

Beyond the Project: Sustaining Pre-service Teacher Education Reform in a Post-Soviet Latvia.



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Abstract

This research examines one of the first initiatives to reform pre-service education in Latvia. The two-year project, Developing Skills for Experiential and Cooperative Learning (SECL) sponsored by Columbia University's Teachers College and funded by Soros Foundation outlived its funding. The group of teacher educators continued their work with collaboration in education by establishing a professional association, Latvian Association for Cooperation in Education (LACE). The association has continued their work on collaboration in education for the past ten years. This study examines the role played by both the personal characteristics of the participants and the project experiences, activities and processes that contributed to the association's longevity.

Introduction

In 1997, post-Soviet Latvia education reform focused primarily on in-service teacher education. A project instituted through Columbia University's Teachers College and funded by Soros Foundation was one of the first efforts to create professional development for pre-service teachers through the training of teacher educators from different higher education institutions throughout Latvia. The two-year project, Developing Skills for Experiential and Cooperative Learning (SECL) in Latvian Teacher Education, focused on how teachers could collaborate effectively to improve educational outcomes for students. At the end of the two-year project, the group of teacher educators continued their work with collaboration in education by establishing a professional association, the Latvian Association for Cooperation in Education (LACE). The association has continued their work on collaboration in education for the past ten years.

Research Questions

What personal characteristics possessed by the project participants contributed to the longevity of the project?

What project experiences, activities and processes contributed to the longevity of the project?

Data Collection

Documentary Analysis: In the analysis, documents from the original project and its partners, as well as subsequent research papers initiated by and about the project were reviewed. The information elicited from this and initial discussions with key stakeholders formulated our research design.

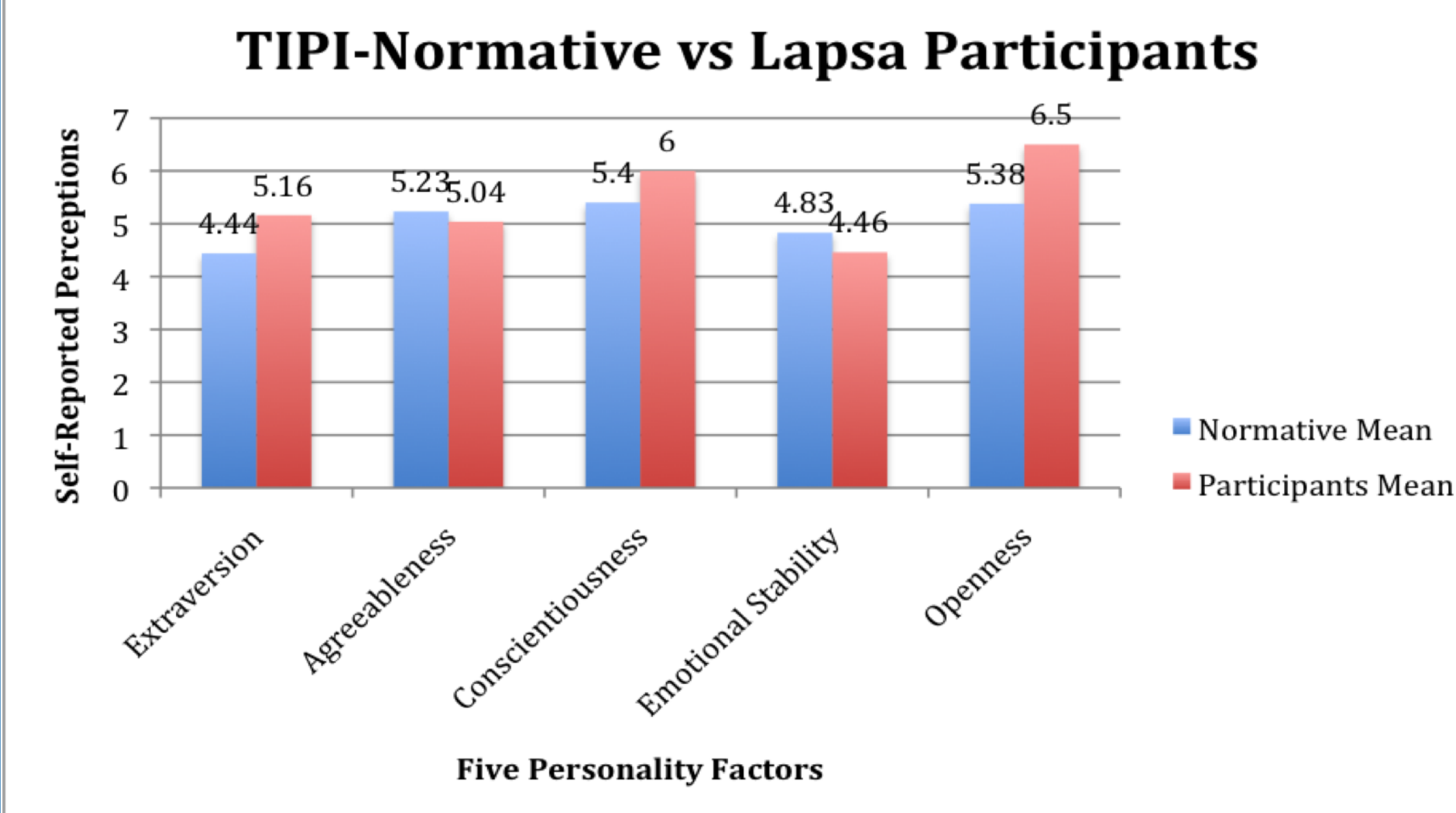
Personality Inventory: Participants took the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling 2003), administered using surveymonkey, to determine whether personality commonalities existed among participants. The instrument measured extravertedness, emotional stability, conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness.

