I. INTRODUCTION

Georgia has an ancient tradition of education, as is indicated by the existence of the School of Philosophy and Rhetoric of Phazisi in the Georgian Kingdom of Colchis (fourth century A.D.), as well as the setting up of cultural enlightenment centres in Palestine (fifth century), Syria (sixth century), Greece (tenth to fifteenth centuries) and Bulgaria (eleventh century). Philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, rhetoric and music were taught at the Gelati and Ikalto Academies (eleventh and twelfth centuries).

At the end of the twentieth century and with the collapse of the USSR, independent Georgia inherited the soviet education system, of which the principal features were totalitarian rule, extreme centralization, uniform ideological educational programmes, a weak evaluation system, inadequate and impenetrable management of financial and human resources, limited participation by the community and absence of the private sector. Democratic movements in the political and social life of Georgia led to cardinal changes in the education system.

In the first years of independence economic recession was aggravated by civil war and military conflicts in the Tskhinvali region and in Abkhazia. The socio-economic crisis had a dreadful impact on education; State financing drastically declined:

• GDP collapsed by 75% between 1990 and 1994.
• Real wages fell by 90%.
• The budget for education in real terms in 1996 was only 5% of 1989.
• The share of education in GDP was more than 7% in 1991; less than 1% in 1994; and 1.4% in 1999.

Since independence, the educational sector in Georgia has experienced a disastrous reduction of its budget. Coupled with financial difficulties, the inherited problems, such as a lack of experience in planning and management of the education system, have aggravated the crisis. The collapse of the soviet system and the disintegration of the USSR brought about a disruption of the links between universities and the labour market.

Apart from that, new political and economic realities had a negative impact on the implementation of joint scientific projects: the work of the research centres and university laboratories of the former USSR was disrupted, and entire branches of science found themselves isolated.

Today, Georgia is in a transitional period. It is undergoing the rebuilding of civil society and democratic institutions, as well as the development of a market economy. However, the final outcome of these processes depends on the success of the education system.

II. PROBLEMS

A short list of the major problems would be as follows:

• Weak governance and low management capacity;
• Growing sector-wide inequities;
• Inefficient use of actual resources;
• Lack of involvement of the community;
• Legislative chaos;
• Corruption;
• Low participation on the part of civil society;
• Inefficient use of resources;
• Political decisions in education are not based on substantial system analysis;
• School administration does not possess the knowledge, skills and capacity necessary to develop the school as an educational unit, which was envisaged by the reform;
• Lack of transparency in the planning, management and assessment of the reform activities, made worse by the lack of community involvement, the closed character of the reform group and unhelpful criticism;
• Elitism in secondary and higher education.

The Georgian Government has formally announced that education is a priority and that the reform process has already started. It should be mentioned that there is no clearly defined vision of the reform. The changes carried out have been unstable and one action may quite often be followed by its opposite reaction.

The lack of adequate financial resources for the education system contradicts the declared priority that should be given to education. Currently, the existing system of education lacks flexibility and transparency. The substantial decrease in funding for the system is not the only cause of the current difficult situation. Teachers find themselves in an unenviable social-economic situation. Highly-skilled personnel are deserting their positions in order to work in better-paid sectors of society or they leave the country altogether to find better working conditions and salaries. This situation has forced the teaching personnel to search for other sources of income, which has resulted in absenteeism, discouragement and demoralization. There is no renewal of teaching materials; most of the school buildings are in a dilapidated condition. It is not clear where the funds allocated for secondary schools go. For example, surveys have shown that only half of the budget allocated for the education system in Tbilisi is used on salaries, yet the schools only receive funds for salaries. It is also unclear on what principles funding is assigned to schools, since at present there are no objective criteria and procedures that define the specific amount of money that should be allocated to each school.

Along with the lack of clarity about the way funds allocated to the education system are spent, even the way the budget is drafted is entirely undemocratic and unjust. Secondary schools are not involved in the drafting process of their own budget. Schools are generally unaware of the amount of money that they are going to receive during the year. The transfer of funds is based on subjective factors, thus creating fertile ground for corruption. In such circumstance, schools have to deal with the problems independently. The process of gathering money from parents is a haphazard process, along with the irrational and undemocratic management of funds.

The mechanisms dealing with the financial relationship between schools and the outside world are non-transparent, ineffective and likely to encourage corruption. The fundamental issue is the problem of financial management—a vital matter in the successful reform of education if the very system is to be saved. It is impossible to imagine the administration of educational finances using the existing models and mechanisms.

Today, the situation of the education system of Georgia is dire, almost critical. The knowledge provided by the current education system is not only inadequate by present-day standards, but is even worse than it was before independence. Due to outdated standards and methodology, the low qualification of teachers, poor school
infrastructures and other reasons, most students receive a minimal education. Public opinion is not taken into consideration in the decision-making process, which means that the reform is seen as being imposed by the government with the intention of reducing the number of teachers. Due to the absence of information, the positive aspects of the reform and its purpose are not clear to the public, particularly in the regions.

Teaching and learning standards are poor and contribute to the production of under-qualified human resources. Teaching and learning do not promote independent thinking and competent problem-solving. Learning aims, where made explicit, do not include cognitive and transferable analytical skills. Instead, course content favours rote memorization in the context of more than 400 over-specialized disciplines. In a fast-changing world, static curricula run the risk of outliving their usefulness.

