

The Gifted Education in Azerbaijan

Sakhavat Mammadov (Corresponding author)

Boğaziçi University

North Campus ETB Blok

Bebek 34342, Istanbul TURKEY

E-mail: sehavet.mammadov@boun.edu.tr

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Abstract

This study explores the Azerbaijan education system, particularly gifted education, its strengths and weaknesses during the Soviet regime and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Further, the study discusses the nature and intent of current legislations, programs and practices regarding the education of gifted children in Azerbaijan. The study addresses the technique of textual analysis that was applied in analyzing and synthesizing the data that was collected from documents, official reports, books, peer-reviewed articles, ERIC tools, newspapers and journals. Findings indicate that there are serious problems with the Azerbaijan education system including the organization of schooling of gifted students. There is a lack of systematic effort for differentiated education catering to the needs of this population. Moreover, the lack of standards and measurements for the identification of gifted children is another essential issue which needs urgent solution.

Keywords: Gifted education, Soviet regime, Current trends, Gifted and talented children, Azerbaijan Education System, Azerbaijan

1. Introduction

Azerbaijan is a small state bordering the Caspian Sea, located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Azerbaijan has a population of about 9 million of inhabitants. The majority of Azerbaijan's population consists of the Turkic and Muslim people. Throughout its history, Azerbaijan has suffered many different invasions. Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence in 1918 by establishing the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the first democratic and secular republic in the Muslim world (Swietochowski, 2004). However, after two years it was occupied by Russian forces and was incorporated into the Soviet Union (Pipes, 1997). Azerbaijan re-gained its independence in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Like the other fifteen countries that emerged after this collapse, Azerbaijan experienced a transition period in its political, economic and educational system. Moreover, the Karabakh conflict with neighboring Armenia deeply influenced the already deteriorated economy. By the end of hostilities in 1994, Azerbaijan has turned its attention to restructuring and rebuilding of its economic and educational systems. Thanks to its vast oil and gas resources, the Azerbaijani people started to envision a promising future (Zeynalov & Sapunov, 1998). As a country at the crossroad of socialism and capitalism, and within the re-identification process of its own values, Azerbaijan has experienced an uneasy development. Changes in its political, economic and educational systems especially during the transition period, created considerable issues and need thorough discussions.

During the transition from planned to market economy, Azerbaijan education system has faced huge problems. Although some of these problems are in the solution phase, there are also some other issues requiring radical changes have not attracted much attention yet. Today, science and education are keys to assuring success in market competition. The Organization of scientific schools is vital to this development, as it is capable of maintaining the unity of educational and scientific work (Maharramov, 2009). One of the important features of scientific schools is their "leader combining scientific-pedagogical abilities with organizer responsibilities, bringing together creatively gifted people" (Maharramov, 2009, p.4). In Azerbaijan, a lack of comprehensive gifted education programs is one of the issues which need an urgent solution. The implementation of such programs would be a significant step in addressing various challenges that the country needs to meet.

The purpose of this study is to explore the Azerbaijan education system, particularly gifted education, its strengths and weaknesses during the Soviet regime and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The research is essentially a knowledge oriented description of gifted education in Azerbaijan, its history, previous and current education reforms and programs that address the education of gifted individuals. This research grew out of a desire to answer the following questions:

1. What is the history of gifted education in Azerbaijan?
2. What are the nature and intent of current legislations, programs and practices regarding the education of gifted children in Azerbaijan?

2. Methodology

Methodologically, this study addresses the technique of textual analysis that was applied in analyzing and synthesizing the data that was collected from various sources. Qualitative content analysis is one of the most extensively used analytical tools. Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on “qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p.453). This paper contains content analysis of documents, official reports, books, peer-reviewed articles, ERIC tools, newspapers and journals.

The data sources used in this analysis were in three different languages (Azerbaijani, Russian and English). The sources in Azerbaijani have a lack of specific terms regarding gifted education. It was a key problem while coding phase. For instance, “giftedness” is an important technical term in the pedagogic discourse. In the Azerbaijani sources, this term appeared in many different forms such as “istedad”, “xüsusi istedad”, “qabiliyyet”, “xüsusi qabiliyyet”, “xüsusi istedada ve qabiliyyete malik”, and etc. Also, it was difficult to identify whether the authors refer to giftedness while using these terms. Therefore, one expert was consulted to generate a comprehensive list of terms most commonly used in the sources to refer to giftedness. The researcher used referential units in order to define coding units. Referential units refer to the way a unit is represented (Krippendorff, 1980).

