

NEW PARADIGMS AND OLD PARADOXES IN CIVIC EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN

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Sitting in a cradle of oil resources and emerging from a decade of border conflicts, Azerbaijan is a country of paradoxes facing a multitude of post-transition challenges. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan's education system faced major challenges, resulting from rapid economic decline, hyperinflation, and budget cuts. Following the drastic decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the real spending on education fell sharply during the 1990s. According to the World Bank (2003), public spending on education in 1998 was only about 34% of the 1992 level. These economic difficulties, combined with the political instability related to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, have severely constrained the Government's ability to undertake extensive education reforms during the 1990s. Negative impacts on the education system included an influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs), shortages of school materials, poor school maintenance, demoralized and underpaid teachers, as well as outdated curriculum and teaching methods. As a result of these challenges, Azerbaijan's education system has failed to equip students with knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of a modern economy, especially a knowledge-based society.

According to the World Bank (2003), one of the main problems of Azerbaijan's education system is serious deterioration in the quality of education, largely due to sharp declines in real public expenditures on education. Outdated curriculums and teaching methods are major concerns for quality improvement in general education in Azerbaijan. School curriculum has continuously focused on learning facts rather than developing skills that allow students to apply knowledge in various situations. Teaching methods have generally been based on rote-learning rather than active, problem-

solving skills. In 2000, one study revealed that nearly 95% of the students had experienced passive learning process (i.e., passive listening, and questions and answers) and that interactive methods were not widely used by teachers (Crawford, 2000). Even where there is a desire to move away from this model, administrators often lack education resources on contemporary teaching methods (World Bank, 2003). As a result, the current educational system has not been producing graduates with knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of the newly emerging political, economic, and social environment.

The situation is particularly acute in the area of civic education. On the one hand, promotion of legal and human rights education remains weak. People do not have sufficient knowledge of the laws or legal norms of the country, and there is no connection between school learning and reality, where laws and rights are often grossly violated. (Kazimzade, Mustafayev, Agayeva, Aliyeva & Akhmedova, 2003). On the other hand, there has been a tremendous lack of skills and resources necessary to revise the traditional content of civic education. During the Soviet period, curriculum was centrally designed in Moscow and Azeri educators were given little discretion on what to teach and how to teach. Consequently, the content and structure of civic education curriculum in post-Soviet Azerbaijan has closely resembled the Soviet model, where the Soviet values of patriotism/loyalty to the state have been replaced with the Azeri ones, while other important democratic ideas (such as civic participation, deliberation, human rights, etc.) have been simply ignored.

This article examines new paradigms and old paradoxes of civic education reform in Azerbaijan. It provides a general overview of education reform efforts in Azerbaijan, followed by the discussion of civic education reform projects since Azerbaijan's independence. Drawing on document reviews and existing project evaluations, this article outlines some of the paradoxes of civic education reform and discusses why some of the reform efforts have been stalled during the last decade.

The Context: The Challenges of Educational Transformation in Azerbaijan

Moving toward a democratic polity and a market economy requires major educational inputs to ensure the quality of decision-making and the equitable distribution of resources. During the transformation period in Azerbaijan, however, the education system has faced serious challenges, including (1) the reduction of state spending on education and (2) the decline of education quality in schools (especially curricula-related problems).

The reduction of state spending on education

During the early years of the transformation period, a sharp drop in fiscal revenues led to declining state education expenditures. Between 1992 and 1995, the share of the education budget as a percentage of GDP fell from approximately 7% to 3.5%. In 1995, government spending on education was only 27% of its level in 1992 (WB, 2002, p. 57). After the initial sharp drop in public spending on education, considerable efforts were made to protect education expenditures. Despite economic recovery in the middle of the 1990s, investments in the education sector have increased, but remained considerably low compared to pre-independence levels. For example, education expenditure as a percentage of GDP has decreased from 7% in 1990 to 4.8% in 2001 (State Statistical Commission of Azerbaijan Republic, 2004). As a result, the education system has deteriorated significantly during this period. As Golladay & Abdullayev (2003) describe, buildings have fallen into disrepair and inventories of furniture and teaching materials have become obsolete. Furthermore, the quality of the teaching force has declined as a consequence of inadequate compensation and insufficient access to opportunities for professional development.

