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A high-need Azeri school: A Georgian perspective

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Abstract

This article contributes to the International Study of Leadership Development Network initiative to identify high-need schools around the globe by focusing on a small minority ethnic school in the country of Georgia. It will be clear in this article that the challenges the Karajala School administrator faces in this former Soviet bloc school stand as an example of the educational disadvantages common to rural minority ethnic schools in Georgia and to many small rural schools in former Soviet bloc nations. The Karajala School is populated with Azeri students and is located in an isolated agrarian village. In the Republic of Georgia, both conditions are markers of a high-need school. The national Ministry of Education struggles to develop educational resources for the educators and students in these types of schools. School principals are woefully ill-prepared to implement modern reforms in education. Even with its new facility, modernized classrooms, indoor restrooms, and a central heating system, Karajala remains a high-need school. This article provides a portrait of this school, identifies the factors that make it a high-need school, links the properties of this type of school to matters of social justice, and identifies the challenges that this school must overcome to address expectations of educational quality and justice.

Keywords: Comparative education, high-needs schools, leadership, principal leadership, school poverty

Background

One of the challenges facing scholars in the High-Need Schools strand has been to come to some agreement as to what constitutes a high-need school. What a Norwegian scholar understands to be a high-need school may be very different than that which an Australian or Russian or American scholar believes. In addition, implicit in the very declaration that there are high-need schools around the world is the accompanying reality that social justice may not be well served in such schools. Armed with divergent examples of high-need schools, educational researchers should be able to illuminate the ways in which the national context, culture, values, economic conditions, politics, and policy combine to allocate resources to schools in a differential manner. Furthermore, researchers should be able to articulate the common attributes of the high-need school and whether or not social justice values are commonly threatened in such schools.

We contribute an Azeri school from the Republic of Georgia to the group of scholars studying high-need schools in different national contexts because it is a school that we contend is typical of many rural schools of the former Soviet Union nations. When the Soviet Union dissolved, the culture and professional structures it created

did not disappear instantly. Many of the characteristics of the Soviet educational system remain in place, having persisted in spite of significant political and social change.

The Georgian Ministry of Education and Science characterizes the previous shortcomings of its national system as follows:

Education vision had not been aligned with the demands of modern society; legal provisions had not been in place to secure quality of and access to education for all students; education had been managed through an unwieldy centralized system of governance; programs and textbooks had been outdated; teaching and learning methodologies had been reminiscent of soviet education system; teacher qualifications had not been subject to development; school financing mechanisms had been inefficient; corruption and nepotism had been flourishing on all levels of education . . . [especially] concerning the entrance into higher education institutions. As a result, students had not been provided with quality education while some of them had completely been excluded from education processes. (Ministry of Education and Science, 2009: 6)

The Georgian Ministry of Education and Science's judgment of its past educational system still holds in many ways. The school we describe is a microcosm of this past and offers some insights into where the schools of Georgia are headed. We make the claim that the school is a high-need school in part because of structural problems in school governance, in part because of the inability of the national ministry to provide adequate resources for it, and in part because of the local community expectations held for it. This last factor is important and we address it in the following section on the school. These three forces combine to raise serious issues of social justice for the students of the school.

The school

The majority of Georgia's school-age children attend school in districts located in cities, are ethnically Georgian, and speak Georgian as their native language. However, there are parts of the country that have populations of non-ethnic Georgians, most notably, families with ties to Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this regional area of repeated ethnic and political conflict and demographic dislocation, sub-populations of minority ethnic groups commonly exist (King, 2008). For a number of reasons, the children of these minority populations pose difficult challenges to national school systems. Language is a major hurdle as these minority ethnic schools offer inadequate instruction. Poverty is another challenge. Attracting and keeping high-quality instructors is often difficult. Trained educational leadership is in short supply. In short, many minority ethnic schools in a country like Georgia may well fall into the category of high-need schools (Sharvashidze and Bryant, 2011). The school described in this article is such a school. It illustrates a type of school that has high needs not because its students fail to achieve at an adequate level on a standardized national examination; it is a high-need school because of the factors and conditions we describe in the following.

Karajala School is a school for grades 1–12, a common configuration in Soviet-style schools, located in a small Azeri village part-way between Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, and Rustavi, a large factory town. To reach the school, one drives down narrow lanes past cinderblock houses with fenced and gated yards. Attached to some of these gates, one can observe a red flag, a signal that there is a marriage-eligible girl in the family. In all likelihood, this girl will no longer attend Karajala School, having reached the marriageable age of 13. The community follows the cultural expectations of the local Azeri, with a strong adherence to Islamic traditions. The community is not deeply impoverished as many in the village make a reasonably good living producing agricultural products for the major cities not far away.

