Teachers as Reflective Learners:
Teacher Perception of Professional Development in the Context of Azerbaijan's Curriculum Reform

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Abstract. This paper builds on current research trends on professional teacher development in Eurasian countries, including the diversification of teacher training, opportunities for professional teacher networking, and developing a collaborative community culture within schools and the broader education community. This study aims to explore teacher beliefs and thoughts on the effectiveness of professional development, specifically in the context of the Education Sector Reform Project (ESRP), implemented in Azerbaijan during 2008–2013. This study analyzes quantitative data from two surveys—the teacher self-assessment and the education reforms assessment. In the prevailing conventional teacher training system, teachers are perceived as beneficiaries of professional development programs. However, over the last decade, policy-makers are beginning to attach greater importance to professional development where teachers are seen as learners that are encouraged to make professional development decisions based on their needs. Including teachers in the design of professional teacher development programs might be suggested as a way to ensure learning activities have a greater impact on the quality of teaching. Such a participatory approach that strengthens teachers' roles as decision makers in their professional development has the potential to advance teacher support during education reforms. Education researchers also have an important role as facilitators mediating dialogue between teachers and policy-makers in order to build an effective partnership within the education community.

1. The Reform Context in Azerbaijan

After the "crisis of the socialist public-political system and break-down of the Soviet Union" and gaining its independence, Azerbaijan, from the middle of the 1990s, gradually started to revive from "political chaos, economic paralysis and social collapse" and has set up its development priorities[Presidential office of Azerbaijan, 2012. P. 2]. In the area of education these priorities were stated as the "... development of human capital... which leads to drastic changes in the education system" [Ibid. P. 7] and the "adaptation of Azerbaijani education system to standards of the world education system" [State Commission on Education Reforms, 1999. P. 2]. In 1999, the Government initiated the Education Sector Reform Project (ESRP) led by the Ministry of Education (MoE) with co-funding and technical assistance from the World Bank (WB).

The ESRP was aimed at reforming public schooling in the country by introducing new curricula for preschool, primary and secondary education. The main goal of the new national curriculum for primary schools, which was introduced in 2006[1] and was first implemented in schools in 2008, was to transform a traditional approach to curriculum that emphasized academic knowledge and academically talented pupils towards a learner-centered approach.

In order to evaluate and document the curriculum reform, the World Bank commissioned a three-phased monitoring study that took place in 2010, 2012, and 2013.[2] These studies, the baseline study in 2010, the midterm in 2012, and the final study in 2013, assessed teacher attitudes toward the reform process. The goals of the reports were to reveal teacher attitudes towards the reform process to policy makers and to begin a decentralization of the educational system from the highly-centralized and authoritarian system into a more evidence-based education system functioning as a professional community of learners, teachers and leaders in order to sustain change.

Within the curriculum reform, teachers were required to adopt a new vision of pupils as active learners with their own interests, diverse needs, learning styles, and strengths. Teachers were also asked to use interactive child-centered teaching methods and to facilitate the development of higher-order thinking skills, creativity, critical thinking, and motivation for lifelong learning among their pupils—traits deemed necessary for the modernization of Azerbaijani society. Finally, teachers were asked to utilize new textbooks and teacher aids and to employ new assessment methods to track pupil achievement.

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[1] The new National Curriculum was first introduced at the primary school level, which encompasses the first four years of schooling and is compulsory for all children starting at the age of 6.

[2] The Monitoring Studies were conducted by two local firms—the Center for Innovations in Education, a local non-governmental organization and the "Sigma" Research Center for Development and International Collaboration

The curriculum reform also introduced innovative changes to the delivery of professional teacher development. Traditionally all in-service teacher training was conducted by the Azerbaijan Teachers Institute and the Baku In-Service Teacher Training Institute, two large state institutes. The ESRP project opened the market to a diverse group of licensed and non-licensed, commercial and non-profit teacher training providers. All school teachers implementing the new curriculum were provided with relatively intensive training on curriculum applications prior to each school year.

The monitoring study revealed that teachers consistently reported difficulties they faced throughout the implementation of the new curriculum. They reported on difficulties related to every aspect of the new curriculum including the use of interactive teaching methods, the use of new assessment methods, new textbooks, and teacher aids. After these difficulties were revealed in 2010, the ESPR management extended the duration of in-service training on the new curriculum from 36 to 60 hours, introduced a procedure to vet trainers, and allowed the use of diverse training packages developed by teacher training providers instead of a single package developed by the MoE at the beginning of the curriculum reform.

Why, in spite of the professional support provided, did teachers continuously face challenges with the implementation of the new curriculum? What aspects of the professional development provided were insufficient in meeting teacher needs? What did teachers think of the professional support provided within the reform process? What kind of professional development do teachers think they need in order to cope with innovations?

