

Civic Education Developments in Azerbaijan: Teacher Reflections and Thoughts

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No goal of educational institutions in a modern democracy stands above the need to teach students the value of participatory democracy and how to engage effectively in democratic institutions and processes. Civic education is a cornerstone of democracy, and it has been crucial to maintaining democratic institutions. Yet, in Azerbaijan the education system has struggled to break away from outmoded approaches to civic 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 education system to keep pace. Thus, the education system represents a “time warp” which still prepares students for a governmental structure that no longer exists. This article examines the efforts of international initiatives in civic education reform in Azerbaijan and identifies the successes and challenges in education policies and classroom practices in Azerbaijan’s secondary schools.

Transition to a new system

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan’s education system faced major challenges, resulting from rapid economic decline, hyperinflation, and budgetary 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, 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(IDPs), shortages of school materials, poor school maintenance, demoralized and underpaid teachers, as well as outdated curriculum and teaching methods.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 Outdated curriculums and teaching methods are major concerns for quality improvement in general education in Azerbaijan. The school curriculum has continuously focused on learn-

ing 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 education 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 often do not know 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 by public officers (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 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.

In 1999, the Government of Azerbaijan 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 recognized the importance of civic education in order to develop and sustain the newly established democracy. 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). This article examines the impact of these international efforts on civic education policies and classroom practices in Azerbaijan.

International Initiatives in Civic Education Reform in Azerbaijan

This article focuses on two internationally initiated civic education reform projects, including the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project*, which was implemented by Montana State University and *Deliberating in a Democracy (DID)*, which was directed by the Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC) in partnership with the Constitutional Rights Foundation in Los Angeles (CRF), Street Law, Inc., and Open Society Institute. Both projects were funded by the United States Department of State and implemented in the 2000s.

The main goal of the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* was to strengthen civic education by developing a new civic education 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 project activities included: (1) capacity build-

ing of local curriculum development team (CDT), (2) development of civic education teaching/learning materials (curriculum units and teacher guide), (3) teacher training in student-centered, interactive teaching/learning methodologies (train-the-trainer and teacher training workshops), and (4) establishment of resource centers to support teachers as they implement the new curriculum in their classrooms. The project was implemented within the period 1999-2005.

The overarching goals of the DID project was to provide: (1) a model for secondary teachers to learn and appreciate among themselves the power of deliberation in their classrooms; and (2) a platform for engaging secondary students in discussions of substantive content on the institutions, governmental systems, and basic principles of a democratic constitutional state. Project activities included: (1) teacher staff development workshops, (2) classroom deliberations, (3) on-line Message Board for students and teachers, (4) videoconference between students in partner sites, and (5) teacher exchange. The project was conducted during the 2004-2005 school year and to be continued in 2006-2007.

Both projects were implemented as pilot projects and, therefore, were fairly limited in scope. 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.

The outcomes of both projects were documented in the evaluation reports (Silova & Kazimzade, 2005; Avery, Freeman, Greenwalt, 2005), which collected multiple types of data (using interview, observation, survey) from multiple sources (students, teachers, school administrators, site coordinators, project directors). In particular, the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training*

Project evaluation was based on a survey of 91 teachers from different geographic regions (Baku, Gandja, and Zakatala), as well as interviews with the curriculum development team members, teacher trainers, and the Ministry of Education officials. The evaluation focused on identifying the success and challenges in implanting the newly developed civic education curriculum modules. The *Deliberating in a Democracy* evaluation instruments included classroom observations, written surveys of teacher and student knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions, as well as interviews with school administrators. Both evaluations were carried out in the spring of 2005.

Findings: Civic Education Teacher Reflections and Thoughts

A review of evaluation findings from the two civic education projects suggested that Azerbaijan's teachers benefited the most from professional development and exchange opportunities offered through international initiatives on civic education reform. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of multiple information sources for teaching/learning civic education, which were not always available in Azerbaijan's schools.

