

Transforming Education Through Instructional Coaching in the Mayan Highlands of Guatemala: A Historical Introspection on Policy, Practice and Educational Transformation

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Abstract

Significant efforts have been made to improve the educational system in the Western Highlands of Guatemala to foster economic growth and social development in the country. However, given the country's linguistic and cultural diversity, challenges in terms of coverage and quality of education persist. Inadequate teacher preparation training and the absence of an induction for new teachers and a pedagogical coaching system for all teachers are some of the impeding factors. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has executed targeted educational projects to support the National Ministry of Education in strengthening the human capital in education. A transformative pedagogical leadership and coaching model was developed that focuses efforts from an oversight system to a mentoring system that strengthens leadership and the capacities of teachers in the application of innovative methodologies that contribute to educational improvement. This model allows for a continuous cycle of improvement to teaching by providing teachers with feedback on teaching practices in the classroom and opportunities for teachers to self-reflect and be empowered in their own learning process and professional growth. This approach has shown positive effects with respect to teaching practices at the school level; however, additional measures are required to gain the support of stakeholders to expand its implementation to bilingual and multicultural contexts to maximize the country's potential to improve the quality of education.

Keywords: *instructional coaching, education policy, teachers' professional development, quality education*

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The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID): Preamble

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) works to advance access to quality education as a mechanism for fostering economic growth and social development in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, a culturally and linguistically diverse region with 25 national languages. To achieve this, USAID provides technical support to the Ministry of Education and other governmental and non-governmental organizations on the execution of several educational projects aimed at improving literacies, technical training, and job placement for the region's youth. One of these projects, the USAID Lifelong Learning Project (2014-2019), aimed to support the implemen-

tation of professional development programs. The project had four distinct goals, which included: (1) improve reading competencies of students in primary school, (2) strengthen the professional development provided to teachers, (3) increase equitable access to education, and (4) improve education and employment opportunities for youth outside of school. Central to meeting these goals is improving the leadership and coaching of the Ministry of Education personnel.

While significant efforts have been made to meet the goals of the project, the country still faces serious challenges in terms of participation and quality, mainly at the preschool and secondary education levels. According to the Ministry of Education data for 2018, the net rate of participation at the preschool level is only 52.57%, while the primary school level is 77.94%. Unfortunately, participation at the lower secondary level drops below the preschool level at 43.24%, and upper secondary level drops even further at 24.91% (Ministry of Education, 2019). In terms of quality, the biggest challenge the country's educational system faces is providing a quality education to the entire school-age population given Guatemala's cultural and linguistic diversity. Consequently, the national reading test average for the first grade in 2010 was 47.51%. Four years later, in 2014, the national reading test average for the third grade was 49.93% (Ministry of Education, 2016). To improve this, a series of conditions linked to educational leadership, policies, and investments are required, if they are to translate into strengthened school personnel that are competent in the effective methodologies that contribute to the learning and development of diverse students.

This article presents some of the actions currently being executed by USAID's projects to support the Ministry of Education's efforts to strengthen the capacities of teachers through instructional coaching to improve the quality of education.

I. Transforming Teacher Preparation and Development

There is a consensus that the teacher is a critical and determinant element of educational reform and quality classroom instruction. Previously, Guatemalan policy only required teachers to have a high school-level education and offered no induction process or academic coaching to support new teachers. Consequently, although some teachers have voluntarily enrolled in university programs to update their knowledge, a high percentage of the country's teachers, particularly those working at primary schools, only have a high school diploma and receive no induction support. Understanding that both limitations serve as impediments to education quality, official policy was enacted four years ago requiring all primary teachers to attend and complete university-level teacher training programs.

A common model of staff development and teacher training in Guatemala entails teachers traveling to an urban center for large group training workshops where they receive one to two days of intense training using the latest teaching techniques before returning to their respective schools to practice what they have learned. Unfortu-

nately, research demonstrates that the average degree of implementation of new teachers using this model is only 5% at best (Joyce & Showers, 2002). On the other hand, when new teaching practices are demonstrated to teachers by a coach and then practiced in their classroom with immediate feedback, even sporadically, the perception of the teachers is that their work is valued and increases their motivation to improve their teaching practice, raising the average degree of implementation to approximately 90-95% (Joyce & Showers, 2002). However, such high percentages of implementation also depend on highly skilled instructional coaches (Wise & Zwiers, 2013).

In the rural areas of Guatemala, where technical staff visit the teachers and provide guidance based on the training they received at workshops, these practices have neither been systematic nor sustainable. The difficulties related to education access in these areas have deterred specialized personnel from the Ministry of Education from visiting and providing coaching to principals and teachers at rural schools. This has prompted the USAID's education projects to support the Ministry of Education to propose an educational policy that requires the implementation of a leadership and pedagogical coaching mechanism, in situ, with a coach to strengthen the induction, professional development processes, and ultimately the capacities of principals and teachers in the classrooms to improve academic performance.

