

After the Rose Revolution: School Administration in Georgia

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Abstract

This study reports qualitative data from a purposeful sampling of five school principals in the Republic of Georgia in order to gather their perceptions of the educational reforms that have occurred in that former Soviet block country, paying particular attention to how those reforms have impacted the work of school principals.

We report that these principals viewed the reform as one leading to greater degrees of freedom for local schools, increased student equity, an educational system that contributes to the national social and economic welfare, and a recognition of education as a central in the development of the Republic of Georgia.

Introduction

The educational system in the Republic of Georgia has experienced important changes and transformations in the past few years (World Education News and Reviews, 2005; Corso, 2005). Gradually, the influence of the former Soviet educational system has declined. After more than 70 years, a 'soviet' Georgian educational system officially terminated its existence four years ago when a national reform was approved and a coalition of politicians and prominent public figures united and initiated changes in the system (Sector Analysis, 2005). Three major factor have contributed to this reform initiative.

First, the former Soviet educational system had withered and its proponents were unable to resist new demands from a now independent educational establishment. Saddled with corruption and favoritism, the educational system ultimately imploded (BBC News, 2005). Years of illegal actions, nepotism, bribery and most importantly negligence caused educational officials to loose credibility. The citizens of the Republic of Georgia no longer felt that the Georgian school system presented an opportunity for their children to acquire knowledge and to obtain a decent education. Rather, education was seen as means for 'the selected', those privileged by the power structure, to attain positions already reserved for them in the nation's society. Thus, civic sentiment came to favor educational reforms.

Second, the change process in all areas of government initiated by the recent Rose Revolution, heavily supported by the public and led by a team of reformers, put a halt to unwieldy governance and ineffectiveness in many directions whether it was located in the economy, business, law, medicine or in education (Monsumova, 2005).

Finally, by the time of the Rose Revolution the country had created sufficient human capital to initiate and implement comprehensive, whole-nation reform. By having many education professionals educated in Western European universities and in the United State, Georgia established a core group of new civil servants who possessed expert knowledge and system competence. In the area of education, these new educators formed a powerful block that advocated dramatic changes in how children in Georgia were to be educated and how Georgian schools were to be run.

Though the new wave of system change has societal support, the degree to which specific segments of the population are sympathetic towards the national reform can be expected to vary. What exists in Tbilisi, the capital of the country, may not exist in small towns in its most distant regions; what is true for the country's central region might not be true for its rural and *non-ethnic* areas. Principal perceptions in *non ethnic* regions like Ajaria and Agkhazia may possibly be quite different than those common in ethnically Georgian Imeriti. How these national reforms are perceived far from the seat of centralized power may be instructive to those interested in wide-scale change. This study will inform that national

perspective by establishing perceptions from one area of the country as the first step in a larger exploration.

Background

The focus of the study is on school leaders. Research specific to countries other than Georgia reports that school principals are critical elements in fostering change (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Hallinger and Heck, 1999; Spillane et al., 2001). There is a logical reason to anticipate that national Georgian educational reforms will be strongly shaped by the nations' local educational leaders. We focused on school principals.

In order to understand how difficult it may be for contemporary school administrators to accept and implement the new national reforms in Georgia, it is important to recall what existed prior to the Rose Revolution. Sixteen years ago few could believe that change would be possible. From the Baltic and Black seas to the Arctic and Pacific Oceans, educational practice was thoroughly controlled, closely observed, and strictly managed. The Soviet Union extended its direct powers over 15 countries in Europe and Asia and enjoyed exclusive influence on those others called 'satellites'. Trapped in this forceful alliance, Georgia, a small country located between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, experienced all of its effects. The state could never exhibit important decision making as it was deprived of any authority in its own economy, business, domestic and foreign politics and even social issues.

Georgia, as did many other countries, complied with rules imposed by the Soviet superpower. Georgia followed three Soviet demands: 1) it contributed dollars to the central budget as was required by the USSR; 2) it allowed for a diverse social service as was demanded by the USSR; and 3) it educated its children as directed by the USSR. The Georgian educational system was tied to the powerful and comprehensive Soviet school system (World Education News and Reviews, 2005). It promoted the same moral precepts, exercised indistinguishable teaching practices and followed an identical curriculum (Perkins, 1998).

To better understand how these three broad areas were brought in line with the Soviet system requirements, it is helpful to closely focus on a few specific details. For instance, moral precepts may be analyzed through an understanding of what ideology was advanced in schools. Teaching practice can be explored through an identification of how teachers behave in classrooms. Finally, the required curriculum can be scrutinized by paying particular attention to how schools prioritize the mastery of foreign languages. In the explanations that follow each of these foci will be preceded by short references to the political purposes they served.

The Soviet school system aimed at nurturing its students to reflect the Soviet ideology which prioritized a full compliance with requirements, a uniformity of thinking, and an unquestioned acceptance of Soviet reality (World Education News and Reviews, 2005). The most effective way to grasp all these purposes was to educate the students using books and an environment that taught them the supremacy of the Soviet authority. To do so, the learning material was organized so that it gradually introduced students in the different grades (primary or secondary) to the ideas of Soviet leadership, especially historical ones (e.g. Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, etc.), as the 'right' personalities for leadership. Recognizing these figures even from kindergarten, the students studied the life paths of these Soviet leaders throughout the school years.

