

School Leadership in Azerbaijani Early Childhood Education: Implications for Education Transfer

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Abstract

This study looks at educational transfer from a school leadership perspective. Imported, internationally-inspired educational interventions designed to change or update teaching methodology that is considered outdated or 'traditional' by the international education community cannot change local leadership and educational paradigms. This study focuses on educational change at the micro level, specifically on the role of the preschool director in leading change. The results suggest that leadership is a critical part of educational transfer, but that transformational leadership theory may not be sufficient to describe specific leaders operating in contexts where consciousness of alternate leadership or educational discourses is lacking. In addition, the case studies suggest that it is difficult to separate leadership change from educational consciousness in both school and education system transformation.

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Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat təhsil islahatını məktəb liderliyi perspektivindən təhlil edir. Beynəlxalq təhsil ictimaiyyəti tərəfindən köhnəlmiş və ya “ənənəvi” hesab edilən tədris metodologiyasını dəyişmək və ya yeniləmək məqsədilə tərtib edilən idxal edilmiş, beynəlxalq təcrübədən qaynaqlanan təhsil müdaxilələri yerli liderliyi və təhsil paradigmasını dəyişə bilməz. Bu tədqiqat təhsildə baş verən dəyişikliyə mikro səviyyədə, daha spesifik olaraq, məktəbəqədər müəssisə direktorunun dəyişikliyi aparmasındakı roluna nəzər salır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, liderlik təhsil islahatının mühüm bir hissəsini təşkil edir, lakin həmin dəyişikliyə yönəlmiş rəhbərlik alternativ liderlik təfəkkürünün və ya təhsil mühakiməsinin çatışmadığı kontekslərdə fəaliyyət göstərən spesifik liderləri təsvir etmək üçün kifayət etməyə bilər. Əlavə olaraq, fərdi hallar üzrə aparılmış tədqiqatlar göstərir ki, həm məktəbdə, həm də təhsil sistemi transformasiyasında liderlik dəyişikliyi təhsil təfəkküründən ayırmaq çətindir.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee koulutuksen muutosta koulun johtamisen perspektiivistä. Maahantuodut, kansainvälisesti inspiroidut koulutuksen interventiot muovaavat ja päivittävät kansainvälisen koulutusyhteisön näkökulmasta vanhentuneita opetusmenetelmiä, mutta ne eivät pysty muuttamaan paikallisia johtamisen ja koulutuksen paradigmoja. Tässä tutkimuksessa keskitytään koulutukselliseen muutokseen mikrotasolla, erityisesti varhaiskasvatuksen johtajan rooliin muutoksen johtamisessa. Tutkimuksen mukaan johtaminen on kriittinen osa koulutuksellista muutosta, mutta transformationaalinen johtamisteoria ei ehkä riitä kuvaamaan tiettyjen johtajien toimintaa konteksteissa, joissa tietoisuus vaihtoehtoisesta johtajuudesta tai koulutuksellisesta keskustelusta puuttuu. Lisäksi, tapaustutkimukset osoittavat että on vaikeaa erottaa johtajuuden muutosta koulutuksellisesta tietoisuudesta sekä koulun että koulutusjärjestelmän muutoksesta.

Introduction

From 1998 to 2003 the Open Society Institute's (OSI) education program piloted its Step-by-Step (SbS) teaching methodology in 53 kindergartens across Azerbaijan.² This was the first attempt to develop national child-centred educational practices at the preschool level in Azerbaijan and was a major initiative of the Soros Foundation's work not only in Azerbaijan but across the post-Soviet region.³ The main project initiatives ended in 2003⁴ with SbS methodology gaining recognition by the Ministry of Education as an alternative teaching methodology for national preschool education (formally allowing teachers/directors to continue implementation of the child-centred teaching program). However, the end of major project activities also ended funding and technical support for the 53 preschools which piloted the program. Following the end of the project in 2003 and a 2006 preschool privatisation initiative which closed or disrupted many of the participating

