

# The Challenges of Curriculum Reforms for Countries in Transition, 1991-2010

**Ulker Shafiyeva**

Head of the Department of Languages,  
The Academy of Public Administration under the President of Azerbaijan  
Email: ulkermn@yahoo.co.uk

## Abstract

Post-Soviet republics have undergone a variety of political and economic changes following the collapse of the Soviet Union to transform themselves into market-oriented open societies. Transitional countries have faced various problems, including social inequality, political unrest, economic hardship, and ethnic conflict. The countries had to introduce reforms in education in response to changing conditions to produce a new generation with ideas and skills that support pluralistic societies and market economies. Some countries opted for rapid, drastic reforms; others chose to restructure their economies while retaining centralized governments. Using examples from post-Soviet countries, the study examines the challenges and strategies in reforming the curriculum for states in transition. The study investigates the ideological aspects that have influenced curriculum revisions in post-Soviet nations.

**Keywords:** education, curriculum, challenges in transition, post-Soviet countries, reforms

## Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet republics embarked upon a wide range of political and economic reforms aimed at transition to democracy and market economy. Countries in transition faced multifaceted challenges associated with economic hardship, political turmoil, ethnic conflicts, and social disparity. Under new circumstances, the post-Soviet republics had to launch educational reforms to foster a new generation of people whose skills would be relevant to a market economy and whose ideas would be conducive to democracy. Some countries opted for rapid changes, others favored a more cautious approach, and third ones decided to reform economic structures while preserving centralized government.

This paper analyzes the ways and obstacles in redesigning curricula for states in transition and draws examples of post-Soviet countries. The paper investigates the ideological problems, such as nationalism and the persistence of the Marxist legacy, which impacted the curriculum reforms in the post-Soviet countries. While curriculum reforms are aimed at market economy and political liberalization, the paper focuses only on those aspects of reforms associated with liberal education (leaving aside a range of issues related to redesigning curriculum for the needs of the market economy).

We maintain that three aspects are essential for successful reform in the curriculum: teacher training, ideological content and management. This conclusion is linked with the theoretical works of Markee (1997), Caltaks (2003), Hartley (1998), and other scholars in the field. In the first part, we analyze the context and initial experience of curriculum reform and then reflect on its three aspects. We also summarize that financial resources might be useful if only the political will directs curriculum reforms toward market-oriented and liberal education.

### **Challenges of Transition**

At the beginning of educational reforms in post-Soviet countries, many experts came to some common agreement that reforms should have been aimed at dismantling the Soviet type of education and installing Western ones. The first decade of transition (the 1990s) manifested that merely the replacement of subjects of curriculum (e.g., History of Communist Party to History of Social Movements) was not going to make significant changes. At the beginning of the transition, reforms, in many cases, ended up with cosmetic results.

Liberal education in Western countries aims at consolidation, fixation, and promotion of socioeconomic achievements of the developed countries. In contrast, the task before post-Soviet countries was completely different – the countries' educational establishments needed to promote ideas about an open economy and society among those who have lived for decades under the communist regime. This task was complicated due to ethnic conflicts, financial shortages and social tensions. Moreover, the educators had difficulty switching from the legacy and mentality of Marxism to a liberal one. They resisted the power change in the management and conceptual shifts in the curriculum.

In the 1920s, John Dewey, a great educator of democracy, propagated his liberal ideas in China. However, Marxism later prevailed in China due to several factors, and Dewey's legacy was forgotten (Hoyt, 2006). The failure of Dewey was attributed, besides other reasons, to social habits and traditions in Chinese society. Even though the post-Soviet area was not a homogenous space (e.g., Moldova is quite different from Uzbekistan), 70 years of communism left a set of similar political and social

habits. "A preacher" with Dewey's ideas would have failed in post-Soviet countries as Dewey failed 80 years ago in China.

"Curricular innovation always takes place within a matrix of cultural, political, economic, institutional and administrative variables that directly influence the ability of project participants to innovate in meaningful ways. The extent to which adopters accept or reject innovations is influenced by personalities and previous experiences of participants." (Markee, 1997: 172). That experience in the USSR was tailored in every way to Marxism.