Among the most negatively affected have been teachers. During the transformation period, teacher salaries have declined rapidly and, today, they remain below the national average. Despite salary increases in the early 2000s, teacher salaries average US\$20-

25 per month and currently constitute 60% of the subsistence minimum (WB, 2002; Sigma, 2005). Low pay makes it difficult to attract high quality candidates to the profession and weak incentive system makes it difficult to motivate teachers to teach full time or engage in professional development, especially outside of the major urban areas.

While the state expenditure on education has declined, private spending on education has considerably increased. According to the World Bank (2002), there is some evidence that an increasing number of poor families cannot afford the increasing cost of education, particularly that of high quality education. For example, the Poverty Assessment report (World Bank, 1997) found that reduced real government spending on critical economic categories had been replaced in part by increased private spending for education. Since the mid-1990s, real private spending on education has sharply increased, especially in the form of informal payments (including payments for private tutoring). Sharp increases in out-of-pocket payments highlight problems not only of deteriorating education quality, but also education access to and transparency of the education system.

Decreasing education quality in schools

The real increase in public expenditures during the second half of the last decade did not result in improvements in the quality of education services (World Bank, 2002). Although indicators relating to education outcomes (e.g., student learning achievements) are not yet available to examine the effects of sharp declines in real resources available for education, available data suggest that the education sector no longer produces general school graduates with minimum standards to meet the skill and knowledge demands of the market economy or the minimum qualifications required by post-secondary education institutions (World Bank, 2002). For example, the results from the Student University Admission Examination clearly reflect the deterioration of the quality of general education, with an average applicant mastering only about 23-54% of the curriculum (SSAC, 2004). This is a clear indication that the majority of general

school leavers fail to achieve a satisfactory level of knowledge in mainstream schools.

Among the main factors affecting education quality are (1) outdated, teacher-centered curriculum and teaching methods, (2) poor learning environment (as suggested by shortages of textbooks, reading and teaching materials, supplies and equipment, and poor physical infrastructure), and (3) an ineffective system of teacher development (in-service and pre-service teacher education). First, the present school curriculum is largely scientific and subject-driven, in contrast to the learner-centered and outcomes-based approach, which is a common dominant paradigm for curriculum development in the OECD countries and most of the developing world (CITO Group, 2003). The primary focus of the curriculum is on teaching facts rather than developing skills that allow students to apply knowledge in various situations. Curriculum is generally overloaded, consisting of a large number of subjects (already reduced, but still 26 at present). Typically, curriculum developers work in isolation, “designing curriculum content based on their scientific background, and have no feeling for what is really needed in the evolving society” (CITO Group, 2003). Teaching methods have generally been based on rote-learning rather than active, problem-solving skills. Even where there is a desire to move away from this model, administrators face a lack of new teaching resources on contemporary teaching methods. Although the Education Reform Program (1999) aims to revise the general education curriculum and strengthen the skills and teaching methods of the teaching force through the provision of teacher professional development opportunities in interactive teaching methods, the implementation process remains slow.

Second, the quality of the learning environment in most general schools has deteriorated considerably, contributing to low learning outcomes, low attendance, and the production of poorly trained school leavers. According to the World Bank report (2002), this is largely due to the lack of access to textbooks and reading materials, the shortage of basic teaching and learning materials and equipment, and the deterioration of the physical facilities. The

quality of education is also uneven across the country, with rural schools facing more serious shortages of adequate supplies of educational materials and having poorer physical facilities for satisfactory teaching and learning. In urban areas, an acute shortage of school buildings exist because new school buildings have not been constructed to accommodate a growing population during the transformation period, resulting in overcrowding in urban schools. As a result, an increasing number of schools (75%) have adopted two and sometimes three shifts per day (World Bank, 2002).