What is also important is that the context for such ideological treatment was appropriate for every given developmental stage of students. For example, in primary class (grades 1-4) material, the leaders were depicted as children with appropriate behavior: they studied hard, had exclusively high evaluations, obeyed their parents and school authorities, and altruistically helped other students. This behavior was then set as a stereotype of most appropriate student demeanor. The students in the secondary level (grades 5-11) encountered the same leaders again during their formative adolescent years. At this stage, students were not only introduced to the full-fledged leader-personalities types, but also to the

foundational concepts of Soviet ideology (World Education News and Reviews, 2005). They learned that non-conventional thinking was to be avoided, that acting within the communist framework was a social good, that belonging to a political party is a responsibility, and, most importantly, that the Soviet system is all-beneficial.

Soviet schools served to reinforce the sense of primacy of authority. According to this principle, teachers were regarded as the main participants and the definers of educational process. They were the central focus of schooling and the sole performers in classrooms. Students were neither permitted nor expected to engage themselves in anything more than listening to and receiving information. Parental voice was unimportant in these times.

Another salient feature of the Soviet education was its goal of providing a broad, comprehensive and fundamental knowledge. But it was also an educational system that was selective in the knowledge provided. Access to information about many other societies, particularly those from the west, was limited, giving graduates little opportunity to become acquainted with other societies and their respective principles and philosophy. In particular, schools restricted exposure to capitalist cultures. The most significant restriction targeted western languages. Though there was hardly any school in the Soviet Union that did not provide at least one European language in its curriculum, language instruction was limited. Short periods and limited classroom hours did not allow teachers to completely cover targeted language areas. In addition, curriculum materials and teaching methodology included no practical application of a language. They provided extensive language elements such as grammar and syntax but failed to facilitate speaking, listening, reading and writing skills.

Thus, the domination of communist ideology, the design of teacher-oriented schooling, and the restriction of a curriculum characterized the Soviet educational system. It is against this backdrop that the national Ministry of Education sought to transform the Georgian educational system.

Is there a perception in local school leaders that this transformation is happening?

The Purpose of the Study

This is a qualitative study that purposefully sampled five school principals in the Republic of Georgia in order to gather their perceptions of the educational reforms that have occurred in that former Soviet block country, paying particular attention to how those reforms have impacted the work of school principals. Three conditions suggest that educational reform in the Republic of Georgia may exhibit unique features in comparison to other former Soviet bloc nations: 1) the Ministry of Education has made significant efforts to carry out a centralized, planned and systematic reform of its entire educational system; 2) the political landscape has become more tolerant of progressive educational practices since the Rose Revolution; and 3) a critical mass of educational leaders has been educated in western universities.

It is relatively easy to determine how national leaders view the reform initiatives in Georgia. But it is not so easy to understand how administrators in the field experience these national efforts. Gathering perceptual data from educational leaders in the field will add a serve to illuminate the reform effort in this nation and will be one of the few attempts to examine perspectives of those far removed from the capital.

After analyzing our qualitative data, we report that these principals view that the reform has resulted in greater degrees of freedom for local schools, increased student equity, a widely implement reform aimed at an educational system that contributes to the social and economic welfare of the state, and the place of education as a central in the development of the Republic of Georgia.

Methodology

Conducting interviews with school administrators on the type of matter pursued in this study can be difficult. Because these administrators are in some ways the target of a change effort promulgated by the Georgian ministry of education, they may be unwilling to be totally candid in providing their perspectives on how the reform has impacted them and their schools. The former Soviet system was deep and located great power in the hands of local school administrators. In many places that power may still insulate school administrators from the reform initiative. Our approach was not only to attempt to determine the level of implementation of reforms. Our interest was also in how the work has changed and, if it has, how school administration as a professional practice has changed.

We have selected five principals in one predominantly homogeneous region of Samegrelo in Western Georgia. These principals are from the first cohort of school leaders elected (not appointed) in their districts to represent the interests of their teachers, students and parents (one of the reform initiatives was the local election of principals) and to promote educational policy developed and designed by the Ministry of Education.

One of the researchers living in Georgia contacted five public school principals and arranged interview sessions with them. The interviews were semi-structured using the questions below. The data were recorded through written notes. Answers to questions were transcribed in detail directly after the conclusion of the interview. Transcripts of interview notes were then member-checked by the participants to ensure the reliability of the transcriptions. All interviews were conducted in Georgian or Russian during July and August of 2007.

The interview protocol consisted of six open-ended questions:

1. Please describe how your work has changed since the Soviet times?
2. Do you think that there is less equity for all students now than there was during the Soviet times? Please explain.
3. How do you perceive the current reform educational reform efforts in Georgia?
4. How do you perceive yourself in this reform? Are these reform efforts likely to improve what happens for children?
5. Which reform initiation, if any, would you characterize as the most important and why?
6. We are conducting this study to report to an international audience of educators. What do you feel is unique and special about what is happening with schools in Georgia and your school in particular about which others should know?