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- 2 Step by Step (SbS) is a comprehensive education reform program for children from birth through age ten, which introduces child-centred, individualised teaching methodologies and supports community and family involvement in preschools and primary schools. The Step by Step Program was developed by Georgetown University experts based on the US HeadStart Program and operates based on a five-year developmental framework in each country. Strategically, the program begins in each country by developing fully-funded model preschool and/or primary school classrooms, and then works to promote low-cost expansion to new classrooms, relying on matching funds from communities. Special emphasis is placed on the long-term replicability of these demonstration schools, through work with Ministries of Education and institutions that train new teachers and re-train experienced teachers. At the end of the development period the program aims to have established high quality, self-sustaining Step by Step training programs that are officially accredited and are available to all teachers or schools seeking to learn the new methods. The program focuses on the needs of underserved children, especially minorities, children with disabilities, Roma, refugee children, and all children living in poverty. The country's participating in OSI's 1998–2003 SbS initiative were: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Haiti, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, and Ukraine.
 - 3 Step by Step Program acted as Soros's 'business card' in each country. For example, George Soros highlighted this program in when he met former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev.
 - 4 OSI has continued to support the development of SbS materials and the implementing organisation in Azerbaijan.

preschools, most of the pilot kindergartens returned to traditional, pre-SbS methodologies, or mixed SbS and traditional models, making conscious decisions about which SbS principles and activities to continue and which to stop.⁵ However, despite the lack of funding, professional development opportunities for the staff, challenges dealing with staff and parents, and questionable returns in terms of prestige or additional pupils, some of the pilot kindergartens continue to self-identify with SbS methodologies.

OSI's SbS program is a great example of an internationally inspired educational intervention designed to change or update teaching methodology that is considered outdated or 'traditional' by the international education community. This article takes a new approach to the evaluation of educational transfer by looking at the results of OSI's SbS program from a school leadership perspective.

Over the last decade of implementing the SbS program and other educational initiatives, the authors have been struck by the importance of the personal commitment of school leaders in determining the success of project implementation. Although leadership has become an important part of the education discussion (e.g. Heck, 1998; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004; Fullan, 2005) most research on the north-south spread of educational programs and ideas has approached the topic from a general comparative approach (Anderson-Levitt, 2003), compared specific teaching practices (e.g. Anderson-Levitt, 2004), or taken a systems approach to educational programs (Bartlett, 2003).

On the other hand, leadership studies have demonstrated the importance (if indirect) of school leaders to school effectiveness and student learning (Heck 1998) as well as on schools and systems change (e.g. Fullan 2005; Bass, 1990). Although leadership has been studied across diverse contexts, including Azerbaijan (Magno, 2009; Magno & Kazimzade, forthcoming 2012), most studies have focused on identifying leadership characteristics across a large sample of school leaders in a particular context (Oplatka, 2004), or on comparing features of leadership and work between a few select countries, usually restricted to Western Europe, the U.S. and East Asia (Oplatka, 2004; Puroila & Rosemary, 2002; Karila, 2002). In addition, few studies have examined how the western-grounded concepts

5 The issue of cherry picking SbS concepts was relevant throughout the entire process.

of transformational and distributed leadership can be applied across diverse contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

This study focuses on educational change at the local level, specifically on the role of the preschool director in leading or inhibiting change. In-depth interviews with two school directors suggest that leadership is a critical part of educational transfer, but that the dichotomy between transformational and transactional leadership may not be sufficient to describe specific leaders operating in situations where the system significantly inhibits innovation and change, and where school leaders have a weak understanding of imported leadership and educational concepts. Transformational leadership depends as much on educational consciousness to change from 'traditional' to 'internationally-accepted' teaching methods as leadership skills, and a more contextualised look at leadership is necessary to define and evaluate transformational leadership.

Methodology and limitations

This study is based on the experience of the authors implementing the SbS program from 1998–2003, participation in research on school leadership (Magno, 2009; Magno & Kazmizade, 2012), and two in-depth interviews conducted with preschool directors who were among the 53 institutions that originally implemented the SbS program in the early 2000s.

The interviews were designed to uncover deeper differences in approach to ECE such as how participants define leadership in early childhood education settings and how they explain the origins of their leadership skills. Because context and even explicit professional experiences were remarkably constant between the two directors (very similar age, education, professional development, and career track), deeper differences in approach to and understanding of ECE were hypothesised to hold the key to answering why one director continued SbS, while another reverted to more traditional teaching methods.