The majority of teachers have reached retirement age and there is a lack of young people entering the profession. The reform aims at the reorganization of higher teacher-training institutions and improving their efficiency in research and methodological activity.

Curriculum content and delivery bear little relevance to the requirements of the labour market. One of out three of those presently unemployed has a higher education degree. Graduates seldom find a job in their field of study. Graduates in employment are not satisfied, both in terms of their career objectives and remuneration. Employers, in turn, complain unequivocally about a shortage of skilled labour. More than 90% of those employers polled in 1998 reported dissatisfaction with the qualifications of their employees. But some success stories exist alongside the failure of the system as a whole. Close to nine out of ten graduates from Tbilisi’s most popular private higher education institutions find a job immediately upon graduation. Some 26% of graduates from faculties of State universities that have introduced reforms also obtain jobs.

Obsolete and inappropriate school standards, an outdated in-service teacher-training system, textbooks focused only on conveying information, a subjective evaluation system, an inadequate system of school financing, centralized management, the absence of State standards in higher and vocational education and a disregard of the needs of the labour market—everything in education necessitates urgent and substantial changes.

III. THE CURRICULUM

The current curriculum has been modified compared to that used during the soviet period. The most significant modifications are reflected in:

- The introduction of new subjects;
- Additional hours for foreign languages;
- An increase in the hours for the humanities, such as the history and geography of Georgia, Georgian language and literature;
- Reduction in the number of hours allocated to the Russian language.

One of the most significant innovations associated with the new curriculum is the development of minimum content standards for each subject. Georgian standards are the basis for development curriculum programmes for each subject and grade, as well as for the corresponding textbooks.

Innovation is taking place through the introduction of new content, sometimes even new courses that call for new teaching methods: for example, environmental and civics education. Discussions about how to introduce these topics in the curriculum
have been one of the central topics of the Georgian reform agenda. These two subjects are indicative of opening up to the west—a market economy and democracy. From an educational point of view, they represent an entry point for innovations in the teaching and learning process. These topics have created the opportunity for developing the students’ capacity to work in teams, participate in classroom activities, solve problems and think critically.

With the exception of the incomplete new subjects, the effort to eliminate past ideology, and the introduction of ‘minimum content required’, the content of the programmes itself has not significantly changed. One can say that the curriculum changes introduced so far have mostly been cosmetic, in an effort to pay lip-service to European standards rather than as the result of significant changes in structure, content and processes.

Curricular reforms take time—time to develop and adjust the required horizontal and vertical links that any modifications of the curriculum imply. Given the social and economic transition already experienced, it is essential to examine the links between student outcomes and the demands of the new economy. Is the education system delivering what is demanded? What type of competencies and skills are necessary today? The fact that vocational education has almost disappeared brings new challenges to general secondary education. What education is relevant today?

IV. TEACHER TRAINING

The many initiatives to develop new subjects, modify old ones and publish new textbooks have not been linked to efforts to align teacher practices with the new requirements.

When questioned about this topic, government officials recognize the importance of focusing efforts in the direction of pre- and in-service teacher training. When pressed to express how they visualize in-service training if the financial resources were available, they consider a period of two to four weeks appropriate, ‘given the fact that all Georgian teachers already have higher education’. This idea of a two-to-four week training period is seen as a one-shot intervention, with no conception of the need to create an on-going support network for professional development.

Several things can help explain the absence of a focus on teacher training:

- A relic of soviet times when teachers were given very detailed instructions on what to teach and when to do it, in a way that did not require them to improve on teaching practice;
- A respect for the professional qualifications of the teacher leaving the choice of methodology in his or her hands (central guidelines on the ‘what’, not the ‘how’ to teach);
- A belief that if teachers are university graduates they are ‘highly qualified’ and capable of adjusting to the changes with minimal support and a few written guidelines;
- No authority on the part of the Ministry of Education to influence or guide the development of pre-service training programmes;
- No resources to finance in-service training.

Apparently, the pre-service training of teachers has been adjusted to match the demands of the new reform programme and the changes in society. The fact that many teachers have been trained as experts in a discipline but not in teaching techniques requires special attention. The balance between subject knowledge and
teaching practice has become one of the key points of discussion in recent teacher-training reforms.

The drastic decline of teachers participating in in-service training programmes at a moment when all efforts are directed at changing and improving the system is an alarming situation and a factor to take into account in any investment strategy. The relevance and appropriateness of the training programmes offered have to be assessed. In addition, an effective system needs to align the source of financing with the providers of the services and the incentives for teachers to participate.

There is no information available on the effectiveness of in-service training. The data report teachers attending the courses, but do not assess in what ways the training has had any impact on teaching practice in the classroom. Collecting this information in the future would help in the design of future interventions.

In addition to efforts to attract the most-qualified individuals to the teaching profession, in-service training programmes need to be developed to support teachers’ professional improvement. Training needs have to be assessed in the light of current demands and expected changes in the curriculum. Strategies will need to take the regional diversity among qualified teachers into account, as well as the level of education and subjects being taught so as to target interventions when and where they are most needed. Networks of teachers that reflect about their practices on a continuous basis have proven effective in improving classroom practices.

The model of pre-service training has to be assessed and revised in the light of current needs. The relative share of subject expertise versus practice and reflection have to be assessed to match present and future needs.

Pre-service and in-service training are not sufficient to improve teaching practices. An appropriate mechanism for supervision/quality improvement has to be developed to provide on-going support to schools and teachers in their efforts to improve the teaching and learning process.

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