Third, the quality of both pre-service teacher education and in-service training has deteriorated during the transformation period, further contributing to the declining quality of general education. In the area of in-service training, resource constraints have restricted the provision of effective in-service training during the 1990s. Although in-service teacher training has remained relatively stable throughout the transformation period, its geographical coverage and the quality of service provision have suffered. For example, the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) study indicated that about 15% of teachers in rural areas never attended in-service teacher training programs (MOE, 2002 p. 53). Despite some attempts at piloting demand-driven, school-based teacher training models, the state in-service training process has remained rather mechanical and is more supply than demand-driven, showing deficiencies in quality and effectiveness (World Bank, 2002; Crawford, 2000). In the area of pre-service teacher education, there is limited awareness of the range of possible methodologies (e.g., modern teaching and learning methodologies) and limited qualifications and experience of teacher training staff to introduce major changes (World Bank, 2002; McBride, 2002). As a representative of the Ministry of Education stated, the quality of pre-service teacher education has decreased and the newly trained teachers are less likely to match the criteria of qualified teachers (personal communication, 2005). As a result of limited professional development opportunities and ineffective initial teacher training, teacher professionalism and morale have suffered, further contributing to the decline of education quality in schools.

In 1999, the Government of Azerbaijan has announced the beginning of the Education Reform Program (financed by the World Bank), which aims to revise the general education curriculum (including civic education) and strengthen the skills and teaching methods of the teaching force through the provision of teacher professional development opportunities in modern teaching methods, emphasizing student-centered and interactive teaching methods. Among other educational goals, the Government has recognized the importance of civic education in order to develop and sustain the newly established democracy. Yet, in Azerbaijan the educational system has struggled to break away from outmoded approaches to civics education based on authoritarian socialist principles adopted in the Soviet era. In this period of fundamental change in Azerbaijan it has been extremely difficult to introduce new paradigms in civic education. In fact, the educational system represents a “time warp” which still prepares students for a governmental structure that no longer exists.

New Paradigms and Old Paradoxes in Civic Education Development

After Azerbaijan regained its independence in 1991, one of the key issues for education policy makers was how to introduce democratic values to the young generation and how education could support the development of a democratic government. The first steps included (1) introducing a new, compulsory subject “Azerbaijan’s Constitution” in school curriculum, (2) revising history curriculum in order to give more prevalence to the history of Azerbaijan, and (3) disseminating the state symbols as visual aids in schools (e.g., hymn, flags, state emblem, etc.). The initiated all these changes as a response to the urgent demand to connect education system with the social changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan, social changes were much faster than educational changes and there was little time for the in-depth analysis and systemic reform in the

area of civic education. Initially, all innovations in civic education were based on the provision of new information about the state, lacking the development of skills and attitudes.

In an effort to support the development of democratic values and civic engagement in Azerbaijan's schools, international donors have devoted considerable resources to civic education projects (e.g., the United States Department of State, the Open Society Institute, the Project Harmony, Norwegian Refugee Council, IFES, etc). For example, the main goal of the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* was to strengthen civic education developing a new civics curriculum for secondary schools, training a new cadre of secondary education teachers to use the new curriculum, and providing resources necessary to support the new curriculum and maintain it following the conclusion of the project. The overarching goals of the *Deliberating in Democracy* or *DID* project was to provide a model for secondary teachers to learn and appreciate among themselves the power of deliberation in their classrooms and a platform for engaging secondary students in discussions of substantive content on the institutions, governmental systems, and basic principles of a democratic constitutional state. The *Harmony Project* implemented long term programs aimed to support school networking and civic education engagement through the intensive use of information technologies. Finally, IFES, OSI Women's Program, UNCHR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNESCO and other agencies have supported civic education initiatives related gender, election rights, refugee rights, and the convention of children rights.

All these internationally-funded projects were implemented as pilot projects and, therefore, were fairly limited in scope. For example, the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* involved 16 teacher trainers who subsequently trained 260 teachers over the period of three years, while the *Deliberating in a Democracy* project involved ten teachers and 124 students from across Azerbaijan in a one-year training initiative. However, most of the state- and internationally-initiated

civic education reform projects have resulted in a number of paradoxes, including (1) a lack of systemic implementation of reforms, (2) state control over the content of civic education curriculum, (3) emphasis the content of civic education curriculum without reforming the teaching/learning process,