Opportunities for professional development, exchange, and networking

Teachers explained that the greatest impact of the civic education trainings was on their classroom environment and student learning outcomes. Reflecting on the changes in their classroom environment, project participants noted that the project contributed to improving student/teacher interpersonal relationships, increasing student motivation to learn, and developing a culture of open, constructive exchange of ideas and opinions among students. Reflecting on the impact of the project on student learning outcomes, teachers emphasized the importance of such new student skills and attitudes as critical thinking, practical applica-

tion of learned material, self-evaluation skills, as well as civic awareness and active participation in classroom, school, and community life. Many teachers' perception of their students changed tremendously. As one participant from the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* noted, "I have discovered my students as creative and active learners." Similarly, a participant from the DID project explained:

The project teaches both the teachers and the students a new way of discussion. It's quite different from other ways of expressing ideas, teaches the students to be more tolerant of each other and be able to come to common agreement. (English language teacher, member of DID trainers team)

In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of the civic education project on their professional growth. Teachers indicated that the project's greatest impact was on helping them to learn and apply new, child-centered teaching/learning methodologies, better understand civic education issues, as well as see the relationship between democratic values, society, and everyday life.

For the majority of teachers, the projects provided the first in-service teacher training opportunity in innovative, child-centered methodologies. For many project participants, it was a novel experience, which involved a major re-evaluation of their teaching philosophies. Reflecting on the impact of the project on her professional growth, one teacher explained:

In the beginning, I was frustrated by the new lesson evaluation approaches, which were suggested by my trainers. Later, however, I realized the importance and usefulness of these new assessment techniques. I realized how evaluation could be used to improve my lessons through feedback from colleagues and students. For the first time in my teaching career, I involved students in lesson evaluation. (Teacher, participant of the *Civics Education Curriculum Development and*

Teacher Training Project)

For many teachers, the civic education reform projects presented the first opportunity to network and exchange experience with teachers from other schools. During the Soviet period, state in-service teacher training institutions provided regular opportunities for teachers to network with other colleagues and exchange experience. Unfortunately, these opportunities became fairly limited during the post-Soviet period due to lack of financial resources. The two civic education reform projects offered new opportunities for teachers to network and share experience with their colleagues locally. This proved particularly important in implementing new teaching/learning methodologies in classroom practices:

It helped us a lot, and we also became acquainted with other organizations, like English Teachers' Association. We had different experiences, and we are adding knowledge to each other. This kind of deliberation is new to us, and each time we ask each other on how to do it better next time. (Azerbaijan Civic Education NGO member, DID project participant)

Opportunities for international networking and exchange

Civic education differs from other school subjects, because it requires not only the knowledge of a specific subject matter, but also awareness of worldwide political, economic, and social life. This is particularly challenging for the former Soviet teachers who were brought up in an isolated environment and were not allowed to freely express their professional and personal opinions. For civic education teachers, it is important to teach students to be the citizens not only of their own country, but also feel responsibility for what is going on in other parts of the world. Therefore, international contacts and exchanges provide an opportunity for teachers and students to widen their horizons.

The *Civics Education Curriculum Development and Teacher Training Project* provided an opportunity for civic education teachers to collaborate with their American colleagues in curriculum development, whereas the DID project involved virtual partnerships of students and teachers to share experiences with civic education lesson implementation. As one of the project participants explained:

Students began to go online. Though it is a good development it poses difficulties for students because most of them don't have computer skills. (Azerbaijan, DID project participant)

Although all project participants valued international exchanges, this project component had several challenges. The first challenge is that international exchanges could be very costly and difficult to sustain over time. The second challenge is that virtual exchanges are often limited because of the insufficient information and communication technology (ICT) skills among students and teachers in Azerbaijan:

Of course, everything was very exciting, but at the same time...it gave me confidence. Our students are the same everywhere – there and here. We learned about the education system in America. I learned more and more about the practice of using their lessons and saw the results. (Azerbaijan teacher who traveled to the US as a DID project participant)