In 1991, the post-Soviet society had several generations of people who were educated within the codes of Marxist-Leninist ethics. However, some experts argued that the post-Soviet societies were ripe for changes even before the collapse of the USSR, and the problem was in the financial shortage and structural approach. Ahmad Abdinov, Deputy Minister of Education of Azerbaijan, wrote in 1996, "Now that Marxism has been rejected, a void or vacuum exists, which must be replaced with something new. Educators must rethink their perspectives. They will need supportive materials in the classroom, books, newspapers, and journals to do this. Admittedly, this is one of the most difficult problems we face today. We desperately need new material for a new ideological approach." (Abdinov, 1996, para 19)

Gunters Caltaks maintains that the problem is not of a financial nature but of a managerial one. "If there is coherent and concerted action between teacher-training universities, the ministries of education, and curriculum development and examination institutions, much can be achieved -even without substantial financial resources. A 'good' educational reform is not only the privilege of rich countries or brilliant intellectuals but rather the outcome of an organized political will, wide contacts, and the collaboration of human skills." (Caltaks, 2003: 16)

In the 1990s, the curriculum was negatively affected by the sharp decline in public funds and the delay in reforms was justified by financial problems. The 2000s brought some wealth to several countries - Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan among them, due to oil exports. However, the educational system still suffered from the slow pace of reforms caused by the rigidity of structures and traditions of the past decades.

The leadership of many post-Soviet countries, including those with the centralized system, realized the necessity of a certain degree of liberalization as countries entered the global economy and competed in the global market. Moreover, other countries which went through the so-called "colour revolutions" -Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, faced challenges in education to promote ideas of the open market.

As Caltaks (2003: 6) points out, it was also soon realized that human capital remained a key asset for reform. Experience in Central European countries, which have acceded to the European Union, manifested that reforms were poorly coordinated even though it was based on reliable outside competence, consultation and finance from Western Europe. Therefore, in Eastern European and Central Asian post-Soviet

countries, various segments of the educational sector had to be put in one coherent curriculum design to propel educational reforms. Those segments of the curriculum were teacher training, ideological context, and management.

Sharvanidze's study (2003) of educational reforms in Georgia focused on the abovementioned aspects of the curriculum, mainly exploring the linkage between education and market demands. The linkage between national curriculum and teacher training was studied in Hartley's (1998) article about the reforms in British schools. He also emphasized the role of the government in redesigning the curriculum.

Markee points to several principles of curricular innovation. It is a complex phenomenon involving two aspects: firstly, the primary goal of any project in the curriculum is to promote professional change, which specifically involves engaging teachers in developing new materials and skills; secondly, political, economic and cultural context (1997: 172). Further, it requires good communication among project participants (1997: 174) and a strategic approach to managing change (1997: 175). The first two aspects correspond to the definition in the paper – teacher training and ideological context accordingly; the other two are related to management.

One of the problems in post-Soviet countries was the acute need for teacher training. Training of a single teacher within the Western educational standards requires a sufficient amount of funds. It was necessary to conduct professional development courses in each country. Having acquired new textbooks, many teachers still employed old Soviet techniques, particularly in rural areas.

"It was easier to create a new curriculum and textbooks than to create new teaching competencies. In all aspects of learning, teachers tend to reproduce the same social communication practices they experienced while learning in the classroom. Unfortunately, even giving credit to a high level of teaching knowledge in general, the teacher-training universities and colleges of the former socialist countries lacked the skills and practices of interactive learning and the practical application of knowledge." (Caltaks, 2003: 8).

Teachers might have known the facts about liberal education, but they could not apply relevant techniques for encouraging competitive and opposing views in classrooms. A smooth transition to a market-oriented society required not only the acquisition of specific knowledge but also the development of actual skills and attitudes in favor of open, pluralistic public life in the broad sense. "Both the content and delivery of education needed to be changed in order to make curricula more flexible, more student-centered and more focused on problem-solving and the application of concepts, rather than the pure memorization of facts" (Caltaks, 2003: 9)

The Asian Development Bank study on six post-Soviet countries concluded about the problems in curriculum reform, "Education is mainly focused on the absorption and reproduction of facts rather than on the development of problem-solving and critical

thinking skills; the content of education is predominantly theoretical and of limited relevance to everyday life; and the relationship between teachers and pupils tends to be hierarchical, the teacher being seen as the owner of knowledge and pupils expected to reproduce it, rather than personal in which teachers attend to an individual pupil's own distinct abilities and needs." (2004: 10)

A much more complicated problem was the ideological influence on curriculum. Ismailova (2004), in her research about educational reform in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, explored the issue of indigenization of the curriculum on history. The indigenization of the curriculum was aimed at the assertion of Kyrgyz identity, but at the same time, it led to the marginalization of the non-Kyrgyz population in the country. This process was a part of the wave of nationalism in post-Soviet countries exacerbated by ethnic conflicts.