To make valid inferences from the text, the researcher and the expert coded the same text separately. The percent agreement was measured between the researcher and the expert, and the result appeared to be highly reliable (96 %). Moreover, the researcher used triangulation by collecting data from multiple and different sources (documents, official reports, books, peer-reviewed articles, ERIC tools, newspapers and journals) to ensure that the findings accurately depict what was aimed at.

Initially, this study starts with the brief history of Azerbaijan education system. In the following part, it describes how different nations perceive the education of gifted individuals. Then, the study explores gifted education in Azerbaijan during the Soviet era, and afterwards it focuses on challenges during the collapse of the Soviet Union and at the crossroads. Finally, the paper discusses current trends in gifted education.

3. A Brief History of Azerbaijan Education System

Azerbaijan has a great history of culture and education. Gobustan rock drawings in the Absheron region of the country which attributed to around 30.000 BP have very diverse themes and content (Gobustan, 2001). These drawings show that ancient people lived here used them to communicate with each other even before the first writing was discovered. The first school in Azerbaijan was established in the 5th century (Bicadze, 2010). Islam, which expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula, for the first time entered Azerbaijan in the beginning of the 8th century. During that time, mosques took a very important place in the spread of Islamic education which was also influential in Azerbaijan. In 10th century, medreses (schools) were opened as religious institutions. According to UNESCO (2005), the primary languages of instruction in these institutions were Persian, Arabic, and later

Azerbaijani. Trends of nationalization in Azerbaijan were formed between the 11th and 14th centuries. During the period of the Azerbaijani khanates in the 18th and in the beginning of the 19th centuries, the influence of Azerbaijani language increased.

After the Turkmenchay treaty, which was signed in 1828 by Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan was divided into two parts. Northern regions where modern Azerbaijan is located today became a part of Russia, whereas South Azerbaijan remained with Iran (Yesilot, 2008). Since then, until 1918, the educational development in Northern Azerbaijan was defined by Russia through the national religious and secular schools as well as Russian secular and bilingual schools. Although there was an increased use of the Azerbaijani language in order to replace Persian, the primary language in educational institutions was Russian (Isakhanli, 2006). The basis of an ordinary education system in Azerbaijan was established in the 19th century with the foundation of a female grammar school in 1865, and technical schools in 1875 (Bicadze, 2010).

With the collapse of czarist Russia, Azerbaijan gained its independence and the Democratic Azerbaijan Republic was founded in 1918. However, it lasted no more than two years. This time period was not enough for the country to develop a national education system; however, Baku State University was established by the parliament of the Democratic Azerbaijan Republic in 1919. A strong presence of the Azerbaijani language and minority rights education policies were two other important things which would be established during these two-years of independence. Additionally, many students were sent to continue their higher education in Europe (Isakhanli, 2006).

4. Gifted Education

Throughout the history, there has been continued interest in children who had special talents. Since ancient times, cultures have paid special attention to children who revealed their talents in various domains. The Greeks, Romans, and Ottomans considered the education of gifted and talented children important for the state power. In the Ottoman Empire, for instance, talented students were selected and educated in specialized schools for the positions of greater responsibility in the state (Akarsu, 2004b).

The modern origins of gifted education evolved after the launching of *Sputnik* by the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. The United States realized that to compete with the Soviet Union on an equal footing, they had to pay attention to the education of gifted children. In the following decades, the identification of gifted and talented youth and their academic and social nurturance started to be an important concern throughout the world. However, national concerns were not the same. The philosophical base and motivations have affected these concerns. Some nations see the education of gifted and talented population as a basic need of society or state, whereas motivation of some nations is the equality of educational opportunity or the full development of each individual for self-fulfillment (Passow, 1997).

Curricular differentiation and instructional modifications is the main focus of most nations which address the education of gifted children (Passow, 1997). Few countries develop special curricular materials for schools, yet many of them expect classroom teachers to

differentiate the curriculum in the classroom for the gifted youth as well as other students who are in need for special education (Passow, 1997). In many nations, extracurricular programs and out-of-school activities are the main part of gifted education programs (Knight, 2006). Also mentorship with adult specialists is becoming important component of provisions for the gifted youth (Passow, 1997).