A constant comparative process was not used as all of the interviews were collected in Georgia and then emailed to the other two researchers in the United States. The responses to each question were read independently by each of the three researchers. The purpose of this was to determine whether common themes emerged from the five subjects. The answers to these questions form a partial answer to the main interests of the researchers: how has Georgian reform evolved and how have the Georgian educational reforms impacted school administrators?

Data Analysis

Question 1 - Please describe how your work has changed since the Soviet times?

“Freedom of speech and freedom of action”. Interestingly enough, all the principals were unanimous in their understanding of the tremendous changes that schools have undergone since the Soviet times. “Freedom of speech” and “opportunity to perform freely” were named as the paramount assets of the new system that prompted a change in professional behavior of our respondents. According to our principals,

As young adults, we were alien to the notions of free-thinking. That changed after April 9, 1989. Since that day, we have been exercising our right and freedom of speech.

During the Soviet period, I had to comply with the orders and the plans imposed by higher levels of government...I also could not undertake anything with my sole initiation. After the collapse [of the Soviet Union], all this came to an end. I have been granted an opportunity to perform freely.

In order to better understand how important this freedom of speech and performance is, it is necessary to remember that the impact of the Soviet Educational System on Georgian schools lingered long after the actual collapse of the Soviet Union. As one of the principals noted, Soviet schools were institutions where “no major changes were apparent to be taking place”. Curriculum, teaching methodologies and assessments had largely been running unchanged since the starting day of Soviet educational system. The components of school practices and governance were common all across the Soviet Union and were ubiquitous for schools in the North and in the South, in the East and in the West. Due to the highly centralized system of Soviet education masterminded and implemented by the USSR Ministry of Education, the schools were required to cover the same curriculum at the same pace and using the same teaching material. A considerable portion of the curriculum was dedicated to soviet ideological issues and the foundations of socialism and communism. Teaching methodologies, also regulated by the Ministry, were mainly teacher centered and limited to lecturing. There was no feedback from the students or assurance of quality of their learning was expected. As far as the assessment was concerned, it was the most universal and all purpose tool developed by the USSR Ministry of Education. It served as a method of evaluation of everyday classroom performance and as the one for determining the content mastery level that students could demonstrate at the end of each period in which a school year was strictly divided. The combinations of these three components, the curriculum, content and assessment created a classroom routine that repeated day after day and year after year without any possible divergences or major changes; students were taught exactly like their parents and frequently by the same teachers.

Radical interventions on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia began taking place shortly after the Rose Revolution. These have purportedly put a halt to both direct and indirect influence of Soviet educational system. The fact that the principals in our study realized the importance and the essence of these transformations is well revealed in their responses. Specifically, the principals saw independent school governance as a direct consequence of the Ministry’s policy to grant them the “opportunity to perform freely”.

The principals of school governance stem from the statutes concerning general education. Based on this statutory, the schools now have gained the right to be self-governed and freely distribute their financial resources.

In this particular response, the principal is alluding to the current Law of Georgia on the General Education that entitles schools to far-reaching exercise of self-governance such as authority by school boards to make decisions on its financial resources and control over educational processes. Verbatim, the legislature states that school boards are allowed to “support the school to efficiently implement the activities stipulated by the present law and for this purpose takes the measures stipulated by the legislation, shall define volume of funding to be allocated form the local budget as extra financial

resources needed for the implementation of school curriculum” (Law of Georgia on the General Education, 2005). More than that, the Law grants the school boards authority over the elected school principals. Specifically, in case principals are found to be unable to adequately lead their schools in accord with the expectations of the community, the boards, as a representative body of teachers, students and parents, have the right to appeal to the Ministry for the dismissal of the principals. Verbatim, the legislature authorizes the school boards “in case of financial violation within the framework of provisions stipulated by the present clause, sub-point “a”, may appeal to the school board of trustees with an offer to stop the powers of a director, and in case the board of trustees does nothing, appeal the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia about the discharge of the board of trustees or/and cancellation of the powers of director prior to expiration of his term” (Law of Georgia on the General Education, 2005).

Question 2 – Do you think there is less equity for all student now than there was during the Soviet time?

“An End to the Chinovniks”. Almost unanimous was the reaction when the question on equity in schools was asked. The majority of the interviewees admitted that current reforms in educational system of Georgia allowed for more equity for students than had ever been exercised in the Soviet schools. The principals and their responses testified that equity in the past was false and went no further than the physical appearance of student all dressed in uniforms.

During the Soviet regime and afterwards, student equity was certainly observed to some degree. The obligation to wear a uniform displayed the instance of such equity.

Another principal was pointed in his response. He noted:

They [the students] did not avoid revealing that some of their teachers were subjective in their assessments of student performance which depended on factors other than the actual level of performance.