II. Paradigmatic Change from Supervisory Control to Instructional Coaching

Throughout the last decades, the Ministry of Education has maintained a teacher supervision system whereby they have created various work positions to monitor the work at the school level and in the classroom; however, this system is primarily exercised when schools or teachers are not doing well. According to the information provided by some education supervisors and Ministry of Education staff, approximately 20% of their time is designated to technical tasks like visiting and providing guidance to teachers and school principals, while 70% to 80% is dedicated to administrative tasks. With the concentration of efforts going to administrative aspects, there is limited time to address issues related to student learning based on best pedagogical practices. Consequently, the USAID's education projects concur with several scholars that there is an urgent need to change the functions they perform from a model of oversight to a leadership model consisting of training, support, and instructional coaching of teachers.

In 2010, the Ministry of Education introduced a teacher training model through a program called "Academic Program for Professional Development of Teachers (PADEP-D)" that was implemented by the San Carlos University of Guatemala and included a pedagogical coaching component for participating teachers. In 2013, data collected in the Western Highlands of the country by USAID's Education Reform in the Classroom indicated that there is a positive effect between teachers who received coaching and student literacy, while inspection-based supervision visits carried out by Ministry of Education staff showed a negative effect. Hence, a paradigmatic shift from a supervisory model to a coaching model is warranted.

Based on this research, USAID's education projects understand that the efforts to provide training and coaching to principals and teachers makes sense only if these efforts are reflected in the practices applied by the teachers in the classroom and translate to academic improvements in student learning. This has transformed the vision of teaching and learning in the country of Guatemala from a "supervision and control" model to a "guidance and coaching" model to improve the competencies of teachers and their students.

In 2006, with the support of national and international consultants, a proposal was developed to redesign and strengthen the national system for educational supervision. This proposal served as the foundation for a transformative conceptualization to address educational supervision and improve educational quality by focusing on leadership and instructional coaching.

Based on that proposal, in 2010 USAID's education projects collaborated with the Ministry of Education to design a National System for School Coaching – SINAÉ (name in Spanish). This system focuses on providing advisory services, coordination, and supervision to the country's education centers to improve teaching and learning using an integrated approach involving different personnel to support school principals, teachers, and parents. This system proposes to articulate the distinct levels that comprise the educational system – local, district, departmental – and is central to achieving strategic and functional coordination. In response to the Ministry of Education, a proposal was developed with the support of the USAID's education projects. A participative process and ample dialogue were conducted between central and departmental directorates, education unions, and representatives to the National Education Council, as well as working in cooperation with international agencies and universities.

In our work experience, USAID's education projects have discovered that teachers are opening the doors to their classrooms and recognizing that other education experts may understand their context and provide support to help them improve their craft. At the same time, USAID's education projects believe that the authorities, officials and technical staff working on education have come to accept that supervising teachers generates resistance and results in very little change in teaching practices. Instead, USAID's education projects believe that directly supporting teachers in the classroom via observation, thoughtful reflection, dialogue and guidance in the establishment of concrete goals in the classroom has a greater impact on students.

The USAID's education projects have seen real changes now that pedagogical coaching has been added. These changes are a result of reflections/remarks of both teachers and students and test scores. There are some experiences in which the academic coach models a teaching technique within the teacher's classroom. The teacher applies it while the coach observes, and then they reflect on it together. The USAID's education projects feel this fosters a closer and more collaborative approach to the professional development of teachers.

However, USAID's education projects have experienced some challenges to this implementation. For example,

some coaches are reluctant to completely rid themselves of their supervisory roles and continue to focus on identifying what the teachers are not doing or are uncertain of how to guide them to establish their own professional development goals. This has required a strategy for the provision of “coaching to the pedagogical coaches” to strengthen the guidance provided by means of a personal coaching and self-reflection process.

III. National Reform for a National Instructional Coaching Policy

In 2011-2012, with technical support from the Support Program for Quality of Education (PACE) of the German International Cooperation (GIZ) and the USAID Education Reform in the Classroom project, the Ministry of Education piloted the SINAЕ project in chosen municipalities in seven areas of the country. The pilot project consisted of the following objectives: (a) train personnel within the Department of Education, (b) train pedagogical coaches, (c) construct a school diagnostic model, (d) validate the instruments and handbooks developed to exercise the coaching function, and (e) provide school coaching to primary teachers. This pilot project informed further improvements on the organizational structure of the system, the participation of the education community, and the development of school coaching strategies for principals and teachers (i.e., frequency of visits, guidance for exchanges between the coach and the teacher, the involvement of the school principal, etc.).