In Europe, there is a continuous political struggle between the ideals of elitism and egalitarianism which impacted the gifted education differently in the various nations of Europe (Persson, Joswig, & Galogh, 2000). Therefore it does not function in the same way as it does in the North America neither as an academic discipline nor as national educational-political effort (Persson, 2009). In some national education policies of European countries, there is utmost accentuation on the education of gifted children, whereas in others, they do not use the term giftedness and do not have any special program for this population (Persson, 2009). The Scandinavian nations, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark consider a special education program as a counter to the equal opportunity principle. These nations do not tend to make any class distinction for children. Therefore, there is no special program available for the gifted (Persson, Joswig, & Galogh, 2000).

The western part of Europe has the economic power and efficient administration to provide necessary support to the education of gifted children. These nations consider gifted education as an ideological issue. Their main concern is the formation of potentially privileged elite with the specialized programs for gifted children which is the contrary notion to democratic principles (Knight, 2006). Therefore, the school systems tend to put Inclusive Education into practice, which means mixed-ability classrooms for all children (Persson, Joswig, & Galogh, 2000).

5. Gifted Education during the Soviet Era

In 1920, Azerbaijan was incorporated into the Soviet Union (Pipes, 1997). According to Curtis (1995) during the Soviet period, the Azerbaijani education system was based on the standard model imposed by Moscow, which featured the state control of all education institutions and heavy doses of Marxist-Leninist ideology at all levels. He also argues that, in the Soviet era, literacy and average education levels rose dramatically. Soviet countries had many educational and cultural centers even in the villages and small towns. A progressive language policy was one of the important reforms during this period (Isakhanli, 2006). A student could be educated in his own language; he could study Russian as a second, and at the same time could learn a foreign language such as English, French or German.

However, towards the end of the 1950s, defects in the effectiveness of this system became conspicuous. Furthermore, people's trust in the state and its propaganda started to deteriorate. At the same time, the government demanded well-educated people, especially in the area of mathematics and physics, in order to improve space and military industry. Such requirements necessitated the creation of specialized schools with a more complicated curriculum (Zhilin).

In 1958, Khrushchev, who was the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, implemented a new direction in the education system, called The Polytechnization of Education. Although in

1936, the Soviet Government had forbidden research in the education of gifted and talented students (especially its connection with IQ testing) due to ideology (Shcheblanova & Shumakova, 2007); one of the key parts of Khrushchev's reform was educational opportunities for this population. According to Khrushchev (1960), "the new system of public education must provide appropriate secondary schools for particularly gifted children who, at an early age, clearly show an obvious aptitude for mathematics, music, and arts" (p.17). During 1970s, there were 11 boarding schools specializing in Mathematics and Science which were called fiziko-matematicheskije shkoly (Dunstan, 1983). These schools were highly selective.

In 1960, the Ministry of Education of USSR organized Physics and Mathematics Olympiads that started to take place on an annual basis. Teams were from different Soviet countries and provinces of Russia (Petrakov, 1982). One of the major goals of this Olympiad was to discover gifted and talented students in the area of physics and mathematics (Matematika v Shkole, 1964). Mathematics clubs and circles were another important project which provided opportunities for students in order to increase their interest in mathematics and to improve the quality of their preparation for the Olympiads. For example, students who participated in the Moscow Mathematics Circle usually were among the Olympiad winners (Leman, 1965).

In order to graduate from these schools, students were required to pass oral and written examinations in their core subjects (Literat, 1963). Additionally, during the semester, they were required to attend an extra six class hours per week; four hours of special courses in the core subjects and two hours of humanities courses (Vogeli, 1997). One day a week students were asked to work in laboratories. English, French and German were taught as foreign languages.

Whether gifted students should be educated in regular classrooms or should be placed in separate schools was an issue during one period of the Soviet era. Differential teaching in Secondary education was a point of debate in 1950s. The idea, first, was brought up by Goncharov, vice-president of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, and supported by many other mathematicians, scientists and pedagogues. However, different officials strongly protested against differentiated education in regular schools and supported creation of special schools. Their counter argument was that, such education would create an obstacle in gifted students' academic and social developments. On the other hand, "If they are brought together with their equivalents", a Politburo Member said, "they lose their arrogance with their superiority" (Stevens, 1987, p.14). As a result, the proposal for the establishment of such schools was not approved at the time (DeWitt, 1961). Later, as stated above, with Khrushchev's reforms the first special school for gifted students was established.