As it is apparent from these responses, more often than not favoritism and nepotism were common in Soviet and post-Soviet schools in Georgia. In some cases, teachers paid attention to students’ social backgrounds. One of the most prominent examples of such practices was the allowance for the students of a ruling elite, otherwise known as ‘Chinovniks’ (a Russian word transliterated into Georgian and assigned a negative connotation to identify dysfunctional and corrupted Soviet and post-Soviet public officials who enjoyed the perks of their positions), to be granted underserved opportunities for advancement.

...[in the times of Soviet regime] primarily the student of corrupted ‘Chinovnik’ used to find accommodations in higher educational institutions, not the ones that were able and well-educated.

Another instance of favoritism was the ubiquitous practices of grade inflation for students who had paid their classroom teachers and private tutors. This practice was in part the consequence of a Soviet educational system that provided low wages for the teachers. With insufficient pay, teachers resorted to private tutoring and the sometimes the recruitment of their classroom students as tutees. Thus, some students paid the teacher and some did not. As demonstrated by an international research study (Bray, 2004) and the actual practice in Georgia, such a division, in its turn, led to the treatment of the former as favorites who did not have to invest their efforts in earning high grades and the latter as ‘ugly ducklings’ who had to toil on daily basis to be given equally high grades.

It mattered most whether a student was a private tutee of the teacher. If they were, their grades in school were particularly high.

Of course there were leading knowledgeable students who did not take private lessons from their classroom teachers and still had high grades. However, these students also were the ones who were asked to perform and demonstrate in front of the class while the rest of the students set idly.

The reforms in the country's educational system brought by the Rose Revolution have been changing all of these practices. All the principals unanimously admitted the difference between the old and the new practices.

...the chances for equal treatment of endeavors demonstrated by the student are higher [today] than in the times of Soviet regime...

"Fair Play and Equity for Students". An opportunity for students to compete fairly and openly with each other for the reward of an admission to higher education institutions was named as another important advantage of the reform. This particular educational policy has resulted in the introduction of the United National Exams which in their turn were perceived as *"the beam of hope"* for the educational system to value students' merits rather than their social assets. One of the principals offered the following response:

The United National Exams and the precedence of fair competition under equal conditions for all students have given everybody a beam of hope. The hope, that if students have knowledge and are well-equipped with abilities, they can achieve their own self-realization.

"Ending the Labeling of Students". Another important concept mentioned in the interviews was the eradication of the old non-written rule to divide students into *"successful"* and *"failing"*.

The students are not divided into successful as successful and failing.

The nonofficial division of students into successful and failing was common in the Soviet schools. Several factors contributed to the quick establishment and deep entrenchment of this practice. On one hand, it was promoted by the dominating teacher-centered classroom methodology where students were deprived of an opportunity to actively participate in the learning process. Lacking this chance, the students were left alone to face complicated content. Teachers were not regarded as a source of help or advice. Instead, they were perceived of as arbiters of learning whose primary responsibility was to judge rather than assist in the students' level of mastery. The only help that students on which the students could count was the assistance of their parents. The social capital of Georgian families, their desire and ability to help was the primary force ensuring high achievements of the students. However, those students whose parents were unwilling or unable to offer relevant help often failed at school. In such environments it was easy to acquire a label for a *"successful"* or *"failing"* performance.

Once assigned, this label was hard to remove. More often than not students were regarded as *"successful"* and *"failing"* all though their school years no matter how well or badly they lived up to their fames. Successful student were regarded as being unable to fail while the failing students were perceived of as being incapable of success. Such perceptions influenced teachers' attitudes towards their students and made them more willing to cooperate with the former and reluctant to deal with the latter. This compromised the equality principle espoused in Soviet educational rhetoric.

"Student Centered Instruction". The introduction of new student centered strategies and the promotion of the concept of student equality have changed the situation. Teachers no longer perform as arbiters of achievements but as participants of learning

They [the students] are the beneficiaries and the reform is focused on the learning process.

With the promotion of the principle of student equity, the labeling of students has declined. Teacher approaches to student teaching and learning have changed. The fundamental underlying implication of equity concept is the ability of all students to learn and make progress. Sharing this concept means the acknowledgement of every student's potential to achieve and the commitment to his/her success.

"Student Participation in School Governance". Finally, among the mentioned equity policies, the principals included the opportunity for the students to choose their classroom leading teacher.

Also the students have an opportunity to choose their own leading teachers.

This is perhaps one of the most radical of the reform innovations—the participation of students in the selection of the school principal. The introduction of this policy is of great significance as a leading teacher is a person who has to serve as both a teacher and an advisor. Their responsibilities require them to attend to the students' academic issues and their personal problems. It is also a person who is supposed to lead the students through all their school years and with whom the students will find themselves communicating most often all through their days in school.

Question 3 – How do you perceive the current educational reform efforts in Georgia?

