Azərbaycanda inklüziv təhsil islahatları: tənqidi təhlil cəhdi

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Annotasiya Bu məqalədə Azərbaycanda aparılan inklüziv təhsil islahatının təhlili təqdim olunur. Müəllif UNESKO-nun təhsil siyasətini planlama çərçivəsindən istifadə edərək, aparılan islahatların milli təhsil siyasətinə təsirini sosial, təhsil və mədəni faktorların təhlili ilə izah etməyə çalışır. «Praqmatik» yanaşmanın nəticəsi olaraq, xüsusi qayğıya ehtiyacı olan uşaqların inklüziya ideyası milli kontekstdə xüsusi məktəblərin «hibridi» kimi «tərcümə» olunmuşdur. Məqalədə inklüziv təhsilin ilk dövriyyəsinin (siklin) öyrətdiyi dərslər müzakirə olunur. Lakin islahat prosesində ortaya çıxan bütün çətinliklərə baxmayaraq, islahatın ilkin mərhələsinin nəticəsində inklüziv təhsilə münasibət müsbətə doğru dəyişmişdir. Təqdim olunan təhlil həm milli səviyyədə inklüziv təhsilin indiki və gələcək mərhələlərində, həm də inklüziv təhsil ideyasının hər hansı ölkə səviyyəsində necə mənimsənilməsinə dair beynəlxalq səviyyədə aparılan müzakirələr üçün faydalı ola bilər.

Açar sözlər İnklüziv təhsil, təhsil siyasəti, xüsusi qayğıya ehtiyacı olan uşaqlar, pilot layihə, Azərbaycan.

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Inclusive Education Reform/s in Azerbaijan: An Attempt at Critical Policy Analysis

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Abstract This paper presents an analysis of inclusive education reform in Azerbaijan. Using the UNESCO education policy planning framework, the author examines how social, educational, and cultural factors have contributed to limited progress in national education policy. As result of a "pragmatic" approach, the idea of inclusion of children with disabilities was "translated" into the "hybridization" of special schools. The paper provides a discussion of lessons learned from the first cycle of the reform process where, despite the challenges faced, there have been positive attitudinal changes towards the concept of inclusive education. This analysis may be helpful in the further national education reform processes, as well as in international discourse on country-specific localization of inclusive education.

Keywords Inclusion, education policy, children with disabilities, pilot project, Azerbaijan.

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Introductory Notes: What was the Driving Force for Conducting this Particular Research?

From 2003 to 2011, Azerbaijan heavily invested heavily in inclusive education reforms led by multiple governmental and non-governmental players. However, the reform had a limited impact on national education policy. Regular schools in Azerbaijan have yet to accept children with disabilities (CWD) and provide them with high-quality education. Why? Which factors have contributed to that limited impact? What were the successes and failures on the way from segregation towards inclusive education for CWD?

We have attempted to respond to these questions using the framework of W.D. Haddad and T. Demsky (Haddad & Demsky, 1995) for an analysis of inclusive education reform in Azerbaijan.

In 2013, the Government of Azerbaijan adopted a new national education development strategy which identified inclusive education among its top strategic goals. In 2017 the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan approved a second 'State Program on the Development of Inclusive education in Azerbaijan for 2018-2024' (MoE, 2017). That means that Azerbaijan has embarked on new inclusive education reforms. We hope that this analysis can "highlight the areas that need particular attention to promote inclusive education and strengthen policy development" (UNESCO, 2009, p.7).

The First Policy Cycle: A Case of an Externally Influenced, Issue-Focused, Incremental Approach

Since independence, Azerbaijan has ratified major conventions relating to human and children's rights and has thus taken on certain obligations, including ensuring "the establishment of inclusive education without discrimination of persons with disabilities" (Mardanov, 2011, p.417). Although internationally the term 'inclusive education' has been increasingly understood more broadly, in Azerbaijan, inclusive education reform initially only targeted CWD.

According to the National Education Law (2009), CWD have a right to education and cannot be discriminated against based on their health status. However, the Education Law entitled CWD to special or integrated education and the Special Education Law (2001) stated that CWD could be accepted into regular schools if those schools could ensure appropriate conditions. To rephrase the thoughts of international scholars, Azerbaijan's national legislation was based on the ideas that: (1) CWD children are different, and (2) these differences are considered liabilities rather than assets (Nilholm 2006, cited in Göransson, Nilholm&Karlsson, 2011, p. 543).

Justification for the Reform

In the early 2000s, the Government of Azerbaijan introduced an inclusive education reform on mainstreaming CWD at the level of early childhood education as well as primary education. Some scholars define the concept of mainstreaming as being "focused on how to integrate pieces into established wholes" (Göransson, Nilholm & Karlsson, 2011, p.543). This definition could also apply to the national inclusive education reform. An attempt was made to integrate CWD into mainstream schools without major changes at the level of regular schools.