Recent changes in the school facility were promising. The old school stood as a stoic, soulless building isolated from the village. The missing windowpanes on the north face of the building were open to the chilled air flowing from the Caucasus Mountain Range. The building's external appearance of neglect signaled what one would find on the inside: cold hallways; old wooden floors that had not been sanded and sealed in years; no indoor lavatories for the staff or the children; faint lighting in classrooms; and a

visible lack of educational materials. Each classroom had a leaky wood-burning stove vented to the outside through a window. The old building was infected with an oppressive malaise. It was not a welcoming place.

Recently, the government of Azerbaijan provided for the construction of a new school for the village. This new school has resulted in visibly improved morale. More students come to the school, and the school appears to be in the early stages of becoming a community center for the village's population. However, Karajala School still functions on the margins of the country's school system, lacking access to curriculum resources and to training for professional staff. As an example, when Dr. Sharvashidze visited the school to gather data, the principal wanted her to take a posed picture of students sitting at an array of computer monitors. These computers are a source of pride. Yet, the school has no Internet connection or instructional materials and students rarely use these computers. Teachers have had only limited training in the use of computers.

Is there a new, more modernized curriculum in this new modernized building? We could find no evidence that innovations to pedagogy and the curriculum had changed for the better, and feel that the conditions of a high-need school remain.

There remains a curious element of the staffing of the school. One portion of the teaching staff was recruited locally, the other from a nearby city. Female teachers were Georgian, many who commuted from Rustavi; male teachers were Azeri, recruited mostly from the village. The female Georgian teachers held certifications from the Ministry of Education and Science, having gone through the government-provided training. The male Azeri teachers were not certified, in part because they lack sufficient facility with the Georgian language to succeed in professional development programs, and in part because they lacked incentives to seek certification. This results in a bifurcated teacher force in which certified and educated Georgian teachers are invested in the future educational advancement of students and in which non-certified and weakly educated Azeri teachers tend to be indifferent to future educational advancement.

The teachers were very poorly paid (ca \$168 a month if not certified and \$300 a month if certified), and while they were lucky to have a teaching job in the school, most had to supplement their meager pay with other work. Financial problems are not confined to minority ethnic schools. Because of inefficiencies in how the national Ministry of Education and Science distributes resources to schools, teachers often go without promised raises and, in some instances, do not even receive their monthly payment for extended time periods. There were few benefits for teachers—benefits such as free bus passes and sometimes a reduction in the electricity bill were provided but no health insurance and no retirement package.

Educational leadership

The principal of this school, an Azeri woman, reports that she has 46 teachers for a school population of 623 students in grades 1–12. Accurate data is elusive.¹ For example,

Table 1. Georgian Ministers of Education.

Minister	Dates of Service
Alexander Lomaia	February 2004–November 2007
Maia Miminoshvili	November 2007–January 2008
Ghia Nodia	January 2008–December 2008
Nika Gvaramia	December 2008–December 2009
Dimitri Shashkin	December 2009–July 2012
Khatia Dekanoidze	July 2012–October 2012
Giorgi Margvelashvili	October 2012–July 2013
Tamar Sanikidze	July 2013–present

included in those 623 students are those who no longer attend school on any regular basis. Attendance is irregular for many students and older ones drop out. By age 13, 14 or 15, the great majority of both boys and girls no longer attend: the boys in order to work with family members and the girls in order to get married. However, the new school has improved daily attendance in the lower grades as parents and students like the new facility.

That the principal is an Azeri woman is an important detail. Recent reforms in Georgian education created local boards of trustees mainly composed of teachers and parents (Bryant and Khatiashvili, 2011; Janashia, 2009; Ministry of Education and Science, 2009). Furthermore, the new reform calls for the principal's term in office to be limited to one year. Because she is Azeri, this principal may expect greater support from the community than did the former Georgian principal who held this position in the past. It is also important that she is not married. Were she married, the local Azeri residents would expect her to stay at home and she would probably not have been appointed by the local council.

We asked this principal about her perception of needs, here is what she said:

First, I would tell the world to tell the new government of Georgia to finish the good beginnings of the previous government and provide Internet to the villages like Karajala. They already have a new, well-equipped school building, but have no access to Internet to be integrated to the rest of Georgia and the world through the social networks and/or other Internet facilities.