"The Reform as a Boiling Process". Similar to other issues raised in our interviews with the school principals, the question of the effectiveness of the current educational reforms in Georgia revealed an absolute and unanimous approval of the Ministry's reform efforts. Also, it was clearly communicated that these school principals supported the intentions of the Ministry to bring Georgian schools to Western standards of democratic education. One of the principals spoke about the reforms in the most figurative way. According to her, "The reform has been going on with great passion. It is in the boiling process". These words well describe the dynamics of the reforms aiming at multiple directions and benefiting all the involved parties – students, educators, parents and the society. It also created an image of a change process heated by at times sharp debates and reactions on behalf of the public. The counterpoints concerning the country's education policy echoed in the even in our small sample of five principals as some of them expressed full support of policy innovations while others maintained a certain level of disapproval. One of the school leaders stated:

I truly believe that it is the most positive ongoing process in the educational system.

Another principal gave a vent to his reservations:

There are still some issues that have to be settled through discussion and sharing. No one single side should try to always promote its ideas. Every school's ideas have to be considered. The educational constitution reads that what is being offered is the minimum; we have to achieve the maximum ourselves. I think that certain changes have to be introduced into this reform and I think these changes will happen.

This position however, did not prevent the principal from acknowledging the overall benefit of the reform.

However, I cannot help assessing the undergoing reform as positive.

The support and ready approval stem from the realization of genuine intention of the state in general and the Ministry of Education in particular to invest their resources into the well-being of all of their citizens and the students in particular.

I think that this reform that aims at the welfare of student and the well-being of the state is very successful.

Such national priorities have not been on the governmental agenda for a long time. During the Soviet times, the only primary concern of the highly centralized government was the equalization (*versus* equality) of all citizens, an insistence of the communist and socialist ideology and obedience to the rule of the communist party. The post-Soviet period brought freedom to Georgia; but it failed to prioritize national welfare as the ultimate goal of the national policy. Instead, the post Soviet period unleashed a desire of the ruling elite for self-gratification and accumulation of personal wealth. By the time of the Rose Revolution in 2003, the country was hopelessly immersed in corruption, nepotism and favoritism. However, the changes generated by the Rose Revolution have caused a turn in the country's history. It has lifted national welfare to a priority position, most specifically in identifying the role of education in national policy. Witnessing these changes in governmental approaches and convinced about governmental concerns for the welfare of the students, the principals have naturally developed sympathy for the Ministry's policies and actions.

Question 4 – How do you perceive yourself in this reform? Are these reform efforts likely to improve what happens for children?

“Service to Others and Self Actualization”. The answers to this question uncovered two main themes. First, the participation in the reform helped the principals realize their *true vocation* - to be committed to students.

I decided to run for the principal's office for the kids. ...possible profits [from other organizations] were not as important to me as finding myself any my vocation. And this is being with kids.

“Locally Directed Loyalty”. Second, the leaders felt a high level of commitment to their occupation. The high degree of personal commitment to the process of schooling in Georgia can be claimed to be unprecedented. The reason for this is the fact that prior to the Rose Revolution, the position of a school leader was an appointed office and subject to the Ministry's approval. Leaders appointed in this fashion often lacked ownership in the school processes and located their loyalty to the Ministry. They did not view themselves as part of their school communities. Neither were they accountable or responsible to their local schools.. It is these attitudes that played an important part in degeneration of Georgian schools into dysfunctional and neglected institutions.

However, with the introduction of elected school principals the climate is expected to change. As our research reveals the personal interest and commitment unanimously demonstrated by the school leaders and revealed by our research is most likely to be a common feature of today's school principals in Georgia. It is this feature that will have a deep potential to make the educational system to change modes and shift from total apathy to comprehensive excitement.

By and large, the leaders clearly committed themselves to making a difference in the lives of their students.

...I would like to say that if I did not feel myself in position to make the difference in the future of the kids, I would have not dared to take such a responsibility as being a principal.

Also, our interviewees perceived themselves as managers and organizers of learning processes and the main strongholds of the ongoing reforms.

My motivation to become a successful manager has been increasing.

* * *

Having won the elections, I was able to demonstrate myself as an organizer.

Notwithstanding this thorough focus on school and reform management and organization, the principals did well realize that their goal is the learning of the students.

Our aim today is to help students develop their personalities. We also have to teach them how to operate with their knowledge and not just gain it.

Finally, as accurately noted by one of the participants, all leadership endeavors and efforts come down to one important goal – *execute their [the students'] commission.*

Everything that is being done is done for the sake of the students' well-being...In as good sense, we execute their commission.

Question 5 – Which reform initiation, if any, would you characterize as the most important and why?

“Education is the most important.” As it became common for our interviewees to express essentially the same opinions on a large number of issues raised in our interviews, the reactions to this particular question were no exception. Specifically, all the interviewees admitted that the most important reforms implemented in the country, were the ones in the field of education.

Though all the undertaken reforms are important for Georgia, I would single out the importance on the educational reform.