Based on the pilot experience, in 2013 the strategy for implementation of SINAЕ was finalized and included the following key aspects: (a) implementation in three phases, prioritizing the areas with a larger educational gap; (b) selection of qualified staff and development of specific competencies; (c) deep knowledge of the school districts and planning of how to approach each one; (d) continuous training of personnel by means of a strategic training plan, annual reflections and collaborative group work; (e) collaboration between the different levels of the educational system, and (f) annual budgeting to ensure funds are available to implement the system (Ajcabul, Marcelino, Sontay, & Estrada, 2014).

Since 2017, the Ministry of Education has initiated the SINAЕ’s implementation with the support of the US-AID Lifelong Learning Project introducing a new strategy for in-service teachers’ professional development. At the same time, an ever-increasing number of teacher training programs promoted by universities, NGOs and foundations, and international cooperation agencies include direct coaching in their professional development programs. Furthermore, the issue is now part of the education agendas of different sectors and potentially may lead to the creation of an educational leadership and coaching culture that favors the implementation of updated and effective methodologies for teaching and assessing learning that includes best school and classroom management practices, among other positive and needed changes, to improve economic and social growth in the country.

IV. Specialized Training on Instructional Coaching

In recent years, the issue of pedagogical coaching has permeated different levels of the educational system and has been valued as a priority action to improve teacher practices and academic performance. The current Ministry of Education Administration has incorporated SINAЕ as one of the strategic action lines within the Multi-Year Strategic Plan for 2016-2020.

Meanwhile, the USAID's Lifelong Learning Project has proven that it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of all educators in charge of teacher development and in the short term to develop leaders that will effectively promote and implement the SINAЕ. In this context, the project has participated in the development of training programs on leadership for instructional coaching at the post-graduate and master's levels, especially addressed to technical staff employed at the Ministry of Education. Linked to this, other entities have developed instructional coaching courses at the university level. There is a need for these types of programs that facilitate teacher development with experts in this area.

One of USAID's education projects have resulted in more than 250 graduates with post-graduate-level degrees, with a specialization in leadership and instructional coaching. At the same time, continued work on the implementation of instructional coaching and support protocols are needed.

V. Challenges to Implementation of an Instructional Coaching System

It is USAID's Lifelong Learning Project opinion that it is feasible to institutionalize and make the SINAЕ operational in the country but requires that a national system for educational coaching continues. There are challenges that the Ministry of Education still needs to address to transform the processes initiated into an education policy on a national scope. These challenges include:

- Institutionalization of instructional coaching as a central component of the educational system, which requires administrative and financial provisions, and continued political will and leadership by the Ministry of Education and the different stakeholders and decision-makers involved.
- Promotion of leadership by all stakeholders involved at the classroom, school and community levels, with a focus on improving teaching and the quality of education.
- Organizational changes in the Ministry of Education to embrace the instructional coaching system at a national, regional and/or district level.

- Establishment of instructional coaching approaches based on: (a) the different learning opportunities available at school: infrastructure, electrical services, water, telephone, internet, availability of textbooks and other academic resources for students and teachers, and appropriate student-teacher ratios, (b) education levels (pre-school, elementary school and secondary school), (c) curricular areas, and (d) teacher professional development.
- The operation of the system at the school level requires the consideration of several factors, including the language of the region or teaching language, geographic conditions such as distance and means of transportation to reach the school, size of the school (i.e., number of principals, teachers, and students), among other factors.
- Active participation of school principals as pedagogical coaches, which means the implementation of new rules for their appointments and permanence in their positions.
- Promotion of permanent learning on leadership and instructional coaching in response to the changing needs of principals, teachers, and students through professional development programs in these areas that are linked to a national training system for education personnel.

Final Comments

The efforts to improve the educational system in the Western Highlands of Guatemala has been a focus of USAID for decades. By working directly with the Ministry of Education to enact educational policies and a strategic plan, and through focused projects, the USAID has identified that the best way to strengthen the quality of the country's educational system is to strengthen its human capital by replacing the supervision model with a pedagogical coaching model that provides direct support to principals and teachers. The leadership and pedagogical coaching model aim to strengthen teachers and principals as educational leaders by providing teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their professional practice and empower them to take ownership of their learning, and professional growth processes based on a cycle of continuous improvement. At the school level, the implementation of this model is beginning to indicate positive results in teachers' pedagogical practice; however, significant efforts are still necessary. Participation from the directors of education departments will be imperative to ensure the model is fully and successfully implemented for maximum benefits. This will also require stakeholders at various levels to recognize and take advantage of their potential to improve the quality of education and expand its implementation in bilingual and multicultural contexts, both in urban and rural areas of the country. To ensure the sustainability of training within these areas, universities must continue to support personnel within the field of education.

Author Bios

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