This school means to the children of the new villages new beginnings. They never had studied in the building like the current one before. The children studying at Karajala School are now motivated to study better, but it still lacks something and differs from the other schools in the vicinity, due to not [sic] internet connection, which might lead to decrease the motivation in future. . . .

I would say to the Minister of Education of Georgia that he and his staff need to work harder, be less politicized and take further measures towards the integration of national minorities into Georgian society.

Karajala School has 700 schoolchildren on the role. They are all Azerians. High school attendees are mostly male. Female students get engaged

and/or married early and mostly get only basic education. Currently, only two female high school students are on the list. To my understanding, in addition to the above, I would provide additional classes on gender equality to such schools.

Georgian school governance

Georgia is not a wealthy country. If it is to steadily advance toward its goals of modernizing its society, politicians and leaders need to use scarce resources well. One of the threats to this is the continuing political instability. One obvious example can be found in the steady turnover of leadership in the Ministry of Education and Sciences (see Table 1).

The Georgian Ministry of Education and Science is the lead agency in a national centralized system somewhat reminiscent of the centralized Soviet system (Ministry of Education and Science, 2009). This ministry is tied to the constantly shifting political power of the nation's leaders, swinging back and forth between a focus on Westernization, democratic reforms and English-language instruction, and a focus on Soviet history and culture and Russian language instruction. Rural schools that have not experienced much in the way of modernization or Westernization tend to exhibit fewer connections to the educational reforms administered in Tbilisi, the capital city. They are out of touch with current knowledge and change. There are regional service units that carry new curriculum programs and mandates from the ministry to the rural schools but these are very under-resourced. For example, the principal addressed this when she spoke of the need for Internet connectivity.

The centrally controlled system of education in Georgia does not discriminate specifically against Azeri schools. However, rural and village schools do not receive an equal distribution of resources. Nor do minority ethnic schools receive the types of compensatory services that might address cultural and language needs. As the principal noted, it would be important to address the integration of "national minorities into Georgian society."

Do the children who attend this school suffer injustice at the hands of this national educational system? Many involved Georgian educators would say yes. They do not receive the type of education that allows them to compete in the modernizing Georgian society: they lack the technical skills; they will not be fluent in Georgian; and their English skills, if they even exist, will be rudimentary. Neither the modern Georgian job market nor higher education will be open to most of the Karajala children. However, educational reformers have pointed to the positive changes that have taken place: an infusion of democratic practices into local schools via the creation of locally elected governing boards; the limitations on administrative longevity; the establishment of a national examination; the efforts to improve instructional quality through English-language instruction; and professional development for teachers. These and other changes are aimed at making all of Georgia's schools more responsive to changing times. There is a long way to go.

John Komlos was quoted in a *New Yorker Magazine* article opining that "The best measure of a just society

is whether you'd be willing to be thrown into it at random" (Bilger, 2004). Not too many thoughtful citizens of Georgia would take that risk. In this sense, Karajala stands as an example of a school that struggles to fulfill a social justice role.

Conclusion

In summation, Karajala faces challenges that contribute to its status as a high-need school. One of the most difficult is the sparse funding for education that comes from a centralized system in which public dollars for schools are often siphoned off by politicians with other designs on educational dollars. A second challenge has been mentioned: the instability of directives and policies coming from the national ministry. A third challenge is the unequal treatment of minority ethnic groups, who often require compensatory support if they are to be integrated into mainstream societies. A fourth challenge is the difficult task of language instruction in a country with a rich mosaic of national and local languages. Another challenge, a particularly difficult one worthy of study, is gender discrimination. Muslim girls face the prospect of limited educational opportunities and Karajala has yet to find either the will or the way to improve the life chances of these girls. Finally, there is the challenge of educational leadership. Corruption, fear, isolation, poverty, and resignation are facts of life for the educators in Karajala School. Money for teacher salaries is lost; teachers fear speaking openly about the problems they face; and the principal has limited means for providing professional development for her teachers or herself.

It is possible that these challenges will find echoes in other parts of the world where minority population schools exist within a dominant majority. The authors hope that the details of this school will resonate with those who seek to better understand the challenges that such high-need schools face in other national contexts.

Note

1. For example, the 46 teachers include part-time teachers who are splitting a salary and do not work a full week.

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Nino Sharvashidze specializes in curriculum theory and global education and is currently researching the emotional experiences of international PhD and Graduate students.

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