Since the first days of the Rose Revolution, Georgia has continuously been undergoing important changes in many directions (Cornell, 2007). It has been witnessing significant transformations in its social welfare system. Specifically, a pay-freeze - the persistent scourge of all the employed Georgians who comprised a large section of all working citizens and were hired by the central budget-fed state institutions (e.g. hospitals, schools, state ministries, etc) – has successfully been eliminated through governmental interventions in the social welfare system. The review and reassessment of international priorities have made Georgia act more actively towards its integration into the Western organizations (e.g. European Union, NATO). Improvements in the domestic policies have successfully been fighting corruption and unstable security (due to the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and North Ossetia and their military-minded and secessionist rulership in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali). The crucial significance of all these governmental efforts can hardly be underestimated. But, the interviewees saw the intention to build human capital through high quality education as a national goal that stood out. One of the interviewees captured such a prioritization in her response. Specifically, she stated,

The country is witnessing quickly unfolding change processes which put the necessity of reform in the educational system on agenda.

“Multiple interventions in multiple directions”. Another important theme emerging from the interviewees' responses was the perception of educational reforms as the Ministry's simultaneous interventions in multiple directions, also understood as projects.

I think that the most important fact is that the Ministry simultaneously works in multiple directions...

The introduction and administration of the United National Exams was understood as one of such projects.

From all the reform efforts, I would single out the establishment of the United National Exams.

Three factors were named as the most important features of these exams. First, as demonstrated above, our leaders valued the equity principle promoted by the exams.

...one of the greatest is the opportunity for the school graduates to participate in the United National Exams and on equal grounds with all other graduates compete for higher educational opportunities.

It is noteworthy, that equity was perceived not only as equal chances for university admissions, but also as an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of an objective assessment. As noted by one of the principals, a system of coded exam worksheets is an important guarantee of this objectivity.

They [the students] also enjoy the opportunity of maximally objective assessments of their performance on the test. This is secured by a codes number with which every set of test papers are provided.

Prior to the reform, the assessment process was 'customized' as each college and university used to establish its own exams (Clark, 2005). It was their prerogative to determine on what content areas to test their applicants, what standards to establish as requirements and what level of performance to regard as proficient. Colleges and universities were enabled to exercise a case-by-case approach to the student performance assessments. It was not altogether uncommon to witness unfairness of evaluation particularly vivid when one applicant's acceptable performance would be regarded as unacceptable for another.

A significant problem with university controlled exams was the ability of exam evaluators to easily identify the applicants. Having students write their names on their test worksheets, every member of the admissions committee was aware of whose performance they were assessing. Given the already mentioned custom of making arrangements for the students of the 'chinovniks' to have effortless and secure accommodations in colleges and universities, such a system of assessment contributed to favoritism and nepotism. Bribery and under-the-sleeve connections dictated which applicants should safely and easily pass their exams and which ones didn't.

Knowing all the intricacies of the college and university admissions, the new reform-minded educational policy makers have converted the 'customized' exams into objective national assessments. For example, applicants' identities have become coded with unique serial numbers that can only be given on the exam worksheets. Such a system of protection has made it impossible for evaluators to discern exact identities of the applicants, has helped them remain impartial in their assessments and has promoted the notion of merit-based competition for higher education.

Second, the leaders highly appreciated the transparency of the exams. The approach has been exercised by making test worksheets graded and scored by the evaluators available for the applicants and their personal review. By and large, these reviews serve as levers to monitor the fairness and accuracy of assessments. In case students passing the exams suspect any unfairness or inaccuracy in a particular given assessment, they can make an appeal of their case to the board of appeals and have their test worksheets re-assessed. In our interviews, one of the principals explicitly highlighted the importance of such exercise of transparency. Specifically, he noted,

...also, all students' original worksheets are multiplied. Those who doubt accuracy of their scores have an opportunity to apply for re-evaluation of their performance on the tests.

The practice of transparent exams and assessment has been a significant achievement of the recent reforms. Prior to them, fearing the discovery of partiality and unfairness of their assessments, evaluators used to bar applicants from re-examining their exams. In rare cases when the students managed to gain access and able to reveal inaccuracies of the assessment, their attempts to appeal were fruitless.

It is all natural that the attempts of the Ministry to eradicate disagreeable practices of partial assessments and dispel the atmosphere of secrecy would find unconditional support on behalf of all educators in general and our interviewees in particular. It is also natural that the above described exercise of transparency would be named as one of the main values of the United National Exams.

Finally, our school leaders singled out opportunities for multiple tries as an indispensably important feature of the United National Exams. These opportunities can be defined as a possibility for tests takers to use their single test scores to apply for different departments within the same university or to the same departments within different universities. Such multiple applications increase probabilities for the students to become accepted at least at one of the applied universities and thus secure their chances to pursue their degrees in higher education. This beneficial policy of multiple applications has been promptly recognized by the majority of our interviewees.

The students have been granted the opportunity to apply to seven different departments using the same test scores. This increases their chances of being admitted to one of them.

In previous years, this was not nearly the case. According to the rules of admissions, students were allowed to apply for only one department at a time. If they were denied admissions, they were able to make another try only the following year. One of the principals put it,

In the past, students could apply for admissions to only one department at a time. If they were denied the scholarship, they did not have a chance to try again until a year later.

