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INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES ON POST-SOVIET ARMENIAN EDUCATION

Abstract

The information in this article is drawn from the study, *Curriculum Reform in Post-Soviet Armenia: Balancing the Local and Global Contexts in the Armenian Secondary Schools* (2010). Further, the article discusses how the World Bank, Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation – Armenia (OSIAF-A), and the European Union imported educational standards into the Armenian secondary schools. The research indicates that since independence from the Soviet Union, Armenian education has achieved a balance between local and global perspectives in their post-Soviet curriculum reform. In addition, in 2005, the Armenian Government and the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) signed the Bologna Process, affirming the alignment of higher education with the international standards of the European Union (EU).

Introduction

Since 1991, when Armenia became independent from the Soviet Union, organizations such as the World Bank and the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation – Armenia (OSIAF-A) played a crucial role in implementing the Armenian National Curriculum (Curriculum) and State Standards for Secondary Education (SSSE) throughout the education system. In addition, in 2005, the Armenian Government and the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) signed the Bologna Process, affirming the alignment of higher education with the international standards of the European Union (EU).

As in many other post-Soviet countries, educational reform in Armenia was given substantial support by international organizations, beginning in 1991. Assistance in policy development by these organizations was sought by many post-Soviet countries that were formerly closed to the Western concept of democracy (Armenuhi Tadevosyan, 2008). As a result, (beginning in 1994 to 1996) post-Soviet countries incorporated the concepts of civil society and democratization, which have been promoted by Western governments and international agencies (Ishkanian, 2008).

Methodology

The 2010 research study was limited to the examination of educational change in the areas of curriculum, teacher practice, and legislative initiatives in the Armenian secondary school since 1991. Further, it investigated the World Bank's and Open Society Institute's (OSI) recent influence on curriculum reform in this post-Soviet nation. Research involved collecting data through observations of two professional development sessions, in July, 2005 and August, 2006 at School 43, a Ministry of Education and Science (MOES)-designated School Center in Armenia, and included a document analysis of the Armenian National Curriculum and State

Standards. In addition, I interviewed educational personnel (teachers and principals) from three Armenian secondary schools – Numbers 43, 160, and 119. These schools were chosen to compare how different schools were implementing and/or responding to reform mandates. Also, interviews were conducted with officials in the field from the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) and policy developers from the World Bank and Open Society Institute (Terzian, 2010).

Decentralization and Globalization Armenia

In Armenia, decentralization took a major role in educational reform and by 1995, Western governments introduced grants for programs promoting democratization. By 1997, over 2,000 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were registered with the Armenian Ministry of Justice. Ishkanian (2003) believed that the link between civil society and NGOs is a late twentieth century phenomenon that should be understood in the context of deregulated and increasingly global economies. G. Shabar and Dennis A. Rondinelli (2007) posit:

Decentralization remains a core prescription of international development organizations for promoting democratic governance and economic adjustment, and is seen by many of its advocates as a condition for achieving sustainable economic, political, and social development and for attaining the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

Jan Orbie and Lisa Tortell (2009) define globalization as the “liberalization of international trade, the expansion of foreign direct investment, and the emergence of cross-border financial flows” (p. 3). Orbie and Tortell (2009) posit that the European Council Declaration on Globalization states that “globalization is a source of opportunity rather than a threat” (p. 3). These scholars believe that the European Union “has repeatedly declared its commitment to promote the social dimension of globalization” (p. 3). The European Union (EU) is considered a global institution invested in joining post-Soviet countries to the EU's democratic and open market philosophy (Archer, 2008).

The World Bank and Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation – Armenia (OSIAF-A)

In 2004, the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) applied for a second World Bank loan to begin the second stage of reform – the World Bank's Educational Quality and Relevance Project (EQRP). The EQRP replaced the first World Bank program in Armenia, the Education Financing and Management Reform Program (1998-2002). This program had focused on structural aspects of the secondary schools, such as decentralization and textbook revision. This second group of loans assisted the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) with its implementation of national curriculum, assessment procedures, and training teachers in updated instructional practices. As stated in the Educational and Quality Relevance Project (EQRP) Midterm Report:

The goal of the Education Quality and Relevance Project is to support the government reforms in general education. The project has the aim of ensuring its relevance to the new economy and knowledge society needs

along with carrying forward reforms to improve the efficiency of the education system (World Bank, 2006, p. 177).

