

Methodology Article

Teacher Training, and Associated Problems and Solutions in the 21st Century's Azerbaijan

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Abstract

Significant reforms were implemented in the education sector of Azerbaijan after the country gained independence, initiating integration with global educational standards. A key focus was ensuring secondary schools were staffed with subject teachers competent in meeting contemporary requirements, highlighting the importance of a policy for young educators. Consequently, the study examined the professional skills of graduates from the Azerbaijan State Pedagogy University, who would teach geography in this new era. The study delved into the educational engagement of secondary school students, particularly those with well-educated parents, access to modern technology, and the ability to source information globally. It specifically considered the capabilities of geography teacher graduates to engage students' attention and the professional skills necessary for this task. Identified deficiencies were scrutinized, and strategies for their resolution were investigated. Higher education reforms, the shift from Soviet educational practices to the Bologna system was analyzed and contrasted. The study entailed a theoretical evaluation of the professional skills of Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University's geography teacher graduates, scrutinizing the curricula and subject content designed to foster these skills. An assessment of the educational process pinpointed organizational and instructional shortcomings in lectures and seminars. The research culminated in pinpointing gaps in the professional competencies of geography teacher graduates, proposing methods to rectify these gaps and align graduates' skills with contemporary standards.

Keywords

Teacher Training, Young Teachers Policy, Teacher Competence, Innovative Teacher, Creative Teacher

1. Introduction

Post-independence, Azerbaijan embarked on robust educational reforms encompassing all educational sectors. In 1999, the Education Reform Program of the Republic of Azerbaijan [1] was instituted. This program delineated the objectives, principles, procedural stages, primary directions, and implementation mechanisms of the reform. However, the program's notable omission was the absence of a mechanism

to ensure the provision of personnel capable of satisfying modern demands and fostering high intellectual potential, as well as the creation of a contemporary scientific and methodological foundation [1] (p. 9). Consequently, the "modern youth pedagogical policy" sparked extensive debate and gained prominence. These discussions sought to address several pivotal questions: What competencies are required for

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subject teachers in modern secondary schools? How can the professional skills of the teaching workforce be tailored to meet modern demands? What criteria should a 21st-century school teacher fulfill? How can a modern school environment be crafted to captivate the attention of 21st-century learners? What measures should the Azerbaijan State Pedagogical University implement to align teacher training with modern necessities? What innovations are essential in higher pedagogical education to enable young teachers to execute policies effectively? These queries became the focal point of daily discourse among educators. To explore these questions, teacher training in 21st-century Azerbaijan was subjected to research. The aim was to theoretically analyze the transition from Soviet to modern educational systems, examining the accomplishments, gaps, current challenges, and their resolutions in the contemporary era.

2. Discussion and Analysis

To synchronize Azerbaijan's education with global standards and establish a secular education system, an initial analysis of education systems in various developed countries was conducted with the support from international education experts invited to Azerbaijan. Seminars with higher and secondary school educators were organized to discuss the objectives of secular education. Following the Decree "On improving the education system in the Republic of Azerbaijan," [2] issued on June 13, 2000, sweeping reforms were enacted in higher education. Notably, departments were established at the Institute of Educational Problems. In March 2004, to advance the education development project, the Minister of Education decreed the establishment of a Curriculum Center. The center was tasked with two principal objectives: a) to enhance the professionalism and communication skills of education sector employees, particularly in adapting to new technological advancements; b) to formulate training programs. To achieve these goals, over 200 exemplary teachers were selected and assembled at the Curriculum Center through interviews among various subject teachers from secondary schools. The scientific-theoretical and methodological soundness of secondary school subject programs and textbooks were evaluated against student age appropriateness. Investigations were conducted to ascertain if the structure and content of these programs and textbooks were congruent with modern requirements and to identify any deficiencies.

On August 21, 2004, the "Program for equipping secondary schools of the Azerbaijan Republic with information and communication technologies" [3] was adopted. As per the program, all secondary schools in Azerbaijan were outfitted with contemporary computer technology and internet connectivity. Subject teachers, administrative staff, and technical personnel underwent training in utilizing modern technical equipment. To facilitate the program's objectives, secondary schools were categorized into 12 zones, with an initial 4,521 schools receiving computer equipment and internet access.