Interview questions were developed by Dr. Cathryn Magno during her 2009 visit to Azerbaijan, but were adapted to ECE context by the authors. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse themes across two cases. The identities of the interviewees are hidden by pseudonyms. Both interviews were conducted in July 2012, and initial research findings were reported at

the European Early Childhood Education Research Conference (EECERA, Porto, August–September 2012).

This study should be considered a starting point for the exploration of both educational program analysis and educational leadership in Azerbaijan. Although the authors are closely familiar with SbS and can provide rich detail into project circumstances, environment, and the implementation process, no data on continuing use of SbS was collected after the end of the project in 2003. Thus, all findings are based on the two interviews and personal experience implementing the SbS program.

Educational transfer from west to east

Based on the U.S. early childhood program Head Start, SbS looked to infuse western early childhood education principles into countries dominated by the Soviet education methodology. The SbS experience in Azerbaijan (and the larger Azeri school-reform movement) can inform the long-standing debate between the universality or particularity of educational systems (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Educational literature contains somewhat of a dichotomy between world-theory scholars who focus on the convergence of schooling world-wide on a “common model” that includes a basic school and classroom structure, mass participation, and even common core curriculums and anthropological and comparative approaches that focus on the uniqueness and even diverging qualities of education in different contexts. Despite general agreement that ideas, curriculums, and principles undergo a re-contextualization as they are reinterpreted in local contexts (e.g. Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000), the crux of debate is where change happens: “Does true school reform happen at the level of global and national policies, or does real change happen at the level of classrooms and schools (Anderson-Levitt, 2003)?”

The results of the SbS program, which proposed child-centred methodologies that would move Azerbaijani early childhood centres toward western educational standards and practices, provides an interesting look into the dichotomy found in the literature. On an individual level, the project shows a lack of convergence toward international educational standards. Program implementation varied widely between institutions with only a very small group of institutions, perhaps seven of 53, continuing to

self-identify with SbS⁶ post 2003 while the rest reverted back to traditional methods or created their own mix of pre-SbS and SbS methodologies.

On the other hand, despite the low level of retention for SbS preschools, the program made an impact nationally in 2009 with the unveiling of national preschool and primary education reform. The newly instituted curriculum incorporated many of the child-centred principles and methodologies now standard in the international literature and first proposed (in Azerbaijan) by the SbS program.

Leadership for change?

A similar universality/particularity debate is being argued within the leadership field where research, even when extended to different contexts, has remained nearly exclusively grounded in western theory (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). Understandings of leadership in the West have evolved from the principal as a manager, to street-level bureaucrat, change agent, instructional leader, educational leader, and most recently to transformational leader (Heck, 1998). Transformational leadership has two components. First, transformational leaders are able to “broaden and elevate the interests of their employees... generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group... and stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group (Bass, 1990, 21).” In contrast, transactional leadership is often described as the leadership relationship found in common work environments that is based on “transactions between manager and employees such as promise and reward for good performance or threat and discipline for poor performance. The second part of transformational leadership involves looking beyond the entrenched status quo and creating change both within the organisation and throughout the larger system (Fullan, 2005).

Fullan takes transformation leadership outside the organisation, applying it to a leader’s role not only on his/her institution, but his/her impact on the entire educational system. To Fullan, systems thinking, or consciousness of a leader’s and the institution’s role in the larger environment is a necessary aspect of embracing change and incorporating it into the larger organisation.

6 Although compliance with methodology has not been evaluated since the end of the program.

Working beyond immediate personal or institutional utility is a key part of the transformation leadership as defined by Fullan. Under this definition, the main mark of a school head is not simply what kind of organisation they are able to create, but how many good leaders they create who can go further in creating system-wide changes (Fullan, 2005).