Douglas Bartamayan (pseudonym), a high-level official in World Bank education programs, stated in an interview that the Project Implementation Unit (PIU) is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the EQRP. He described the PIU as follows:

The Project Implementation Unit works under the regulations of the Ministry and World Bank, but is a World Bank-funded department that focuses on implementing World Bank programs such as the Educational and Quality Relevance Project. The main mission is to oversee the project's implementation. The Ministry of Education and Science is in charge of defining strategies for the secondary schools, higher education programs, and technical education reform programs (D. Bartmayan, personal communication, June 25, 2008).

Three policy group participants from MOES explained why the Ministry chose the World Bank for loan assistance. Nancy Nijayan (pseudonym), a high-level administrator from MOES, explained:

The World Bank was chosen because it is the only place where you get concessional loan money. We are borrowing from the Bank because it is the only place where we can afford to borrow money. We cannot borrow from the open market – it is too expensive – at least for educational projects. You can get an IDA loan which is a grant to reform the system and in the private market you will not find many places where you can borrow for social programs – this is one reason. The second reason, and a very important one, is that the Bank draws academic expertise from all over the world and from their experiences from the lessons learned in different regions. So, you have this big public organization that is also a think tank, but then can tap into other think tanks and regions, and provide you with the best practical knowledge. So, these are the reasons we chose the Bank (N. Nijayan, personal communication, June, 24, 2008).

Nijayan further asserted that the World Bank's success with reforms in other regions was attractive to the MOES, especially since the Bank's programs were intended to make education relevant to the social and political changes in post-Soviet Armenia. She continued:

The objective with the World Bank's Quality and Educational Relevance Project was to create a secondary general education that fit with a knowledge economy and was relevant for the labor market of the day. For example, if there is a high demand in the market for certain a professional like scientific technology professionals, then the state has to react to this. It is not only the Armenian market, but the European market too. You have to look at the trends abroad--not only your country when you design your educational system (N. Nijayan, personal communication, June, 24, 2008).

Scott Amenyan (pseudonym), an expert from the Armenian National Institute of Education (NIE), discussed why civic education became important to post-Soviet Armenia. Scott explained the following:

With a small amount of money, we have supported the creation and development of a model which can be a real example of how to implement reforms on decentralization throughout the whole country. For example, we have community schools and the decentralized schools models in a few states in Armenia (S. Amenyan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

Danelyan, a middle-level official from OSIAF-A, affirmed Amenyan's statement, explaining:

Schools should be a place not only for students and teachers, but for parents and the community. Community schools have been part of the OSIAF-A agenda as well as a focus for the Educational Quality and Relevance Project by the World Bank. The purpose is to make the management structure accessible to parents, so they can give service to the schools, the school boards, and the student councils (A. Danelyan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

The Armenian Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) has lessened its authority by granting decision-making responsibilities to the administration, teachers, and community of each Armenian secondary school. Jennifer Bartanyan (pseudonym), a high-level official from MOES, stated:

In the beginning, one person used to make all of the decisions. Now each school is independent and has their own school board that discusses issues, like budget, hiring of teachers, and choosing the Ministry of Education and Science-approved materials (J. Bartanyan, personal communication, June 20, 2008.).

Danelyan, from OSIAF-A, explained that although school boards have increased interaction between the school and the community, there are still organizational difficulties. Danelyan posited that the current dysfunction with making curricular and financial decisions is due to the lack of autonomy in decision-making during the Soviet period. This was affirmed by Stuart Katayan (pseudonym), a social studies expert from the National Institute of Education. Stuart noted that the school boards were still weak:

First, school boards are reacting to old bureaucratic methods. Most school boards are under control of the school principals, and most elections of school principals are not fair – so it is the same as in Soviet times. If you do not have such an environment like fair elections in the country, then you are not going to have fair elections or people operating fairly in the schools (S. Ketayan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

Interestingly, Ketayan's account suggests that although most former Soviet republics have made the transition to democracy, understanding participatory behaviors in cultures where authority was centralized requires the internalization of democratic practices.