With the growing relevance of the "young teacher policy" in Azerbaijan, on January 31, 2008, the "Decree on some measures related to the integration of higher educational institutions of the Republic of Azerbaijan into the European higher education space" [4] was enacted. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with higher education institutions, was tasked with drafting the "State Program of Reforms in the Higher Education System of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2008-2012" and presenting it to the Cabinet of Ministers of Azerbaijan by March 30, 2008. Concurrently, in consideration of the Cabinet of Ministers and the Ministry of Education's proposals, a directive was issued to align the list of undergraduate specialties in higher education with the documents ratified by UNESCO and other international bodies.

The establishment of a new, modern Law was imperative for the development of an independent Azerbaijani state. After extensive deliberations spanning several years, the "Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Education" was ratified on January 13, 2009. This law encapsulated various educational forms, institutions, stages, levels, and supplementary education. It instituted contemporary requirements for parents, students, and educators [5].

The evaluation of students' knowledge and abilities in secondary schools started to approx in 1975-1980s, leading to a gradual neglect of assessment standards. Even in 1983, when Professor Mammad Zulfugarov developed a curriculum for teaching geography and established and published standards for assessing geographic knowledge and skills, the standards were not universally adopted by geography teachers [12]. The Azerbaijan State Pedagogical Institute faced a shortfall of qualified methodological staff in the teaching methodology of geography, which compromised the professional preparation of young teachers. The unprofessional conduct of methodologists during teaching practice and geography teaching seminars further detracted from the quality of teacher training. Consequently, establishing new assessment standards in secondary schools emerged as a critical issue. On January 13, 2009, the "Concept of Assessment in the General Education System of the Republic of Azerbaijan" [6] was adopted. This document outlined the requirements for assessment activities, identified existing problems, articulated the rationale for a new concept, and detailed objectives, assessment features, types, tools, monitoring systems, and various levels of assessment.

On May 22, 2009, the President of the Azerbaijan Republic endorsed the "State Program of Reforms in the Higher Education System of the Azerbaijan Republic for 2009-2013" [7], prompting the Cabinet of Ministers to address the resultant issues. The decree mandated an expedited integration of the higher education system into the European educational space, alignment of higher education content with Bologna principles, and the creation of an effective higher education system that could provide the populace with modern standard education, in sync with the country's economic development trends.

The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, on

June 3, 2010, adopted the "Concept of general education (national curriculum) of the Republic of Azerbaijan" [8]. The concept clarified the general education requirements, the standards for general education content, and the subjects taught at this level. It established the overall learning outcomes for students in secondary schools, including for the subject "Geography," and provided guidelines on the weekly hours for subjects, pedagogical process organization, student achievement assessment, and curriculum structure. Subsequently, on May 3, 2011, the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan ratified the "State standard and programs (curricula) of the general education level" [9].

The development concept "Azerbaijan 2020: Vision for the Future" was adopted on December 29, 2012 [10]. It commenced with a comprehensive analysis of the Azerbaijani education system's status during the independence years, followed by projections of changes in the global education context, and outlined strategic views and priorities for 2020. The concept emphasized the high competitiveness of the national economy, economic structure improvement, non-oil sector development, scientific potential and innovation support, information society transition, modern education system establishment, gender equality, and family development.

On October 24, 2013, the "State Strategy for the Development of Education in the Republic of Azerbaijan" [11] was signed, delineating five strategic areas. The second area set forth specific modernity-reflecting requirements for teachers and students. It highlighted the modernization of educational human resources, the adoption of innovative teaching methods, the cultivation of competent modern teachers, the enhancement of teacher professionalism, the establishment of a new student achievement assessment system, the identification and nurturing of student talents, and the development of inclusive education teaching methods.

In 2013, the "Educational program (curriculum) on the subject 'Geography for secondary schools of the Republic of Azerbaijan (grades VI-XI)'" [13] was devised and distributed to geography teachers. This program defined the geography teaching content, general learning outcomes, activity content and areas, class standards, integration, teaching strategies, and student achievement assessment.

To support those in the Azerbaijani education sector, efforts were made to communicate the requirements from newly adopted decisions to secondary school subject teachers, enhance their professional skills, and facilitate their proficiency in using technical tools.

The Education Society, officially inaugurated on August 15, 1990, aimed to provide public backing and foster the development of education and science in Azerbaijan.