Lack of systemic implementation of reforms

A common problem in any country experiencing rapid social and economic change is that different aspects of education reform sometimes move at different paces. This often leads to poorly coordinated and contradicting policies, and to misunderstandings and tensions among educational stakeholders (Asian Development Bank, 2002). Sometimes, laws may not change as quickly as actual practice. For example, internationally-funded civic education projects have encouraged delegation of responsibilities and decentralization of decision-making at the school level without a legal framework to support it. Similarly, new curriculum units and textbooks have been published without first developing the new standards in the civic education subject area. Furthermore, new curriculum units have been introduced without reforming the assessment/evaluation system and without providing the necessary implementation support through in-service and pre-service teacher training. Often these contradictions are a product of well-intentioned individuals and groups moving at a different pace and with different perspectives on what they were trying to accomplish, leading to tensions and gaps in the service and stalling civic education reform efforts.

State control over the civic education curriculum

Currently, the Ministry of Education strictly dictates what should be taught in civic education, providing teachers with detailed guidelines regarding the topics to be covered and materials to be used during civic education lessons. In a way, all teachers are expected to teach the same material, from the same textbook, on the same day to their students in different parts of the country. As confirmed by the report of the Asian Development Bank (2000),

curricula innovations initiated by individual schools and teachers are generally not encouraged. Such curricula innovations "require a great deal of bureaucratic coordination" in order to obtain the necessary consent of the regional education departments. While innovations in educational methods are usually allowed, "textbooks, syllabi, and curricula are not attributed to the competence of school," which must strictly follow a common educational curriculum (Asian Development Bank, 2000). State control over the content of civic education curriculum means that teachers are generally limited to a single, state-approved source of information (e.g., state civic education program) for their lesson planning, leaving no space for alternative interpretations of some civic education topics.

Working within the existing structure of civic education curriculum development (i.e. centrally designed curriculum and lesson plans), some of the internationally-initiated civic education reform projects were able to bring new ideas into the official curriculum. For example, two civic education projects (e.g., *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* and *Deliberating in a Democracy* projects) not only provided access to new teaching/learning materials for civic education teachers, but also taught them skills in developing their own civic education curriculum units. In particular, the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* curriculum development team has successfully integrated project outcomes (i.e. new curriculum units) into the centralized state civic education curriculum. Currently, approximately one fourth of all curriculum content is based on curriculum units developed by the project team, which is quite impressive in a strictly controlled education environment of Azerbaijan. The inclusion of these curriculum units in the state curriculum means that *all* civic education teachers of Azerbaijan will be required to use them in their secondary education classrooms. It also means, however, that Azerbaijan's teachers will not have a choice to teach any other civic education topic of their choice.

Teaching democratic ideas through undemocratic means

State control over the content of civic education curriculum undoubtedly hampers the introduction of new, innovative paradigms in civic education. Currently, the emphasis is on the political literacy of students, mainly focusing on the transmission of information and knowledge regarding the history and geography of the country, the underlying principles of its constitution, and its main organizational patterns and political system. This paradigm calls for essentially passive understanding on the part of students. It neither requires greater involvement of students in terms of civic opinions and attitudes nor encourages students for action in the political, social and cultural life of their community. This is exactly what some of the internationally-funded civic education projects attempted to do, but unsuccessfully. For example, the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* emphasized three categories of objectives in civic education (e.g., political literacy, opinions and attitudes, as well as active participation), yet only one of these objectives (i.e. political literacy) found its way into the state civic education curriculum. Unfortunately, all process-related guidelines have been entirely left out of the centralized curriculum. This meant that the new civic education content was included, while the innovative teaching/learning techniques were dropped (e.g., emphasis on child-centered, active teaching methodology, critical thinking). Presently, the state curriculum focuses on the knowledge acquisition only, leaving it up to individual teachers to decide which teaching methodologies to choose. While this may not be a bad thing in itself, the problem is that the majority of Azerbaijan's teachers use traditional, teacher-centered methods in their classrooms. In current circumstances, this means that democratic ideas may be taught in very undemocratic ways, without encouraging students to think critically, discuss, and analyze the learned materials.