Of course, it will change teachers' careers for those six teachers – any international travel always gives you a different perspective of the world. If you are a social studies teacher, it's invaluable – so it goes way beyond the goals and outcomes of this project. (Civic Education trainer, DID Azerbaijan)

The cultural exchange was an amazing experience – to go to another country and not just be there as a tourist but to go to the schools and have that

experience. That was phenomenal for me on a couple of levels. Just the way we were able to experience the nation and as a world history teacher we went to some pretty phenomenal places. (DC Metro US Teacher who traveled to Azerbaijan as a DID participant)

Multiple information sources for teaching civic education

Among the most important outcomes of the civic education projects, the teachers noted access to various sources of information, which could be used for effectively planning and conducting their civic education lessons. 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. The two civic education 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.

Working within the existing structure of the curriculum development, for example, 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.

While working within the traditional, centralized education curriculum structure was instrumental in institutionalizing the new civic

education content, it also had serious drawbacks. Unfortunately, all process-related guidelines have been entirely left out of the centralized curriculum. This meant that while the new civic education content was included, 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 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.

The project team made an attempt to address this problem by publishing a teacher guide, which presents student-centered, interactive teaching/learning methods. The guide (consisting of 170 pages) includes detailed information on different student-centered approaches and gives concrete, hands-on examples on how to use these approaches in civic education classrooms. After many revisions, the Ministry of Education approved the guide at the end of 2004, giving teachers the official permission to use the guide in their classroom practices.¹ The problem is that the guide is only available to a limited number of schools. With a total of 4,000 schools in Azerbaijan, the teacher guide is currently accessible to every second school only. Given a general lack of professional development literature for teachers in Azerbaijan, this is a very limited distribution, which severely hampers wider dissemination of the project outcomes.

Conclusions

Overall, the civic education reform projects have achieved remarkable outcomes in introducing new, innovative civic education content

and methodology in secondary schools of Azerbaijan. Most importantly, they provided opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development activities, establish networking mechanisms for a more effective implementation of new teaching/learning methodologies, and exchange their teaching/learning experiences both locally and internationally. Furthermore, the projects provided access to new sources of information and teaching/learning materials for teachers, as well as supported them in designing their own, context-specific civic education curriculum units.

Despite these achievements, the dissemination of projects' outcomes has remained fairly limited for a number of reasons. First, while the participants and education experts appreciated the important contributions of the projects to the civic education development in Azerbaijan (e.g., the development of the new curriculum units, the teacher guide, and the trainings), they expressed the need for a more systemic approach to civic education reform. 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. With all these factors combined, this reduces the effectiveness of the new, innovative approaches to civic education promoted by the project. Although a systemic civic education reform was not possible within the project framework because of time and budgetary limitations, 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, the projects would have benefited from a more effective dissemination strategy.

In particular, the training component could have been disseminated more widely and effectively if it involved education professionals from in-service and pre-service teacher education institutions in the country. In this way, project outcomes (i.e., emphasis on student-centered teaching/learning methodologies) would have been institutionalized in state education structures, thus making project outcomes sustainable over time. 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.

In order to address these issues the government has introduced a new strategy for the teachers' professional development process. The government strategy aims at strengthening the skills and knowledge of teachers of the subject matter and have a much wider variety of teaching methods through the development and implementation of teacher training programs and the provision of opportunities for their professional growth. The teacher-participants from both Projects would participate as advanced trainers in the planned teaching methodology reforms.

Finally, the civic education reform projects could have been strengthened by establishing collaborative relationships with other international organizations and local NGOs working in the area of civic education. Such collabora-

tion 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 different education stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education, international institutions, and local NGOs to promote systemic reforms in the area of civic education.

Endnote

¹ While the teacher guide presents innovative teaching/learning methods, the cover has remained fairly traditional, featuring a scene from a teacher-centered classroom and the deceased President Aliyev. See Annex A.

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Annex A

Teacher Guide Cover