On June 4, 2016, under the leadership of Professor Ajdar Agayev, the Education Society hosted the 1st Republican Forum of Advanced Teachers, marking a first in the republic. The forum gathered experienced and professional subject teachers from across the nation, focusing on aligning Azerbaijani school education with contemporary standards. The

discussions highlighted both achievements and the challenges impeding educational progress.

On April 28, 2018, the Education Society convened the 2nd Republican Forum of Advanced Teachers. Over two years, the forum concentrated on educational achievements and unresolved issues, discussing both their objective and subjective facets. Key challenges for secondary schools, such as the scarcity of teaching materials, regional internet connectivity issues, the elimination of specialized classrooms, student overcrowding, lack of modern technical equipment, and flaws in contemporary textbooks, were extensively debated.

The "Madad Azerbaijan" Educational Society, established in 1999 and partnering with the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, significantly contributed to the introduction of educational innovations and the creation of educational opportunities. It played a pivotal role in modernizing and enhancing the professional skills of countless teachers across 39 regions. The society organized numerous subject-specific trainings, identified capable teachers, and provided them with opportunities to serve as trainers, thereby bolstering the teacher training force.

Since 2008, Smart Technologies has been active in Azerbaijan, collaborating closely with the Ministry of Science and Education to supply secondary schools with interactive whiteboards, offer methodological support to teachers in ICT equipment usage for teaching, and foster the development of professional skills.

On February 1, 2020, the 1st Forum of Young Teachers was convened under the auspices of the Department of Youth Policy and Sports of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, alongside the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the Youth Foundation. The forum was conducted on a grand scale, and its second iteration, the 2nd Forum of Young Teachers, followed on June 11, 2022. Both events saw the participation of approximately 300 subject teachers, NGO representatives, and journalists from various regions, all under the age of 35. The forums' primary focus was on invigorating young teachers, harnessing their abilities, and steering them towards practical application. Concurrently, presentations on "the creative synergy between student and innovative teacher," "a culture of quality in education," and "social-emotional skills in education" were delivered.

On January 13, 2024, the Association of Young Teachers of Azerbaijan organized a forum titled "The future of our national education, a young teacher is an active citizen." The forum aimed to acquaint educators with the prospective objectives of Azerbaijan's educational policy, bolster teacher collaboration, and amplify public engagement and support for education.

The forums revealed significant deficiencies across all secondary schools in Azerbaijan, attributable to both objective and subjective factors. Addressing these issues necessitates departmental and state-level interventions. However, some concerns are intrinsically linked to teacher training. To

elucidate the root causes of these training deficiencies, the curriculum content for the "geography teacher" specialty was scrutinized, alongside the alignment of taught subjects with the acquisition of professional skills. Lectures and seminars were organized and conducted to meet contemporary standards, and barriers to students' professional skill development were examined.

It is prudent to commence the teacher training course by considering students' attitudes towards career choice. Prior to independence, university admissions were conducted at the institutional level. Applicants applied directly to universities for their chosen specialties, and high achievers were admitted as students. Those aspiring to the teaching profession endeavored to gain both theoretical and practical expertise. In the modern era, entrance exams became centralized, leading individuals who fell short in their preferred specialties to settle for available alternatives. Consequently, a contingent of Geography Teaching students, indifferent to the teaching vocation, pursued studies solely to obtain a Higher Education Diploma. This disinterest poses a fundamental challenge for the pedagogical specialty. Surveys among students revealed distinct groups:

- 1) A minority passionate about geography and aspiring to teach the subject.
- 2) A small number of students coerced into the specialty by parental pressure (4-5 individuals per group).
- 3) A few inspired to teach geography by their own teachers (1-2 individuals per group).
- 4) The majority, compelled to study teaching geography merely to secure higher education credentials.

Survey findings indicate that those genuinely aspiring to become geography teachers and eager to hone professional skills are scarce. Such individuals emerge as educational leaders in secondary schools. Conversely, those reluctantly pursuing geography struggle to teach unless they transition to unrelated fields. This dynamic fosters a cadre of educators unable to meet modern standards, culminating in a decline in educational quality.

On August 21, 2020, the Ministry of Education of the Azerbaijan Republic sanctioned the Geography teaching program for bachelor's degrees. The program encompasses general provisions, graduate competencies, program structure (totaling 240 credits over four years), teaching methodologies, assessment criteria, subject-specific learning outcomes, infrastructure, human resources, teaching internships, employment prospects, and lifelong learning opportunities [14].