Thus, in comparison to the previous experiences, the current examination system has certainly increased the chances for the applicants to become enrolled in higher education. Consequently, the policy helps keep students motivated to further their knowledge and expertise.

Besides the United National Exams, the participants of our study gave a particular prominence to another focus of the Ministry of Education and Science – a considerable accent on the human resource development. As accurately described by one of the school leaders, the main purpose of this attempt was to *maintain the balance* between upgraded policies and educators' competences.

Reform efforts demonstrated in every aspect of education are all intertwined. The most important is the accent on the professional re-qualification of teachers and school principals. What should principals do if they are well prepared and intent to introduce a whole array of changes in schools but do not have a strong team of teachers? This is the primary concern of the Ministry – to maintain the balance – and this is why they focus on the professional prequalification of teachers.

As many other elements of educational reforms, the Ministry's focus on teachers' professional development has exclusively been brought by the new system change process. Prior to the reforms,

teaching was not perceived as a profession in any need of development and improvement. Indeed, with the curriculum unalterably persisting from year to year, with teaching strategies strictly focused on lecturing and most importantly, with the pervasive notion of students being passive recipients of knowledge, teachers, administrators and policy makers would fail to see any necessity for changes the routine. Rarely would there be any training opportunities for the teachers; rarely would any innovation be introduced into schools; rarely would educators have access to up-to-date professional literature.

After the Rose Revolution all of this changed. The old school system was found to be stale; old practices were found to be unacceptable; old teaching techniques were found to be inefficient. The Ministry chose to integrate the past into the future instead of totally dismantling the former system. It opted for improvement; instead of dismissing all the old employees of the system and replacing them with educators equipped with contemporary knowledge. To do this, the Ministry established numerous training programs.

The overall success of the reforms has proven the Ministry to be correct in its strategies. The positive consequences of the policy have demonstrated to the public in general and the participants of educational reforms in particular that it is not necessary to impose havoc in order to build harmony; it is not necessary to engage in sporadic cases of change in order to make progress. All that is necessary is to perceive reforms as continuous processes that indispensably build upon the past and constantly create opportunities for improvement.

Finally, our leaders acknowledged the significance of election of school principals as an important project of the Ministry. Specifically, one of the principals maintained,

It is also very important that school principals have been elected through a democratic process of voting.

The most beneficial element of this acknowledgement is the realization of great responsibility in front of the electorate – the students, teachers and parents – who are inextricably involved in school life. The same principal when on with explanation,

...being elected means greater responsibility.

Question 6 – We are conducting this study to report to an international audience of educators. What do you feel is unique and special about what is happening with schools in Georgia and your school in particular about which others should know?

Three main themes emerged as a result of our data analysis. In particular, the principals primarily focused their attention on the following phenomena – establishment of democratic school governance, accent on the quality of education, and considerable investments in school buildings. By and large, answers to this last question can be viewed as a comprehensive summary of our interviews.

The principals perceived it necessary that the democratic processes taking place in the educational system of Georgia should be communicated to the international community. In their responses, our interviewees highlighted the importance of establishing the traditions of democratic school governance based on the elections of the principals and representation of constituents' interests through the school boards.

...elections of school principals were held within a democratic framework. Responsibility level of principals elected by schools rises sharply. Teachers and the students trust them and entitle them to action.

I think that the most important thing that happened in Georgian schools is that they have witnessed the establishment of the school boards.

Large governmental investments in the renovation of school buildings were viewed as another considerable benefit of the reforms.

I think that the most important thing is to know in what environment students learn. ...state government has earmarked special resources for the improvement of school buildings and school facilities...Due to this help, it was possible to thoroughly renovate the school and equip it with excellent school inventory...It is true that we are not quite up to the standards, but I hope that we will be able to approximate the international standards in the nearest future.

The notorious events that took place in one of the schools in Beslan's School No1 in Ossetia in September 4, 2004 made Georgian government take considerable measures to provide not only the comfort but also security of its students. For this purpose, schools have extensively been provided with surveillance cameras. This important circumstance did not escape the attention of our principals ("Student security is ensured with installed observation cameras") and was duly mentioned as a fact worthy of being conveyed to educators in other counties.

Finally, the leaders expressed their desire to notify the world community that Georgian government in general and the Ministry of Education and Science in particular were not only concentrated on the creation of comfortable environments for their students, but also put a considerable accent on the quality of education with which they have been provided. This focus has been crystallized in establishing requirements for teacher accreditation ("Also, the process of teacher certification has started").

Our extensive analysis of principals' responses can be concluded with a concise retort of one of the interviewees.

So far, these are the most important events that have happened in Georgian schools and specifically in my school.

Findings

Our summary of what these five principals told us about education in Georgia after the Rose Revolution can be categorized as follows.

First, these principals perceived a national ministry as complimentary and persistent in trying to re-shape the Georgian educational system. It should also be noted that in the times of crisis, centralization is probably the most efficient mode in which problems can be solved (Fullan, 2005). It allows for emergency measures to be taken in a timely fashion, special interventions to be promptly implemented and desirable effects to be quickly noticed. Georgian education had entered a state of crisis by the time of the Rose Revolution.