In many other post-Soviet countries, textbooks on history and literature were replete with inflammatory texts and distorted facts due to interethnic conflicts. Under such circumstances, education for an inclusive, pluralistic society was overshadowed by nationalist rhetoric. "Tasks of building the new nation, including a shared vision among citizens about their future in the region and the world, required a new ideological background for the whole education system. The universal challenge to find the right balance between preserving the national identity complicated by recent local history demanded skillfully designed curricula with a strong emphasis on democracy, and intercultural, communicative and value aspects of education." (Caltaks, 2003: 9).

The ideological struggle in post-Soviet countries was multifaceted. This process was complicated by the return of religion in post-atheist societies and the global geopolitical tension characterized by the clash of civilizations. Western democracy was frequently associated with the chaos of the market economy and a rage of wild capitalism. Alieva claims, "communist ideology, predominant until recently, with its ideas of justice and brotherhood, oddly enough promoted a spreading of bourgeois Western values rather than democratic values." (1999: 2)

In this regard, Heyneman (2000) points to the necessity of proper education for social cohesion. In his opinion, former socialist countries are finding that nation-building in the 21st century is significantly different than in the 17th century when it could be enforced by using a single authoritarian control. Today, people have multiple local initiatives and open access to uncensored information online. "Many authorities find themselves without sufficient experience and without the traditions for compromise and consensus necessary for success." (p. 186)

Recipes for overcoming problems were many. Some scholars suggested using an American model (Ozcan, 2006). Ozcan points out, "...education for democracy is a significant component of the public school curriculum both in the United States and Europe. In US schools, in addition to the civics and government courses, many

extracurricular activities prepare youth as democratic citizens." (p.2) However, Ozcan does not view the current crisis with democracy in the US and does not appreciate the different political, economic, and cultural contexts in America compared to post-Soviet countries. However, his reasoning about using the American model was based on certain principles of the US educational system. The important features are the lack of centralization, which gives more power to local educational establishments, limited interference from the federal government, and some common guidance for forging national unity and teaching pluralism. Schools in the US are closely linked with local communities and municipal authorities.

Relations between educational establishments and civil society in post-Soviet countries were radically different. "In order for schools to become relevant to people's needs, they have to open themselves to society, which in practice means more connections and shared responsibilities with the local community. (Caltaks, 2003: 10)

However, for example, in the case of Azerbaijan, the experience proved that sometimes centralized control could reduce corruption and increase the quality of education. Thus, a standardized entrance examination to universities introduced in Azerbaijan since 1992 received highly positive remarks from many international organizations.

The reformation of the post-Soviet educational system was not about the problem of loose or firm power but the nature of power and managerial skills. The six countries study conducted by the Asian Development Bank (2004) revealed the problem with coordination and cooperation as key obstacles. In Azerbaijan, the study concluded regarding the causes of resistance to change: "A common problem is that different aspects of education reform may move at different paces. This can lead to poorly coordinated and contradicting policies, misunderstandings, and tensions among people. In some instances, regulations may not change as quickly as in actual practice. In other instances, new regulations may not be enforced and come into actual practice. Among the central challenges of the education reforms is the need to develop stronger management capacity at all levels of the administration." (Asian Development Bank, 2004: 7).

However, with the arrival of income from oil resources, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Education embarked on a wide range of reforms, especially the introduction of a new curriculum. Education programs have achieved some notable progress as the transition period transformed into a new era, leaving behind the limits of "post-Soviet" as a notion applied to countries (Samadova, 2016). However, the government and society in many transition countries (and now thirty years after the independence, we should probably speak about post-transition) must overcome the habits and traditions formed over the past decades.

## **Conclusion**

The curriculum transition in post-Soviet countries had been challenging but brought positive results. While financial resources had been an essential element of educational reforms, especially for teacher training, the other two aspects – ideology and management required political will, strategy and coordination. Even though many post-Soviet countries continue to face problems in the field of education, it should be noted that, in general, the educational system, particularly in Azerbaijan, has undergone significant positive changes. At the same time, there is still a need for more reforms of the education management system, both at the macro level and at the level of individual educational institutions. This applies to both secondary and higher education.

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