In the 1970s, different kinds of Residential schools were established in order to meet the need for a differential education. These schools were for gifted and talented students who wished to extend their knowledge in various areas such as physics, mathematics, biology, sports, humanities, and music and art. However, this was not supported by corresponding scientific research. Thus, they could not fulfill their aims. In the following years, scientists and pedagogues established a non-governmental public organization in order to enhance the

education of gifted students and develop their capabilities. They organized symposia, conferences and many other activities to attract the attention of the government and public (Aleksperov, 1991).

During the 1980s, gifted children and their education was began to be considered relevant. In 1988, the Educational Committee acknowledged the importance of identification and education of gifted children (Shcheblanova & Shumakova, 2007). The government increased organizing or supporting the establishment of new schools. These schools were academic in nature and their organizers did have true scientific backgrounds. Some of these schools were innovative private, schools, such as Montessori, Rudolf Steiner and Elkonin-Davydov. They had their own curricula, but since it was difficult to match their program with the demands of post-secondary education, they could only provide their education at the primary level (Zhilin).

At the end of the Soviet era, private tutoring arose as an alternative to formal education. This kind of instruction is popular in today's Azerbaijan. Children are trained for university entrance exams for a considerable fee. Most teachers are pleased to earn such an extra income. Updating themselves in one subject for examinations to higher educational institutions based on almost stationary curriculum is not difficult for most teachers. Therefore, in this kind of education model there is limited motivation to systematically search for the gifted and talented students. As a result, the country experienced strain during its transition to a market economy due to the lack of competent, functionally trained specialists in science, industry, and agriculture (Aleksperov, 1991).

It is very important to note that in the Soviet education system the term "gifted" was not emphasized often. The reason is that such a term was incompatible with the ideology of the regime. The education system, claiming to follow Marxist-Leninist ideology, considered teacher effort and propaganda as the main factors on the quality of education and neglected individual abilities, as well as the effect of cultural background in the quality of education (Zhilin). The term "gifted" only appeared in official papers through to the end of the last decade of the Soviet regime.

6. The Education at the Cross Roads

Azerbaijan re-gained its independence in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was the beginning of a completely new phase in the history of Azerbaijani education. Not only the economic and political problems occurring during the independence period were challenges for the Azerbaijani education; the Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia escalated from 1991 to early 1992, and the main impediment to the re-establishment of national educational system.

The Karabakh War brought profound human casualties to the country. Azerbaijan lost 16% of its territory, more than 30,000 people perished, and one million people were displaced from the Azerbaijani lands (International Herald Tribune, 2003). Azerbaijan had more than 700 schools, colleges, kindergartens, institutes and other educational institutions destroyed. Also,

there were 100,000 refugee students and 10,000 refugee teachers living in the refugee camps (Mardanov, 1999).

In the very first years of its independence, Azerbaijan faced a variety of difficulties in the area of education. In particular, preparation of textbooks and other educational materials with newly adopted Latin scripts, limited financial resources to carry out necessary renovation, and restoration were the main problems during the transition period (Silova, Johnson, & Heyneman, 2007). The opportunity for modernization was made real by the country's natural gas, petroleum, and agriculture wealth which now benefit all nations. Moreover, Azerbaijan has the rich potential of a young and dynamic population that can lead to rapid improvements. It's not surprising that Azerbaijan had significant GDP growth rates for three years between 2006 and 2008 (Index Mundi, 2010). In light of this fact, a number of institutions, including the government, are focusing on building the system of education to reduce the societal inequities and to increase the literacy rate in the country.

A quality curriculum in different science fields is one of the current features of Azerbaijani education system which was inherited from the Soviet. At the same time, a strongly centralized system that can be seen as one of the main disadvantages of today's Azerbaijani education is also rooted in the Soviet education system (Isakhanli, 2006). Although Azerbaijani higher education has experienced some changes during the post-Soviet Period (Isakhanli), its structure remains unchanged since those times (OECD, 2004), especially in state universities. The centralization within the education system remains exposed to potential dangers such as corruption, bribery and nepotism.

Isakhanli, stressed several factors which influenced the Azerbaijani education system negatively during the transition period:

- 1- The country's economy is in transition and is plagued by corruption and bribery;
- 2- Government funding of reforms in education system is relatively limited;
- 3- The tax system is intricate, at least when it comes to the education system;
- 4- Libraries are poor, engendering weak access to knowledge and information.