A second aspect of modern leadership discourse refers to distributed leadership, the development of shared roles for thinking and acting within an organisation that are based within an “implicit framework of understanding” that creates “concertive action” (Gronn, 2000 in Magno, 2009, 27). In other words, leadership that is distributed involves many people in tasks not simply through delegation, but through creating a culture of joint thinking and action across organisational levels, activities, and goals (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Leadership in context

Both transformational and distributional leadership theory are strongly rooted in a largely western context. It is not clear whether a single definition of leadership can be applied globally, nor how leadership ideas are transferred between nations and cultures (Heck, 1998; Magno, 2009). It is quite clear however, that the variance in operating environments in schools and educational systems creates important distinctions in leadership and teaching practices even within the Western context (Puroila & Rosemary, 2002; Anderson-Levitt, 2004). Leadership practiced in more culturally distant areas exhibits significant contextual differences from that of the west, including highly-centralised systems, greater authoritarianism and less independent schools (Oplatka, 2004; Puroila, Melnik, & Sarvela-Pikkarainen, 2002).

A contextual approach to leadership links the practice of leadership with social interaction within the local community and national environment, expanding leadership practices and understandings beyond localisation in the leader and placing them within culturally based social interactions and understandings (Karila, 2002). Azerbaijani principals and preschool directors operate in a similar environment to other developing countries. As a result, some similar characteristics including, limited autonomy from the national ministry, absences of instructional leadership, low degree of change

initiation, and conservative and autocratic leadership tendencies have been observed (Oplatka, 2004; Magno, 2009). Preschools also exhibit similarities to the Russian early childhood environment which includes a greater role differentiation among staff within a hierarchical system and more focus on evaluation and control (Puroila et al., 2002; Karila, 2002).

Magno found that the local understanding of “leadership” is inconsistent with western literature’s understanding of transformational and distributed leadership. Most principals do not feel like they can set goals for their schools above and beyond the requirements of the Ministry of Education, and neither do they feel like there is room for more than one leader within an organisation (Magno, 2009).

Building a leadership consciousness: Interviews with two school leaders

Two directors of preschool institutions who participated in the SbS program from 1998–2003 were interviewed. Both directors lead preschools in Baku and have very similar professional development histories. However, Firangiz’s preschool reverted back to traditional teaching methods after the end of the program, while Maryam and her preschool continue to identify with the SbS program.

Despite both being educated as pedagogues (Firangiz in Preschool Pedagogy and Methodology and Maryam in Philology and Teaching Language), neither one originally set out to work in preschool education. However, Maryam did desire to work in education, recounting that that she always wanted to be educated and educate others. She liked when others listened to her and realised that in order to “have attention of others she need to know very much and do everything very well.” She reported that her attraction for teaching and her role as a leader developed in childhood, saying, “I played a role of a teacher, I gathered children when my mom was out at work and taught them, I knew that it was very interesting to be a teacher, this is the profession, when one could always have followers and when one could always influence others.” After graduating from university, Maryam could not find a job in school after graduation and accepted a methodologist position at the preschool where years later she was appointed as a director.

Firangiz showed a similar desire for a leadership position, though not necessarily one in education. She recalled that she first realised that it was possible to become a boss and lead others when her sister was working as a teacher practitioner in a preschool. Though her original idea was to become a doctor, she settled on preschool pedagogy because she did not have the test scores for the medical faculty. After graduation Firangiz worked as a member of a trade union, but when her youngest son was one and half and it was time to return to work after maternity leave she decided to give her kids to preschool and go work at the preschool herself. She remembered thinking that after a certain amount of time she could become a director at a preschool and satisfy the wish that was even written in her school graduation album – to become a director.

Both directors seem to have achieved their goals of having influence and educating people, and despite the differences in their ideas about education and leadership it is difficult to label Maryam as a more transformational leader. For example, both directors defined setting a good example as an important part of leadership. Firangiz, the director who ended the official SbS program, mentioned responsibility, keeping promises, and the ability to talk openly and share concerns. On the other hand, Maryam, a director who continues to identify with the SbS program, defined leadership as helping others achieve more and mentioned the specific example of working with two pedagogues during the SbS program as an experience that taught her how to work together and be productive. Both leaders stressed the aspect of being role models, but, while Maryam used the words “team” and “we” to describe the working relationship in her preschool, Firangiz used the word “staff.”

In addition, self-evaluation of their leadership understandings show important, but small differences in philosophy and understanding between the two directors. Firangiz reported that her motivation for the development of her leadership is recognition and differentiation. On the other hand, Maryam reported that she has always wanted to achieve something beyond simply reaching pre-set targets and following regulations – a very unusual attitude among school leaders based on Magno’s (2009) findings.

