

The dynamics of policy on the language of instruction in compulsory education



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Private needs and public resources

It is not a secret that for a number of different reasons some Armenian families would prefer their children to be educated in a foreign language. Since for over a decade the Armenian compulsory education system has been failing to provide quality general education and to ensure sufficient knowledge of foreign languages, such families prefer to educate their children in schools abroad, where they are not only educated in a foreign language, but are also brought up in a foreign language environment. Moreover, in the past the state discretely attempted to address this issue. For instance, there are more than 50 Armenian students at the Regent's School in Thailand, including children of state officials.

That there is an issue is already obvious. The question is how the public policy is going to address it. Should the state heed to the needs and wants of a group of families and try to address those? The answer seems quite straightforward at a first glance: if there are families that can afford considerable sums of money to educate their children abroad, why not to open schools with a foreign language as the main language of instruction here in Armenia? Wouldn't this keep the children and the money within Armenia? However, public policy cannot be developed on individual cases. Otherwise, the state will be compelled to satisfy the other needs of individual families as well. For instance, it is often noted that "many parents want and pay for their children not to get education". Should state policy address such needs and preferences as well? Naturally, the answer is no.

The liberal and the conservative under the same yoke

Public policies on education and language are interrelated. However, their basics and logics are different. Thus, educational policy provides an opportunity for alternative education and in certain cases defines the right to be educated in a foreign language for the students holding RA citizenship. Specific educational standards and curricula are developed. However, the public policy regarding private and alternative secondary education is yet underdeveloped. In general, the current picture of the public policy on education, which on surface seems liberal, has developed throughout time as a result of situational responses to particular issues. Meanwhile, throughout its development it has adjusted to the needs of the secondary education and the migration needs and preferences of families. In contrast, language policy is conservative in its core, and it neglects to address the issues rising from the developmental nature of the language. Legislation in this regard needs amendment: many legal formulations do not comply with modern concepts and definitions.

The sparks of rigid juxtaposition

Thus, if the public policy on education is comparatively liberal, the policy on language is rather conservative. This is actually natural, and such a state of affairs can be observed in almost all countries. Moreover, juxtaposition of the two policies should result in the development of a system of education and upbringing in a native language with the right to alternate education, which opens up an opportunity for gaining advanced levels of proficiency in foreign language. Any initiative

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promoting education where instruction is in a foreign language is destined to end up on the intersection of liberal and conservative approaches, which consequently results in heated debates and replacement of arguments with emotive responses. Actually, conservatism of the language policy is being bypassed even today. For instance, it has to take into account the need of returned migrants: education of children having studied in foreign schools should not stop. However, it is one thing to realize that there are irreversible realities and one has to deal with those, and it is a totally different thing when one authors irreversible phenomena. Unfortunately, there are families that have their children brought up and educated in upbringing where a foreign language is the main language of instruction and socialization, thus irrevocably changing the future of the child's Weltanschauung.

Harmonization of reality and development

The public policy should not promote parent's preference for bringing up and educating their children in a foreign language environment. However, it cannot prohibit it as well. If for whatever reason the child has been brought up in a foreign language environment and has started his education in a foreign language, the state should come to terms with such an irreversible reality and should provide necessary conditions to ensure the continuation of the child's education, even if the education is organized in a foreign language. Harmonization of the needs of children in immigrating families of RA citizens and of the opportunities for exercising the right to alternative education implies several actions:

First, education in a foreign language as the main language of instruction on the territory of the Republic of Armenia should be provided only in private schools. RA citizens should have access to such educational services only after middle school.

Second, a specific curriculum should be developed for the study of Armenian language in such schools and/or the minimal proficiency criteria for the knowledge of the native language should be defined, as well adequate assessment mechanisms.

Third, there should be a clear procedure to verify the fact of having previously studied in a school where the language of instruction has been other than Armenian, as well to assess the proficiency level of the given foreign language. Such a procedure should aim at proving the so-called 'irreversibility' of upbringing and education in a foreign language.

Fourth, in case the 'irreversibility' has been established, it is necessary to provide opportunities for the realization of the right to education of these children, by opening classes with intensive study of the given foreign language or private schools where the language of instruction is a foreign language.

Finally, it is necessary to pay adequate attention to the development of the Armenian language through public and specialized discussions, which will necessitate the regular revision of public policy on language and compliance of the Law on Language with the current realities and requirements.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion "Multilingual Education: Challenge or Opportunity?", which took place on May 11, 2010. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.