Corruption in the education system is a pervasive threat to future social cohesion in most of the former Soviet republics, including Azerbaijan (Silova, Johnson, & Heyneman, 2007). Although it might be assumed that the corruption is somehow a 'cultural' aspect:

"... All cultures are shamed by unfairness, and no society is absent of rules of fairness within the education system. As a norm in education, fairness is universal. What does differ is how to treat the evidence. In some instances, shame may prevent someone from admitting the obvious. When this occurs, corruption will remain unaddressed and will spread like a cancer until trust is absent and the value of educational investments is reduced to virtually zero" (Heyneman, 2007, p.2)

Azerbaijan and some other post-Soviet countries are identified as locations with the highest prevalence of corruption (International Corruption Perceptions Index, 2003). Corruption

remains a dangerous barrier to economic and social development of the country. In recent years, the government has taken some steps to solve this problem, yet it does not satisfy the public. In order to prevent corruption there is a strong need for regulations, laws and harsh penalties for those who choose to be corrupt.

The literacy and average educational levels during the Soviet era had increased dramatically from the lower levels of the former Soviet countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, their main concerns shifted towards more fundamental problems. Many students in Azerbaijan drop out of school in order either to earn money or to go to vocational-technical schools. Statistics show that the percentage of students who drop out of school before the age of 15 is 4.3%; this rate rises to 18.8% for the students at the age of 15 or older (Isakhanli, 2006).

Moreover, according to OECD-PISA results, in 2007, Azerbaijan ranked among the lowest of all 57 countries participating in national testing. The results revealed that Azerbaijan has weaknesses in reading and science, yet does pretty well in mathematics. Since literacy and reading comprehension are closely related to other subjects, poor results in this part of the assessment can be considered quite worrying (World Bank, 2008)

7. A Brief Overlook of Current Trends in the Education System

Primary, basic and secondary schools in Azerbaijan are not separated from each other and have a single administrative structure. In Azerbaijan, school education is compulsory and free from tuition as it was under Soviet rule. However, the number of years of compulsory education dropped from 11 to 9. Moreover, the quality of education especially at the secondary level is not satisfactory. Parents have no choice but to hire private tutors to provide preparatory education for their children. According to Isakhanli (2006), spreading private tutorship all around the country has become a shadow industry.

Now, there are 32 state and 15 private universities in Azerbaijan. A new bill on education was drafted in 1997 emphasizing the full authority of relevant executive bodies. Such exercise of authority leads to the influence of personal networks across the state agencies in the field of education. The State dictates what the universities must teach. There is a lack of academic freedom in higher education institutions, including private ones (Isakhanli, 2006). It not only restrains personal creativity and initiative, but also assaults freedom of thought. According to Isakhanli (2006), corruption and bribery in the Azerbaijan education system causes the centralization of power and the attenuation of autonomy of higher education institutions.

In 1992, the Law on Education which stressed tasks and directions toward educational reform was passed. Many important steps in the area of education have been taken since the very first years of its independence. According to the Minister of Education, Mardanov (1999) some of the main issues which need immediate attention are sustainable human development, equal rights to education, improvement of legislation, education quality, improvement of education management, curriculum development, in-service and pre-service teacher training, accreditation of educational institutions, introduction of new funding mechanisms, and improvement of the transfer mechanism from one tier of education to the another. There are

several reform projects which were implemented in order to prepare methodological materials, to develop curriculum and to provide in-service teacher trainings (UNESCO, 2005).

The Heydar Aliyev Foundation, which is a non-governmental, non-commercial organization, takes on a key role in the reconstruction process. In recent years, many schools have been built and repaired, and new educational centers have been opened thanks to this foundation (Heydar Aliyev Foundation, 2011). There are also many international organizations, such as the World Bank, European Union, UNICEF, IREX, and Soros Foundation which have been taking part in the reform projects of Azerbaijani education system (Asian Development Bank, 2004). These organizations provide financial support like, grants and credits for various educational issues which need to be restructured.

Globalization has begot an improvement of education systems, especially in post-Soviet countries. In spite of some important crises in several areas during the very first years of its independence, Azerbaijan was able to cooperate with many countries and adopt different educational models from them. The United States of America, Great Britain, France, Russia, Turkey, China, Japan, and South Korea are some of the countries with which Azerbaijan has established cooperation in the area of education (MoE, 2011). Furthermore, in 2005, Azerbaijan joined the Bologna process which brought great opportunity to the education system in order to integrate with 45 European countries included in a European Higher Education Area (MOE, 2011). Now, Azerbaijan is taking very important steps to apply the Bologna principles in its education system.