Innovations that do not move beyond the pilot stage

Finally, many internationally-funded civic education projects have been implemented as pilot projects and they have generally not

moved beyond the piloting stage for several reasons. First, there is a lack of project evaluations, which would allow policy-makers to consider alternative approaches to civic education in Azerbaijan. Second, policy-makers are often unwilling to consider “lessons learned” for developing state education policies in the area of civic education simply because these “lessons” may not necessary correspond to the state-mandated ideas of how civic education should be taught. More importantly, many internationally-funded pilot projects were implemented without any coordination between various projects themselves, the Ministry officials, and/or other education institutions in the country. This has often resulted in a lack of dissemination of projects’ outcomes and their inability to move beyond the pilot stage. For example, some of the civic education projects organized training for teachers, yet failed to involve representatives of in-service and pre-service teacher educators who could have institutionalized the new ideas in state structures (i.e. in-service and pre-service teacher education institutions).

Conclusion

Civic education is a cornerstone of democracy, and it has been crucial to maintaining democratic institutions. Yet, in Azerbaijan the educational system has struggled to break away from outmoded approaches to civics education based on authoritarian socialist principles adopted in the Soviet era. In this period of fundamental change in Azerbaijan it has been extremely difficult for the system of education to keep pace. Thus, the educational system represents a “time warp” which still prepares students for a governmental structure that no longer exists.

Despite many achievements in introducing new paradigms of civic education in Azerbaijan, the civic education reform is a site of many paradoxes. First, the civic education reform has lacked a more systemic approach. Ideally, the reform should have started with developing new education standards, revising the existing curriculum, developing teacher guidebooks, printing student textbooks, and

providing teacher training. Currently, however, the new curriculum units are implemented without the existence of appropriate textbooks for students and the new teacher guide is disseminated without the teacher training that should go along with it. Combined, this reduces the effectiveness of the new, innovative approaches to civic education promoted by various civic education initiatives. Furthermore, efforts could have been made to better coordinate the activities of different education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, international institutions, and local NGOs to promote systemic reforms in the area of civic education.

Second, most civic education initiatives have never moved beyond the piloting stages as a result of ineffective dissemination strategies. In particular, many international initiatives have failed to involve education professionals from in-service and pre-service teacher education institutions, which are key in institutionalizing educational innovations in the country. For example, inclusion of in-service teacher education institutions would have ensured that interactive teaching/learning methodologies are included in professional development courses, which all teachers are required to take once every five years. Furthermore, inclusion of pre-service teacher education institutions would have ensured that student teachers are familiar with interactive teaching methods as they graduate from pedagogical institutions.

Finally, the civic education reform projects could have been strengthened through establishing collaborative relationships with other international organizations and local NGOs working in the area of civic education. Such collaboration would have been particularly beneficial in advocating for policy changes such as advancing the use of student-centered, interactive teaching/learning methodologies in all civic education classrooms. More importantly, such collaboration could have allowed for better coordination of civic education reform initiatives among of different education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, international institutions, and local NGOs to promote systemic reforms in the area of civic education.

The Education Sector Development Program, which has been initiated in end of 1990s through the World Bank loan, will open new opportunities for radical changes within the education system, including the introduction of new innovative secondary school curriculum, decentralization of teachers' development system, and independent textbook provision. The question is how these changes would impact civic education development and how democratic values would be introduced in the newly reformed education system. These are complex questions, which should be answered by education evaluation researchers in the future.

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AZƏRBAYCANDA MÜLKİ TƏHSİLDƏ YENİ PARADİQMALAR VƏ ƏSKİ PARADOKSLAR

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Məqalədə Azərbaycan təhsil islahatları prosesində ortaya çıxan yeni paradıqlar və əski paradokslar öyrənilir. Müəlliflər Azərbaycanda təhsil islahatlarının ümumi xülasəsini verməklə yanaşı, ölkənin müstəqillik əldə etməsindən sonra təhsil sahəsində həyata keçirilmiş layihələri müzakirə edirlər. Araşdırmalar və mövcud layihələrin dəyərləndirilməsi nəticəsində, bu sahədə olan müəyyən təzadlar üzə çıxarılır və bəzi islahat addımlarının natamam qalmasının səbəbləri araşdırılır.