Maryam describes her leadership development under the SbS program as the movement from the fulfilment of externally imposed duties to trying new things and motivating people for new achievements. She also reported a different way of thinking about management, describing that even before

becoming a director she had always wanted to achieve more than “consistency with the expectations.” Although, she did not have a clear understanding of what she wanted to change and what new things she wanted to bring to her profession, she emphasised that SbS was a period of intensive learning that taught her two things that influenced her development as a leader. Firstly, she realised that even when the person assumes managing position and could be considering herself as a completed person, she still has something to learn from others and teach others how to do to achieve the change; and second, she realised that in order to manage the work effectively one should be open for other ideas and thoughts and should be able to use from different understandings in order to achieve a “sense of collective.”

Although, the idea of a sense of collective is missing from Firangiz, she describes a similar transformation of her leadership style from admittedly too controlling and authoritative in her first preschool to developing a more family-like atmosphere where all workers know their responsibilities. The first preschool in which she became a director was a large preschool that she was able to develop into one of the best in Azerbaijan. After leaving due to the stress of the job, she found a smaller preschool nearer to her home and again successfully built up the centre into one of the most respected institutions in Azerbaijan. She signed up for the SbS, she admitted, primarily to improve the material conditions of the preschool, and despite saying the program was interesting, she did not attribute significant impact on her leadership to the SbS program. However, Firangiz did describe ideas similar to Maryam’s achievement beyond the “expectations” when recounting her experience in a 1996 Ministry of Education project on self-monitoring. From this program she learned not wait for Ministry inspections, and rather to take personal responsibility for her preschool.

Magno (2009) writes that school leadership, specifically the concepts of transformational and distributional leadership, “stands poised as the catalyst” for systemic reform toward democratic schooling in Azerbaijan. Maryam demonstrates that significant changes at the micro level are possible through leadership and educational programs. According to a further comparison of the two directors based on their influence on the national education framework according to Fullan’s (2005) definition of transformational leadership as system-wide change, Maryam’s centre has produced numerous influential pedagogues and trainers who work with child-centred methodology, and Maryam herself was invited by the

Ministry to participate in the development of the new national preschool curriculum. Firangiz, on the other hand, has not produced any pedagogues known beyond her centre and is not involved in policy discussions.

However, the system wide impact of Maryam and the pedagogues developed through her centre is unclear, putting into question the potential impact of transformational leadership on an external system that significantly inhibits innovation and change orientation. For example, Maryam's centre was one of the preschools privatized in 2006 and it continues to operate in a legal vacuum. Both centres are considered among the best in Azerbaijan by the Ministry of Education and it is not clear that the system values Maryam's educational transformation in any concrete way.

Building an educational consciousness

Numerous studies have pointed to the importance of the external environment in terms of formal regulations and legislation (Karila, 2002), system structure (Oplatka, 2004), and the cultural and ideological reality of society (Nivala, 2002) in shaping leadership ideas and practices. Magno (2009) suggests that a major shift in school culture is needed to conceptualise transformational and distributed leadership, but the two case studies suggest that it is difficult to separate leadership consciousness from educational consciousness in both local and macro-level transformation.

Neither education, nor leadership occurs in a vacuum, and a child-centred educational approach of the kind proposed by the SbS program necessitates a rethinking of relationships both between children and teachers within classrooms and between teachers and school directors. In essence, SbS espouses a form of school democratisation, shifting focus from the teacher as the sole provider of knowledge, skills, and direction, to a holistic focus on developing, listening to, and responding to the needs and desires of the child. It was one of the first, and continues to be an important, western-motivated educational program proposing a western, child-centred perspective.

The 'Western' model represented by the SbS program focuses on child-centredness, parental involvement, and a more equal child-teacher relationship. Although liberation ideology is not made explicit, one can draw parallels to Fréire's recognition that schooling is a political act that

can emancipate or further oppress (Bartlett, 2003, 152). In fact, part of the Open Society Institute's stated goal for the program was to "engender democratic principles and practices in young children and their families" and to "promote students' critical thinking, creativity, and leadership skills which were perceived to be lacking from the traditional educational approach" (SbS evaluation report).