8. Gifted Education in Today's Azerbaijan

The Ministry of Education (MoE) controls all educational activities in Azerbaijan. It participates in the development and implementation of the state policy regarding public and private education as well as special education programs. The MoE supervises general public and private schools, kindergartens, specialized schools and higher educational institutions. There are 33 universities, 2 institutions of supplementary education, 113 vocational institutions, 57 specialized secondary schools, 6 kindergartens, 4 preschools, and 20 non-school institutions (IBE, 2011).

The public special education system of Azerbaijan is rooted in the Soviet science of defectology. This system segregates children who have special needs in to separate schools and in home environments. They are totally separated from their normally developing age peers. The curricular model in Azerbaijan is also built on a traditional education model. Large-group activities, regimented practice, rote memorization, and passive learning tasks are examples of Soviet-style educational practices which prevent engagement of children with disabilities in regular class activities. Since 2005, the government of Azerbaijan has made some regulations to ensure the education of children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. For instance, The National Program on Development of Inclusive Education is one of the initiatives which is conducted by the nongovernmental organization Center for Innovations in Education (CIE) in partnership with World Vision Azerbaijan and International Medical

Corps. They launched pilot projects in four cities which aimed to educate to children with disabilities alongside their peers (Lesko, Ziegler, Mikailova, & Roels, 2010).

According to the EFA Assessment Country Reports (2000), education in Azerbaijan was dominated by a teacher-centered pedagogy and a curriculum largely filled by Soviet content. Since 1998, there were different reform projects planned in the light of three inter-related documents: Conception of Education, Revision to the Education Law of 1992, and Education Sector Reform Program. The important part of the document regarding the education of gifted children is: "Specialized schools will be established that have a focus on high technology and a new type of institution will be developed for development of gifted children. In addition, a special Scientific Research Centre will be established to facilitate the early identification of gifted children."

Gifted education in Azerbaijan lacks a specific legal mandate. There is no accepted definition of giftedness and a standard measurement to identify gifted students. The emphasis of strategies pursued at MoE level is the education of students with high intellectual and artistic abilities on the basis of national achievement exams, competitions, contests and Olympiads. The education system defined in the "The Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan" no 833-IIIQ (TQDK, 2009) includes a series of legislative acts striving to make the right of all students to quality education. The term "gifted and talented" appears ten times in this law. Legislative acts direct the commissioner of education to consider building new schools, lyceum, and centers for students with special talents. The law also promotes social and financial support for these students. One of the traditional incentive programs for gifted and talented students is a monthly stipend paid by the MoE. Not only intellectually gifted students are considered in these programs, but also exceptionally talented children in the areas of art, music or athletics receive a monthly stipend when their names are placed in the "Golden Book of Talented Youth" (Mardanov, 1999).

The MoE strongly emphasizes the importance of each person's exceptional talent, capability and creativity. Mardanov (1999) stated that, it's their hope to help gifted and talented students and develop their potentials at an early age. He also made a proposal to open a special department within the Ministry of Education that would help encourage gifted children. There are some plans which aim at fostering gifted children's abilities, to help them in problem-solving and decision-making. For instance, the Ministry of Education created an action plan which aims to increase the creative potential of especially gifted children. This plan reflects the preparation of an internet portal and data bank on gifted children and an increase in the necessary materials for newly created education institutions (MoE, 2006).

The organization of annual school, district, regional and nation-wide Olympiads in 12 different academic subjects is one of the important practices of the MoE. According to Mardanov, the Minister of Education, the subject Olympiads has a special importance in the revealing of gifted children, creating competitiveness and encouraging the interest of children in these subjects. The Minister expressed his satisfaction with the state policy for the gifted and talented youth development and his appreciation for the national president for these works regarding the education of gifted youths (MoE, 2011). Another regulation

concerning gifted children is their early entry into school before the age of six. The MoE created a committee of educators and psychologists who will deal with admission of gifted children to the school (Today, 2011).