"A policy change is normally a response to a problem or set of problems in the sector" (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.24). However, in Azerbaijan, at the beginning of the reform, segregated education of CWD was not even recognized as a problem. It is necessary to note that Azerbaijan's reform efforts began without a clear understanding of the size and scope of the problem. According to UNESCO, "inclusive education systems and societies can only be realized if governments are aware of the nature of the problem…the size and character of the out-of-school populations" (UNESCO, 2009, p.21). However, precise data on the number of CWD were not available at the beginning of the reform. According to the data released to the public in 2011, only about 15% of CWD were in education (Mardanov, 2011, p. 417).

Like other post-Soviet countries, Azerbaijan had a long tradition of special education provision through special schools. Prior to the reform, society at large believed that this was the only way to educate CWD. In 2001, a singular but very different look at special education provision in Azerbaijan was provided by a UK citizen who conducted research on the situation in boarding schools, but that research was never published and did not gain widespread recognition (Gwen Burchell, 2001).

Thus, the first cycle of inclusive education reform in Azerbaijan was not aimed at resolving the problem of the segregated education of CWD but rather at bringing the issue of inclusive education into the national educational landscape.

The issue of inclusive education was brought to the government's attention agenda by local civil society activists working in tandem with international donor organizations. This naturally means that the first cycle of national inclusive education reform was heavily influenced by external forces, and thus the reform process started by relying on "interaction rather than on a complete analysis of the situation"(Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.20). The MoE chose an incremental path of education reform of CWD by introducing the new policy on a pilot basis. While many scholars define inclusion as a "radical challenge to prevailing ideas and practices of existing education systems" (Barton &Armstrong, 2003) (cited in K. Göransson, C.Nilholm & K.Karlsson, 2011, p. 542), the incremental path

means that "no sweeping or drastic reforms should be attempted; only incremental and limited policy adjustments can be made…," which "are expected to remedy an improving the existing situation" (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.20).

A Situation Leading to Policy Formulation

In 2005, the MoE began the implementation of a State "development program on organization of education of children with special needs (CWD) (2005-2009)". The program was particularly aimed at the "provision of children's right to education; realization of their transfer to inclusive education; equal opportunities for education of children in educational institutions; strengthening social security of children under the state care; …adjustment of the technical and educational capacity of special education institutions to the modern standards" (Mardanov, 2011, p. 418). The program's funding was primarily allocated for improving facilities of special schools, but also for staffing pilot inclusive schools and kindergartens with teacher-assistants (TAs).

The pilot project offered parents of children with mild and moderate disabilities an opportunity to put their children in mainstream education on a voluntary basis. Teachers and TAs underwent continual training and mentoring on inclusive education methodology. Technical assistance was provided by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest professional special education association in the USA (Lesko, Ziegler, Mikayilova, Roels, 2010).

The MoE did not invest in strengthening the learning environment in pilot regular schools. Neither, it is necessary to note, did donors invest in making schools physically accessible for CWD, nor in the organizational development of pilot schools, for example, in school improvement and school leadership. Despite the fact that the concept of inclusive education "calls for major reform within ordinary schools" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8), and requires schools to re-examine what they teach, how they teach and how they assess learners' performances, the first cycle of the national inclusive education reform lacked a whole school approach.

Haddad and Demsky define the issue-based approach to policy-making as "short-term decisions involving day-to-day management or, as the term implies, a particular issue" (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p. 18). This was evident in the context of the national inclusive education reform. The MoE was making short-term decisions in order to ensure the smooth implementation of the pilot project such as decreasing the number of children in inclusive classrooms, creating TA positions in pilot schools, allowing a special psychological-medical-pedagogical commission to refer CWD to pilot project schools, allowing pilot schools to accept those children, and providing transportation fees to families of mainstreamed children.

By 2011, inclusive education had been piloted in 17 schools and 13 kindergartens in several regions across the country. 268 CWD had been mainstreamed into inclusive classrooms. This figure equated to the average size of a special educational institution. With donor funding, a course on inclusive education was developed and adopted as a selective course at the State Pedagogical University, as well as through the in-service teacher training institute.

CWD mainstreamed to pilot inclusive classrooms were provided with necessary services and specialists through contracting community-based rehabilitation centers (CBRCs) run mainly by parent leaders of CWD. The service provision was funded during the first years of the pilot projects and then parents were advised to approach the CBRCs independently. Like other post-Soviet countries undertaking inclusive education reform, (Michalchenko, 2012; Smekhova, 2013; Jugaylo, 2014) the lack of special support services for CWD in regular schools has remained a barrier to their meaningful inclusion in Azerbaijan.