Fréire differentiates between "banking education," which rests on hierarchical relationships between students as "objects of assistance" and teachers as "owners of knowledge," and problem-posing education, which allows questioning of the status quo and relies upon an egalitarian relationship between teachers and students and a dialogical pedagogy (Fréire 1972, 56). Problem-posing education and a focus on holistic development, development through play, and child choice is at odds with the 'traditional' focus on teacher control and knowledge development in Azeri classrooms. Thus, the SbS program was a redesign of classroom interaction from the traditional to a Western-developed child-centred approach. This redesign requires a significant rethink in the teacher's understanding of the purpose and principles of education. At the classroom level, this rethink stems from a greater orientation toward Fréire's concept of problem posing education and requires a critical assessment of the "theories of knowledge and learning that shape the way people think about education and its purpose" (Bartlett, 2003).

The interviews suggest that both directors view the SbS, child-centred model of child development as substantially different from the traditional, Soviet-based methods currently dominant in Azeri preschools. For example, Firangiz views the two approaches in a clear dichotomy:

"SbS is innovative and creative approach, respecting child's individuality and requires hard work of teachers on own self-improvement. But traditional approach is more about collective work, being more focused on development of children's academic skills and building their knowledge basis."

Firangiz recognises the difference between the two approaches and admitted that SbS was an interesting learning experience especially in terms of providing a different view of the child.

However, Maryam described her first experience in learning about SbS program philosophy and principles as discovering a totally "new world of

childhood” and “professional sensitivity of people working with young children.” When she was asked to describe the meaning of the word she used – “sensitivity” – in that particular context, she explained this as a new approach for listening to and understanding children. Maryam described that traditional programs implemented in preschool settings focus on content-based knowledge and academic skills, such as reading, writing, drawing, counting, reciting poems.

The idea and terminology of two-levels of consciousness – educational and leadership – comes from Nivala (2002). He proposes that first, a director’s understanding of both leadership and educational paradigm is directly tied to the contextual influences of the legislative, political, and cultural environment. In order for leaders in educational institutions to enact changes (as described by transformational leadership models), they must be conscious of the aims of the work in early childhood education settings (substance) as well as their roles as administrators and leaders. In other words, changes in consciousness in both leadership and educational content are important because “pedagogical leadership can only be actualised within the limits of the leader’s pedagogic consciousness” (Nivala, 2002, 18).

Consciousness is a major part of Nivala’s overall contextual framework bounding a school director’s actions. Though both directors recognise the difference between the two educational approaches, they differ substantially in their internalization (and valuation) of the child-centred methodology and the extent to which the introduction to SbS has affected their understanding and practice. Although the SbS program did not specifically target school leaders and did not provide school leadership theory or training, Maryam clearly internalised the program impacting her perception of both education and leadership.

For example, Maryam described her aims for preschool education as going beyond simplistic preparation of children for entering the elementary school to developing talents and “building the first stair to their future.” She demonstrated an emotional attachment to the SbS ideas recounting her realization that in order to teach children effectively adults must “listen to them, observe them and learn from them.” The last expression – “learn from them [children]” – she said with a smile, elaborating on her ideas that not too many people responsible for the provision of ECEC in our country think this way even now.

Maryam reported a similar impact on her leadership practice, recounting how SbS enhanced her openness to new ideas and thoughts and led to the development of a “sense of collective.” She credited “the two Svetas,”⁷ for always sharing their ideas with her and then sharing with the rest of the team. Thus, for Maryam, the transformation of educational consciousness toward an educational model that implicitly utilised distributed leadership principles enabled a leadership transformation as well.

Firangiz offers more traditional views on early childhood education, demonstrating her preference for the Soviet-based view of preschool as a preparation for the next stage of schooling. She reported that the main duty of a preschool principal is to “lead the process of a child’s training and development” and her main responsibility as the health of the child. For example, she responded that children should attend preschool after the age of three when they are able to express their own feelings and control themselves. This demonstrates her belief that the primary goal of preschool is to teach elementary academic skills that prepare children for primary school. In addition, her evaluation of the biggest issues concerning her preschool concerns almost exclusively material things, such as small classrooms, absence of outdoor space, and lack of music classroom. Though undoubtedly important, the limited category of concerns suggests a lack of transformational thinking on new approaches to child education, rather a focus on small changes that can improve specific services that are already offered.