In 2006, the Ministry of Education has prepared 4 years strategic plan named as “2006-2010 State Program addressing the development of creativity potential in gifted and talented students”. This plan aimed at early intervention for potentially gifted and talented children (MoE, 2011). Nowadays there are several programmes for the gifted students in Azerbaijan, and most of them deal with students who either are academically successful in their schools or are winners of science Olympiads. As a part of the plan, the public school “Genc Istedatlar” (Young Talents) was established in 2007. This school admits students from around the country on the basis of an achievement exam. “Heydar Aliyev” School is another state-run school which has a particular emphasis on the education of students with high intellectual and artistic abilities. These schools offer various opportunities such as extracurricular arts and sports activities, special classes equipped with the latest technology, hands-on projects (Rahimov, 2010).

Besides government-supported public schools, there are some private lyceums and gymnasiums that were founded by various international organizations and private funders. One of those international organizations is the Turkish “Çağ Öğretim A.Ş” which is a prominent player in the educational restructuring in Azerbaijan. Turkish schools have a very important role in the education of gifted Azerbaijani youth. “Çağ Öğretim A.Ş” has a group of 15 schools, which are called Azerbaijani-Turkish Private Schools (Cag Ogretim, 2007). Enrollment to these institutions is based on the entrance examinations. The examinations are highly competitive and students who are accepted to these schools are at the top percentile ranks.

Azerbaijani-Turkish Private Schools have won high praise for their educational quality, as demonstrated by the student’s high scores in international and national scientific competitions. Achievements and successful results include more than 450 medals in international contests and Olympiads since they have been established. These schools have gained a considerable strong reputation as the best schools in the country. The acceptance rate of these students after completing university entrance exams is very high, 98%. Today, besides Azerbaijan, graduates of these schools study in prestigious schools in Turkey, the USA, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Russia, South Korea, Singapore and other countries (Ozeren, 2007).

According to the Minister of Education Misir Mardanov (2007), Turkish entrepreneurs and teachers have equipped the schools with the latest technology. Most of the students who represent Azerbaijan in the international arena are from these schools. Teachers in these schools tend to have very strong personalities. Relationships between teachers and pupils are often very close. Due to this close relationship, teachers can encourage students even when the study becomes intensive. Furthermore, teachers provide effective psychological assistance to students and are able to meet their academic, social and psychological needs.

The International School of Azerbaijan, British School in Azerbaijan and Baku International School are some other private schools which are operating in Azerbaijan.

Additionally, Azerbaijan is the venue for artistic and musical art festivals, contests and other exhibitions aimed at detection of children who have talent and special abilities. Fine Arts Education takes a very important place in Azerbaijan Education System. Fine Arts Education and training institutions are under control of two ministries. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism supervises children's music, art and painting schools and the Baku School of Choreography. The Ministry of Education controls the special secondary and higher arts education. Education in Children's music, art and painting schools is optional. In these schools, children have opportunities to study one to one with their teachers. After a nine year education period, they receive a certificate from these schools and talented students qualify to continue their education in the institutions of higher arts. Education of talent and special abilities also requires additional examinations which are guided by international practices and in the direction of national features. The State Students Admission Commission (SSAC) of Azerbaijan conducts these examinations. The professions which require talent and special abilities include fine art, music, architecture and design, theatre, cinematography and choreography, physical training and sport. There is a great attention paid to children who have talent and special abilities.

9. Discussion

During the Soviet era, there was a uniform learning process throughout the empire. This model has received only slight modifications after 1970s. Textbooks and curriculums were the same for all countries within the Soviet Union, including Azerbaijan. Naturally, such curriculums cannot address students' individual potentials or weaknesses or include the various motivational factors which likely will not work the same for all students in a classroom environment. Therefore, expecting students to be able to present creativity was not the case in such an education model. Primary and secondary schools all over the Soviet Union had the same status. Throughout eleven years, from the beginning of elementary to the end of the secondary school, students did not receive any motivational rewards for their outstanding successes in schools. Furthermore, at the end of obligatory education, the same certificate was given to all graduates. It is quite clear that this educational model which treated students as monotypes, neither providing a comprehensive teaching-learning process according student characteristics nor developing their talents by various educational strategies was possible.

Although the system was of high quality, strict control did not allow nations to make any local modifications. Such an all-union educational system dictated common features such as rigid adherence to the content of the curriculum. Moreover, national and cultural values of the societies were strongly rejected by the state; therefore, it was unlikely to reflect their identities in the curriculum. The situation with all these deficiencies lead to a decrease in teacher and student motivation as well as a lack of parental concern in looking for further ways to improve the education of their children. An important fact towards the end of the Soviet regime was that during 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet educational system was

jeopardized by corruption and bribery, particularly in university entrance exams (Isakhanli, 2006).