Second, these principals identified significant achievements of the reform and were able to articulate these as:

- 1) a "beam of hope" in reference to the Comprehensive National exams;
- 2) a movement toward true student equity
- 3) freedom of action or "opportunity to perform freely" in reference to enhanced local decision making;

- 4) teacher professional autonomy over curriculum in reference to the shift from the rigid Soviet curricula;
- 5) a reduction the false labeling of students as successes or failures;
- 6) elected principals as a means of establishing a shift in loyalty to the student and local school;
- 7) greatly enhanced facilities in support of student learning;
- 8) professional development for teachers.

Third, in terms of how the reform has impacted their beliefs about their own practice as administrators these principals spoke of the following:

- 1) “true vocation” as they saw school administrators shifting their focus from the mentality of the Chinovnik to the professionally oriented servant leader;
- 2) a heady excitement as the multiple layers of the reform yielded a process called a “boiling process”;
- 3) a conviction that as school leaders they were to focus on the welfare of students and through that focus on the welfare of the society;

Discussion

The findings of our case study of five newly elected principal leading public schools in the small town of Zugdidi clearly reveal their strong support for new educational policies introduced to the system by the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. The principals also demonstrated their deep understanding and appreciation of the reforms that were taking place in public schools. In their responses the principals single out the efforts of the Ministry in the establishment and administration of the United National Exams, the in creation of opportunities for the public school to exercise self-governance, in the introduction of principles of democratic rulership though elections of principles and establishment of representative body of school board, in the care for school resources and in the focus on the quality of education.

Though the discoveries of our qualitative research cannot be claimed to be largely generalizeable, they closely coincide with results and finding of other studies attempting to determine the effectiveness of the newly implemented policies and reveal public opinion regarding the Ministry’s interventions. In 2006 with the request of the Ministry of Education and Science, one of such studies was conducted by the Georgian Opinion Research Business International (GORBI) – an oldest and most authoritative opinion research organization which is included in the Gallup International Association. In its qualitative research study, GORGBI aimed as revealing the perceptions of school leaders concerning the quality of public serves provided by the Ministry of Education and Science. Based on the interviews collected from six principal in Tbilisi public schools the researching institution discovered that the participants of the study realized extremely well that a change of an old educational system was absolutely necessary. They also demonstrated their thorough knowledge of legal backgrounds of the reforms and gave newly enacted laws and regulations their full support. While evaluating system changes, the principals highlighted the importance for schools to control their own disposable budgets, for them to witness the government investing into comfortable and well-equipped school buildings and for the teachers to have opportunities for professional development and teaching autonomy.

Three studies were conducted in 2004 and the January and April of 2005 by the Business and Consulting-Group Research (BCG-Research) – another authoritative research company operating in Georgia. The research aim at uncovering public opinions on educational reforms being implemented in the country. It was noteworthy that the study that took place prior to the actual administration of the United National Exams yet still revealed a strong belief by the public that the exams would be objective. In our study that was conducted during the time when the United National Exams had been administered for two years, the principals actually testified that the exams were objective. Thus, the BCG-Research study uncovered wishful predictions that our principals have validated.

Thus, all the studies reveal true and genuine belief of the public in general and educators in particular that the reforms are beneficial and aim at the well-being of students. They also communicate the strong desire of the government and the readiness of the people to go to any extent, incur any costs but make their students successful and competitive members of a society. This is done for the sole sake of the children playing in the front-yards of their houses to create a future for themselves and their country; for the parents keeping an ever-watchful eye on them to enjoy peace and happiness in their older age; for the neighbors leaning out of the windows of their houses and shaking hands to have the ever-lasting comfort of their friendship.

Limitations of the Current Research and Implications for the Future Studies

A sample of five principals is to be generalized to the population of school leaders in Georgia. For example, our sampling did not provide for ethnic representation. Because of significant ethnic conflict in the Caucasus, school principals in other parts of the country may well see a national reform through different eyes. The participants of the study were from the southernmost region of western Georgia where ethnic minorities are not present. It might be expected that the attitudes of other minority groups towards educational reforms will be different, particularly if socio-political beliefs separate these groups from the government in Tbilisi. Future research will better complete the picture uncovered in this study by exploring school leaders' perceptions on the reforms in regions where ethnic diasporas of Azerbaijanis and Armenians are widely represented.

Another limitation of the research is its geographic restrictions. The research was conducted in a small town where community bonds between the inhabitants are strong. A close proximity existing between the town's people might have created a 'neighborhood' effect which, in its turn, might have promoted the majority of the residents to have similar views. This circumstance might have accounted for the high degree of congruence of our leaders' opinions observed during the interviews. It might be the case that the participants developed their perceptions in order to be in thorough rapport with their colleagues with whom they are likely to have not only close professional but also personal connections. Future studies will be likely to gain recognition by attempting to either dispel or corroborate this assumption. In order to do this, it might be advantageous for them to select their research participants either from large metropolitan areas or geographically remote locations.

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