Teachers should design and use methods that allow students to be better prepared for their professional and personal adult lives.

In the era of globalization and informatization, the time demands teachers to be highly competent in IT and act more as guides for students rather than sources of information. As a facilitator and a guide, teachers should concentrate on what and how their students can learn, as well as how they can use the learning. Moreover, an education system that combines traditional education and

international practices is more important society connected to a global world.
in educating and preparing citizens to a

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Түйін

Біз студенттерге бағытталған әдіс студенттердің өзінде дербестік қасиетті дамытуында, олардың өз оқуларына деген жауапкершіліктерін арттыруында өте құнды әдіс болып табылады деген ойға жүгінеміз. Оқытушылароқу барысында өз студенттерінің не үйренетіндіктері және қалай үйренетіндіктері, сондай-ақ келешекте өз білімдерін қалай жүзеге асыратындықтары сияқты сұрақтардың төңірегінде болуы тиіс. Сонымен қатар, дәстүрлі білім беру және халықаралық тәжірибені ұштастыратын білім беру жүйесі әлемжаһандануына байланысты азаматтардың білім алуында және әлеуметтік қоғамға даярлауында маңызды болып табылады.

Резюме

Мы склонны думать, что подход, ориентированный на студентов, очень ценен для развития самостоятельности студентов и повышения их ответственности за свое обучение. Преподаватели должны сосредоточиться на том, чему и как их студенты могут научиться, а также на том, как они могут использовать свое обучение в будущем. Более того, система образования, сочетающая традиционное образование и международную практику, важна для обучения и подготовки граждан к обществу, связанному с глобальным миром.