The European Union and International Standards

In 2005, Armenia joined Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in signing the Bologna Declaration. According to a study issued by the GHK, an international consulting firm, the European Commission's goal for having member-seeking countries sign the Bologna Declaration is "to direct the development of teacher education towards the adaptation of the education system to European principles" (GHK, 2011). The implementation of these reforms is a complex, challenging process, which can be traced to the educational community's attachment to the old system. Nijayan, a higher-level official from the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science believes that the "Standards of the Bologna Process for higher education and special education have changed the qualifications for the general education sector, so the educational system can be aligned with standards for European education" (N. Nijayan, personal communication, June 24, 2008).

Danelyan, a middle-level official with OSIAF-A, explained that the Bologna Process required the Armenian secondary schools to incorporate European standards at the primary, middle, and high school levels. He stated that "the MOES is responsible for the educational system as a whole, so there cannot be this kind of contradiction like one sector is going towards European standards and the other one is not; so the political decision is to integrate European Standards so every sector has the same reforms" (A. Denelyan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

In 1996, Armenia signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), a cultural, political, and economic alliance between Armenia and the European Union (H.-J. Zahorka, 2003). Joining the PCA was Armenia's first attempt to align their Curriculum to the democratic practices of the European Union. For example, the values of civic education such as tolerance, openness, and human rights were promoted alongside a new Armenian national identity. The Ministry of Education and Science has promoted building respect for the Armenian national identity by including national symbols in each classroom.

Requirements for acceptance into the European Union impacted both the curriculum and facilitation of new skills in Armenian secondary schools. Special emphasis was placed on providing professional development in the subjects of civic education and information communication technology (ICT). The new social and political values reflected ideas of the "Copenhagen criteria", which required applicant countries to adapt to democratic practices to enable them to integrate into the European Union. Stuart Katayan, an expert from the Armenian National Institute of Education, discussed why the topic of civics became important to post-Soviet Armenia:

Civics is the subject where we have the most investment. For example, we have more training for civics teachers than Armenian and ICT teachers. During the last 10 years, we had much training for civics teachers because that is an important value for our society (S. Katayan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

Amenyan from OSIAF-A asserted that the special emphasis on civic education was due to the need to align Armenia with the tenets of the European Union:

The approach to education from the civic perspective is more important in the reform stage we are now in with secondary education. Now it is a priority, because we want to be a member of the European Union. Values of human rights were not a priority during Soviet times (S. Amenyan, personal communication, June 19, 2008).

Gina Shakian (pseudonym), an Armenian language teacher asserted that civic education was an important topic because now teachers can share their thoughts and opinions:

We are now looking at civic education at our teacher training sessions – an important topic for the democratic changes for education, and I like that we have this information on how we can learn to express our opinions. We did not have these types of sessions in the Soviet Union (G. Shakian, personal communication, June 25, 2008).

Conclusion

This article discusses the World Bank's and OSIAF-A's engagement in Armenian curriculum reform. The Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) adoption of a civil society involves including principles of a democratic participation throughout the Armenian National Curriculum. Armenia aims to meet membership requirements of the European Union by introducing international standards, so the Armenian secondary schools can compete in a global world. The Armenian National Curriculum was written with the intention of including democratic elements, thus preparing the Armenian system of education for entry into the European Union. The reorganization of civic understanding in the schools illustrates the government's vigorous attempt to use curriculum reform to realize the desired social, political, and economic changes in post-Soviet Armenia.

International scholars note that global forces are changing the state's role in school reform. As stated in Armenia's National Curriculum, global developments "have a direct impact on educational systems, and create a new diversity of educational objectives" (National Curriculum, 2004, p. 1). Nancy Kendall believes that specific programs created by globalizing entities represent "global prescriptions for restructuring daily practices and relations of state, market, and society" (Kendall 2007, p. 283).

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