When speaking of innovation and learning Firangiz recounts how she has read almost every book on childhood education and that she always buys one for herself and one for her centre. She describes herself as always being the first to innovate, but her examples, getting computers into her centre and starting computer and English language courses, do not get to the heart of leadership or pedagogical innovation taught by the SbS program. When comparing the current early childhood education in Azerbaijan to the situation under the Soviet Union, she also focuses solely on material things such as funding and food for children, suggesting that she has not been affected by any changes in teaching practices and ideologies. Although Firangiz is able to clearly articulate the difference between the western, SbS-introduced approach and the traditional, Soviet-

7 Both were employees of Maryam’s centre during the implementation of the project.

based practices, she does not recognise the infusion of child-centred early childhood methodology (either into her centre as part of the SbS project or into the national curriculum since 2009) as a significant change compared to changing levels of state material support for early childhood institutions.

Although Firangiz recognised the difference between the two preschool programs and was very capable of reorienting her preschool in line with the SbS program if she chose to, her lack of belief in the educational components of the program seemed to be the core factor preventing a transformational integration of the SbS program within her preschool. For example, she describes difficulties with her teachers accepting the program and complaints of parents as the main reasons for only keeping certain aspects of the program. She described herself as having attempted to explain the program and convince her pedagogues, but said the discussions were not effective. However, given her history as an effective and decisive leader, it seems that this failure to convert the preschool to the SbS program had as much to do with her lack of belief in the program as anything else.

Conclusion

The child-centred, problem-posing teaching model stands in contrast to how most teachers and education professionals in Azerbaijan view teaching and learning. Education in the Azerbaijani context is seen as autonomous from societal forces, and knowledge is thought to be transmitted through a “universal, cognitive developmental series,” or the teaching process (Bartlett, 2003, 153). This leads teachers to focus on giving information and lends itself to teacher-centred classrooms and a more centralised system. In the local Azerbaijani context, early childhood education professionals see their job as first taking care of children’s physical needs such as food and rest, and secondly passing academic knowledge such as reading, writing, and arithmetic from teacher to child. The goal of ECE is seen as preparation for primary school and knowledge is viewed through a much more autonomous model.

On a macro level, educational projects attempt to shape the way people think about schooling and its purpose and the overall theory of knowledge and learning they internalise are important not only in who benefits from them, but in how they are adapted by local cultures (Bartlett, 2003, 2–3).

The macro, institutional changes envisioned by the SbS program included “contribution to broader reform efforts” and the “development of students’ critical thinking, creativity, and leadership skills which were perceived to be lacking from the traditional educational approach (SbS Evaluation).” Program driven, macro educational change must then make holistic change in how society and educational actors perceive education (Moss, presentation in Opatija, Croatia Oct, 2012).

However, the two case studies suggest that on a micro-level institutional change is very dependent on the role of the director. The director’s change-orientation, in-turn, depends on his/her understanding of both leadership and education. Although theories of transformational leadership set out behaviours, interactions, and values allowing leaders to achieve changes within their organisations and broader systems, it is unclear how such models of behaviour can be applied to leaders and contexts lacking exposure to both these leadership ideas and new models for early childhood education.

The case-studies suggest that leadership and educational consciousness are inter-related to such an extent that they cannot be separated. Maryam’s commitment to and internalisation of the educational model drove her adoption of distributed and transformational leadership practices. At the same time, her open-minded leadership tendencies may have contributed to her ability to internalise the SbS educational principles.

On the other hand, although Firangiz was interested in the program and seemed very capable to reorient her preschool in line with the SbS program if she chose to. However, her lack of belief in the educational components of the program seemed to be the core factor preventing a transformational integration of the SbS program within her preschool.

This paper has important implications for education interventions in the region and suggests that interventions looking to import forward-thinking initiatives need to take a broad approach that incorporates leadership, teaching, and a holistic systems approach to educational reform. Changing national consciousness is an incremental process and this study suggests that interventions can, and in this case do, have an important overall impact, but their direct impact may be limited to a select group of participants that is already self-motivated for change. Within this small group of motivated actors, innovative initiatives can make a big difference. However, the SbS experience illustrates the difficulties of taking development initiatives to scale.

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