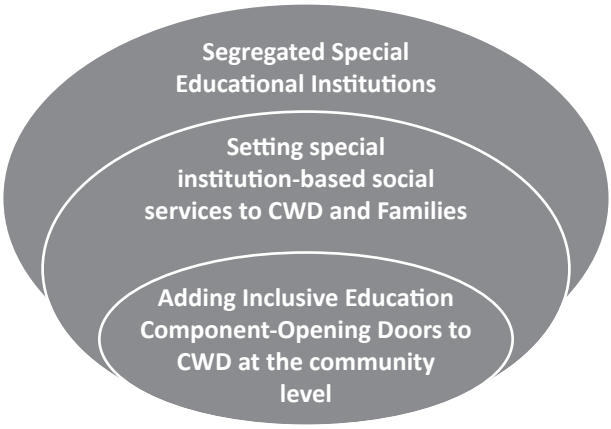
The MoE never formally commissioned an evaluation of the pilot projects in order to have a "complete analysis of the situation to develop a blueprint for solving problems" (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.20). Donor organizations funded four consequent research studies conducted between 2003 and 2011 which revealed the positive impact of inclusive teaching practices on children, both with and without disabilities, as well as on parents and the school community. The importance of these research studies was that they responded to "one of the major questions countries need... to answer…whether or not a demand existed for the reform…piloting permitted this" (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.69).

From 2006 to 2015, the MoE implemented another important State Program on Alternative Care and Deinstitutionalization. The main goal of this program was to promote the transfer of children with special needs, including those with disabilities, from institutions to biological or alternative families, and to establish family and community-based support and rehabilitation services. However, inclusive education was not a part of the program. This limited possibilities for linking that social service reform program with inclusive education reform efforts.

By 2011, within the State Program seven special boarding schools were "transformed" into "special schools with an inclusive education component", and four special social service providing centers were set up at the institutions thus transformed. In practical terms, transformation of special boarding schools meant setting up supplementary services, as well "opening doors" to typical children from the community.

Article 24 of the UN Convention on Disability Rights "envisages the development of inclusive education, and the closing down of segregated schools, internationally" (D'Alessio, 2011, p. xi). In order to do that UNESCO recommended "the gradual transition… of special schools into resource centers with outreach

Figure 1. **Hybrid model of inclusive education development in Azerbaijan**



services to support the regular school system and offer guidance to families in their efforts to support their children" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 18).

Implementation of the second State Program revealed that the vision of the Government for inclusion of CWD could be probably identified not as inclusive vs. segregated education, but rather as segregated education with an added inclusive education component. This seems to be in line with findings of international scholars that "the notion of inclusive education is often misinterpreted and considered as a progressive continuum stemming from a special education needs" (D'Alessio, 2011, p. 23).

In this way, through the transformation of special schools into "special schools with an inclusive component", the MoE created "hybrid" special schools in Azerbaijan envisioned as a combination of a special school, inclusive school, and rehabilitation and family counseling centers all in one. The issue of hybridity as a kind of "local variation,…. [with] different degrees of application…" in political agendas was particularly stressed by Stephen J. Ball (Ball, 1998, p.125) when he was analyzing processes of translation: "localization and reconceptualization involved in the realization…of policy in special national … settings". Through the hybridization of special education the MoE was probably trying to reduce "the limitations of traditional …education" (K. Göransson, C.Nilholm & K.Karlsson, 2011, p.543).

The generation of policy options

By looking back at the processes described above, we can infer that by 2011 (the end of the first pilot project on inclusive education), the MoE essentially had

three policy options for planning further reform: (I) scaling up piloted inclusive education practices all around the country (i.e. a fully inclusive education system); (II) creating an inclusive school per district acting as a adequately resourced hub capable of mainstreaming CWD at district level (i.e. a partially inclusive education system); and (III) transforming special institutions into schools with an inclusive education component (i.e. "hybridization" of special schools/institutions) accompanied perhaps by the gradual expansion of inclusive education to regular schools.

Looking at policy options

Most probably, these policy options were evaluated in an informal way:

Option I: scaling up inclusive education practices to all regular schools. This option had obvious limitations: (I) there was no proposed mechanism for the provision of supplementary services to CWD at the level of regular schools (in addition to the lack of qualified specialists); (II) a country-wide replication of inclusive education would have meant a significant increase in the number of TAs and thus a significant increase in public funding allocations to regular schools; (III) the transportation of CWD was also an issue because if the majority of CWD were to attend inclusive schools they would need transportation allowances or provision of transportation means; (IV) assessment of the attainment of CWD also remained problematic.