The curriculum, aligned with the program, comprises "general subjects" (including two blocks of elective subjects totaling 30 credits), "special subjects" (120 credits), "university-determined subjects" (six blocks of elective subjects totaling 60 credits), culminating in a teaching practicum (30 credits).

A student survey highlighted concerns regarding the "geography teacher" specialty curriculum. Participants noted the omission of key subjects pivotal for professional specializa-

tion, with some relegated to elective status. Notably, "geology" and "geography research method" were absent from the curriculum.

In contemporary Azerbaijani secondary schools, teachers should ideally serve as coordinators, with students acting as researchers within the learning process. Teachers must design the educational journey to enable students to acquire geographical knowledge and skills through independent tasks. Students should engage in topic research, event and process analysis, and pattern identification based on their findings. A geography teacher lacking proficiency in research methods, theoretical knowledge, and practical skills in the field cannot effectively orchestrate student-led research activities. Similarly, a teacher unversed in geology cannot guide students in identifying rock characteristics during field excursions and studies.

The inclusion of "Toponymy" and "School Local History Course" in the curriculum remains contentious. Given the absence of subject groups at the university, students lack elective options. "Toponymy" is a politically and nationally significant subject, particularly pertinent in the study of Azerbaijani toponyms, local settlement names, and geographical nomenclature historically altered by imperialist and occupying forces. Hence, the inclusion of toponymy as a core subject is crucial.

The "school local history course" is foundational for a geography teacher's professional skill set. Teachers should frame all topics in the context of local history, enabling students to relate the subject matter to their nation and experiences. Guided excursions transform the natural environment, economy, and population into research subjects. Students apply theoretical knowledge practically, engaging in observations, experiments, community collaboration, and acquiring geographical knowledge and skills through personal endeavors. This approach fosters the development of citizens who are individualistic, creatively minded, possess a contemporary worldview, and are capable of contributing ideas and proposals. Therefore, the "school local history course" should be a principal subject in the curriculum.

The cessation of practical subject teaching and laboratory instruction post-1985 has emerged as a critical gap in the training of future geography teachers. Historically, geography students engaged in diverse field trips across the Absheron Peninsula, correlating with their first-year subject matter. These excursions to historical sites, museums, natural landscapes, and industrial facilities were research-oriented, guided by faculty members. Students conducted various studies, made observational analyses, and performed experiments. The scientific findings were documented as abstracts, contributing to the development of new geographical works and advancing the discipline within Azerbaijan. The materials gathered during these research activities were transformed into educational aids, enriching the faculty's pedagogical resources.

In their second year, students embarked on month-long

research practices across Azerbaijan, guided by professors and teachers. The third year expanded their research practice beyond national borders to Geographic information systems countries. The insights gained from these experiences were showcased at student scientific society conferences and published in proceedings, constituting valuable academic contributions.

The Geography Department's fieldwork in teaching and practice not only enhanced the visualization of climatology lessons but also provided data utilized by meteorological stations. Regrettably, the frequent amalgamation of the Geography Faculty with other faculties and multiple relocations resulted in the loss of educational aids, scientific literature, and the geographical specialty's foundational resources. These disruptions have significantly impeded the development of professional skills among geography teachers. Addressing these issues at the state level is imperative to elevate the quality of teacher training and equip secondary schools with creatively skilled educators.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

To wrap up the discussion above, the following conclusions and recommendations are proposed:

- 1) The state has undertaken educational reforms to align Azerbaijani education with global standards and contemporary demands, progressively enacting laws that are now being incrementally implemented.
- 2) Beyond legislative measures, the establishment of educational societies in Azerbaijan has facilitated the redesign of professional skills, involving secondary school subject teachers, including geography educators, in various training programs.
- 3) Persistent challenges in teacher training necessitate state-level solutions. Curricula must incorporate subjects that bolster the professional competencies of geography teachers, with an emphasis on practical exercises.
- 4) Given geography's reliance on local history and empirical observation, all specialized subjects should be structured as laboratory classes, with practical sessions conducted amidst nature, within industrial settings, at historical sites, and in museums.
- 5) University admissions for the "geography teacher" specialty should be contingent upon the genuine interest and aspirations of the candidates. Those who perform poorly in unrelated specialties and exhibit low admission rates should not be considered for the "geography teacher" program. This approach will ensure a dedicated and passionate cohort of future geography educators.

Author Contributions

Mirvari Verdiyeva is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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