After the Soviet regime, although there have been various plans and projects that aim at improvement of gifted education, there is a lack of systematic effort for differentiated education catering to the needs of gifted and talented students in Azerbaijan. Another problem is with the use of the term “gifted”. The meaning of “gifted” is similar to the word “smart” and it is used to define children who are higher achievers in their classes. There are no measures or tests to identify gifted children or legislation regarding those children. It is difficult to speak of any earnest and systematic efforts regarding the identification and education of the gifted population. Current reports about ongoing projects are not accessible; therefore, the content of projects related to this issue is not clear enough.

One important point is to distinguish giftedness from being a higher achiever. Children from these two groups learn in very different ways, they even experience the school environment completely differently and have different academic needs. Research suggests that the social and emotional development of highly gifted children differs somewhat as well (Hollingworth, 1942; Roedell, 1984). Moreover, it is important to consider that not all gifted children are not high achievers. Some gifted children might have hidden abilities or high potential with behavioral problems. Gifted children become higher achievers when their interests are directed toward what they innately are motivated to do and when they are empowered to try new skills (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 1999).

Gifted children, from a very early age, need special guidance to help them improve their social competencies, to understand and cope with their unusual abilities (Roedell, 1985). “Since advanced social understanding does not translate directly into mature behavior, teacher guidance will be needed to help intellectually gifted children apply their powerful cognitive skills to the arena of social interaction” (Roedell, p.7). In Azerbaijan, overall teacher preparedness not only in the education of children with special needs, as well as teaching normally developing children is below the required level. Although the MoE tries to restructure teacher training and certification methods, in large part, teachers are considered unqualified or under-qualified. Instructions remains traditionally teacher-centered and teachers generally do not take individual student characteristics into account (Asian Development Bank, 2004).

Currently, the public primary and secondary schools in Azerbaijan do not address the needs of gifted students who perform above their grade levels. Also, the general quality of education in these schools is not at intended levels. On the other hand, the private schools promote a different atmosphere of learning thanks to their discipline, close attention to students, qualified teachers, and successful organization. These schools enroll students who pass required competitive entrance exams. However, private schools neither have classes for gifted students nor do teachers develop a program unique to this population. Furthermore, although these schools accept students who are within a certain high percentile of exam results, sometimes many students in requested ranges are not enrolled because of the high tuition fees. Private schools, nevertheless, can be considered as prosperous.

Analyzing the process and content in studying the policy formulation of the gifted program and understanding how these two elements create the final policy is essential. Process and content are interconnected; the former affects how the policy was formed; the latter reflects expression of the policy as understood by the population (Warwick, 1979). How the government views the problem of the gifted population is important during policy formulation. For instance, the government should note at-risk gifted students. Gifted students are not normally considered at-risk for academic failure or problems (McCoach & Siegle, 2003). Due to the lack of appropriate identification though, the potentials of gifted students who seem capable of outstanding performance cannot be realized. Therefore, without necessary interventions, they are at risk of becoming underachievers.

10. Conclusion

In Azerbaijan, the transition to democracy, and the development of economic, judicial and political systems are developing at a slow pace. The slow rate of improvement in these systems prevents necessary implementations in the education system in the short term and the solutions of some vital problems in the long term. In recent years, Azerbaijan has taken very important steps toward establishing successful cooperation with different countries in diplomatic, business and education areas. Azerbaijan is seeking the help of international organizations in its modernization and in the internalization of the education system.

Even though the country has a young and dynamic population and possesses a tradition of seeking education, serious problems with the education system including the organization of schooling of gifted students remain as major problems in theoretical and literal improvement of the society. The solution of these problems will lead to the development of its education system. As a country with abundant natural and human resources, deep-rooted culture and a long educational history, Azerbaijan seems ready to resolve difficulties and problems in the education system. Specifying standards for the identification of gifted students is one of the essential issues concerning gifted education. Also, because some gifted students might feel constrained by the lack of acceleration in the program, by citing curriculum enrichment and acceleration specifically, creating necessary criteria for serving of gifted students is another vital step in developing a viable gifted education program.

In order to improve the process, various contemporary models which serve gifted youth should be examined and applied in the discovery and education of this population. Additionally, scientific research in this sphere should play a key role in exploring challenges in application processes and further possibilities. Establishment of gifted teaching programs under education faculties, and arrangement and organization of teacher training programs are other considerable steps in carrying out the process.

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