The traditional assessment methods prevalent in local public schools sees "subject-based academic performance…often used as an indicator of learning outcomes," while in inclusive education 'learning achievement' needs to be conceived more broadly as the acquisition of the values, attitudes, knowledge and skills required to meet the challenges of contemporary societies" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 6). Many CWD mainstreamed within the first inclusive education pilot project were not able to demonstrate "typical" academic performance. That was considered by the traditional educational community, education authorities, and special education community as evidence that inclusive education had been unsuccessful. J. Evans and I. Lunt's analysis of "the contradictions in government policy and the ambivalence of practitioners" in the context of England and Wales led them to conclude that "in order for a fully inclusive system to evolve, there would need to be a huge shift in the culture, organization and expectations of schooling" because a traditional school "does not sufficiently recognize and cater for individual difference" (Evans & Lunt, 2002, p.42).

Option II: a single inclusive "hub" school per district. The limitations listed with regards to the first policy option applied to this option as well. Transportation of CWD to a single inclusive "hub" school also seemed to lack feasibility,

especially in remote rural areas and big cities.

Both options were evaluated and most probably rejected in terms of desirability, affordability and feasibility.

Option III: transformation of special schools and special boarding institutions into special and inclusive schools with centers providing social services. At the same time gradual expansion of inclusive schools.

The MoE supported this option, most likely because it considered it capable of providing solutions to multiple problems such as the replication of inclusive education, deinstitutionalization, prevention of institutionalization and community-based service provision.

Taking the policy decision

In 2011, in partnership with UNICEF, the MoE developed two important documents: (i) The Inclusive Education Law which was submitted to Parliament; (ii) The Second State Program on the Further Development of Inclusive Education (2012-2016) which was submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers.

The Inclusive Education Law has never been adopted, and the Second State Program was not approved. Probably these entities conducted their own evaluation of the proposed options and realized that their implementation would require a significant increase in the government's allocation of resources. This evaluation complies with the Mitchell's idea of the so-called "pragmatic approach" when governments make policy decisions based on economic reasons (Mitchell, 2005).

The policy cycle came to an end. Later, the Minister of Education who had initiated the inclusive education reform was dismissed.

The Second Policy Cycle

After a new Minister of Education was appointed, a new inclusive education policy cycle started with the adoption of the National Strategy for Educational Development in 2013 which listed several strategic activities related to inclusive education (Presidential Office, 2013, pp. 6-7).

Within the second cycle another inclusive education pilot project has been initiated in two regular schools with the donor funding and the assistance of UNICEF. It seems that the new policy cycle has also begun with an incremental approach… However, the advantage of the new cycle is that it has started in a context of positive attitudinal changes generated by the pilot projects already undertaken in the previous cycle.

A First Inclusive Education Reform Cycle: Summary of Some Important Lessons Learned

The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how the idea of reform has been realized through being affected by a "national and cultural context" (Stephen Ball, 1998, p.127). This case analysis allows us to describe some conceptual lessons important for further national inclusive education reform, as well as contributing to international discourse about the country-specific peculiarities of implementing such reforms:

• In the beginning of the first cycle of inclusive education reform the idea of inclusion was not known to the education community nor to society at large. Consequently, the demand for inclusive education reform was not generated within the system and was not perceived as a need, but instead was externally brought about by the donor community. The fact that the reform was a creation of external players meant that the country itself had no feeling of 'owning' these ideas. Led by traditional pedagogical ideas, the dominant pedagogical community resisted ideas of inclusive education and were not invited to the dialogue.

• "National policy making is inevitably a…matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches… (Ball, 1994) (cited in Stephen J. Ball, 1998, p. 126). The Government of Azerbaijan being involved in the reform process attempted to generate its own reform ideas which were heavily influenced by the prevailing traditional perceptions and views. The government tried to find a balance between the international demand for inclusive education and the national belief in special, segregated education. The search for a balance between these mutually exclusive ideas resulted in the translation of the idea of inclusion into the hybridization of special schools. This pattern confirms the findings of international scholars such as Ball that "policy ideas are… received and interpreted differently within different …national ideologies" (Ball, 1998, p.126).

• "How changes are to occur, and what types of changes are required are the main questions confronted by those involved in the struggle for inclusion" (Barton & Armstrong, 2007), cited in D'Alessio, 2011, p. 24). The government, donors and civil society were probably too optimistic in believing that changes introduced at the level of teaching practices, without changes at the level of schools and their ethos, would be sufficient for changing prevailing pedagogical values. However, the history of inclusion indicates that "inclusive education required transformations in the organization and structure of schools and school systems, pedagogical reforms that mirrored new knowledge about how learning emerges, and institutional reformation…(Skrtic et al., 1996)" (cited in Artiles&Kozleski, 2016, p.8).

Concluding remark

Regular schools involved in pilot projects during the first policy cycle have continued inclusive teaching practices after the pilot project ended. This is probably an important evidence of a paradigm shift and creates hopes for the future success of inclusive education developments in the country.

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