Open-Ended Surveys: Participants were then asked to complete a 10-question open-ended survey. The focus of this questionnaire was on leadership, the transformational nature of leadership, and change. These themes were suggested in discussions with key stakeholders.

Follow-Up Interviews: Coding for themes in the data collected from the open-ended surveys created more reflective questions to ask participants in their interview. These focused on networking, the capacity for change/or ability to innovate, trust, congeniality and collegiality, distributive leadership and common personal characteristics.



Key Findings: Personal Characteristics:



Extraversion: Our initial data showed a clear level of extraversion among the participants, which was higher than the normative mean. Research suggests that extraversion is generally seen as a predictor for success in social occupations (Barrick & Mount, 2006).

Agreeableness: Participants rated lower than the norm in agreeability. Sagiv (2002) suggests that in traditional societies, such as a post-Soviet Latvia the act of confronting those traditions can be seen as disagreeable. *If you only knew how difficult it was to implement cooperative learning*

Key Findings: Project Experiences, Activities and Processes

Group Development: The participants viewed the organization both as a place in which professional development opportunities arose, but also as a social organization in which they shared in each other's personal lives.

Trust: Our participants suggested that trust was a critical issue to group development, to group functioning and to group continuity. In a social system undergoing a drastic change from a closed Soviet system to a more open one, trust is critical.

Distributive Leadership: The SECL project promoted the idea of a shared leadership style, as shown in the practice of rotating leaders and varied meeting locations, both of which were adopted to ensure cooperative leadership by

Future Research

There are several avenues to explore from these findings. One is to more fully understand the relationship that a project participant's personal attributes may have on a projects' sustainability and longevity. Another is to better understand if a relationship exists between a projects' experiences, activities and processes and sustainability and longevity. A third is to compare similar cases to determine if

in practice and how resistant our colleagues were." (Personal Communication, 11/20/08)

Conscientiousness: Despite some slight disparities, project participants' conscientiousness stood out as higher than the normative mean. One study of conscientiousness suggested that "conscientiousness positively predicted intrinsic and extrinsic career success." (Judge et al, 2006)

Emotional Stability: The mean of the project participants' score was below the mean of the general population. Feichtinger and Fink's work (1998) indicates that societies can undergo collective culture shock. A low score may reflect the political and societal upheaval the educational system has experienced.

Openness: The group mean on the openness score was 6.5. This characterizes them as extremely open-minded people. The theme of openness weaves itself throughout most of the discussions with interviewees. As one of the interviewed participants explained, "LAPSA... is like a metaphor for an open door."

Collegiality and Congeniality: A major emergent theme was the connection between collegiality, in the form of being able to build professional relationships that focus on a clear goal, and congeniality in the form of friendship. Project participants commented on the personal and professional bond that was created through the project and continues through the current work of the association.

Networking: They used the very method they were studying, cooperative learning, to form a network of higher education professionals. Rather than teaching about cooperative learning in isolation, they decided to work together to improve many aspects of Latvia's teacher training programs.

there is any cross-case support for face and theoretical generalizability. Finally, a fourth avenue is to explore the connection between the project's goal (training for cooperative learning) and the actions and activities embedded in the project training process that may have fostered group development among participants through congeniality, trust, and distributive leadership.