These questions were examined through the analysis of quantitative data gathered during the three monitoring study phases. Our research attention was focused on teacher opinions on their innovative experience and the perceptions of their professional needs in the process of new curriculum implementation.

2. Teacher perceptions of professional needs during reform

The education reform projects initiated in post-Soviet countries during the last 20 years considered teacher professional development as a crucial issue that affected successes and failures of the innovations introduced [Silova, 2010]. Analysis of this teacher professional development has usually been conducted based on monitoring reports representing the viewpoints of donor organizations and state institutions, while the voices of teachers have been absent from the process. This research however, uses "teacher voices" to get feedback from educators and to ensure participative decision making and effective planning of innovations implemented in the area of professional teacher development [Hustler et al,, 2003; Hipsher, 2014; Johnson, 2011]. The teacher views on new curriculum applications are of particular importance in the context of the curriculum reform in Azer-

baijan because they have the potential to inform policy makers and education officials about the relationship between reform efforts and its impact on professional teacher growth, from the point of view of teachers themselves.

Teacher perception of professional development has recently begun attracting the interests of researches in post-Soviet countries. Research conducted in the contexts of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Georgia and Azerbaijan [Niyozov, 2004; Joldoshalieva, 2006; Silova, Moyer, 2010; Gorgodze, 2013; Karimova, Kazimzade, 2014] share important features of reform initiatives undertaken across the region.

These similar features include:

1. *Diversified delivery.* Many Eurasian countries have shifted from the highly centralized

in-service teacher training model (INSET) to a decentralized and diversified teacher training model. In Azerbaijan the decentralization was realized through the involvement of the non-state institutions as primary providers of training on the new curriculum [Karimova, Kazimzade, 2014]. The reform process also increased the diversity of types or forms of professional development. For example, one issue was the difference between out-of-school and "in-house" professional teacher development programs. How does the system tackle the issue of traditional out-of-school training vs. school-based support? How are mentoring, peer coaching and other forms of teacher support valued by teachers? What are the opportunities available at schools to ensure such forms of teacher professional development?

2. *Collaborative learning community.* In order to cope with the challenge of adapting innovative teaching practices and meeting reform expectations, teachers have to be provided with opportunities to mediate and interact with their colleagues and to exchange ideas and experiences. Teachers discovered professional networking as a great opportunity to gain constructive feedback and advice from colleagues [Silova, Moyer, 2010; Joldoshalieva, 2006]. How is the teachers' need for a collaborative learning community addressed in professional development activities? How are the opportunities for professional teacher partnerships and cooperation ensured by schools?

Using data from the monitoring study, this paper makes an attempt to respond to these questions on the new curriculum implementation process, their professional needs, and teachers' satisfaction with both the quality of support provided by schools and r with training providers and local education departments.

3. The Monitoring Study

This paper reflects on findings of the monitoring study on the impact of the curriculum reform implemented in primary schools from 2009–2013. The analysis provides a data-driven look at primary school teachers' assessment of multiple aspects of the reform process in-

cluding the use of interactive teaching methodologies, applications of curriculum at the classroom and school levels, the use of diverse assessment strategies, the effectiveness of teacher training programs, and teacher perceptions of required professional support.

3.1. Research Instruments

Two surveys including a teacher self-assessment and an education reform assessment were conducted among teachers within the monitoring study.

The teacher self-assessment survey was conducted using a self-administered anonymous questionnaire, which consisted of five parts. Each part contained a certain number of questions, including multiple choice items and open-ended questions. The questions focused on the following areas: (1) background information of respondents such as age and gender, educational attainment, job experience and duration of work experience (9 questions); (2) assessment of on-going reforms and implementation of new curriculum; (3) assessment of teaching and learning processes, teaching practices, and the use of textbooks and teacher aids; (4) assessment of pupils' achievements; and (5) assessment of professional development provided in the process of the new curriculum implementation such as training and methodological support.

Education reforms assessment (The General Population Survey) consisted of four questionnaires for four respondent groups: teachers, school principals, parents, and students. The questionnaires for adults consisted of multiple choice items and open-ended questions on the following themes: (1) awareness of and support for education reforms and particularly the curriculum reform; (2) attitudes toward preschool education: (3) school library usage: (4) awareness of the importance of preschool education for children's school readiness and its impact on students' successful learning.

For the purpose of this particular research paper the relevant data gathered from teachers in both surveys was employed in order to provide an in-depth analysis of teacher perceptions of their professional needs in the process of the curriculum reform.

3.2. Study Participants

Throughout the Monitoring study phases more than 7,700 teachers were surveyed, including approximately 2,700 teachers who took part in the Teacher Self-Assessment Survey between 2010–2013, and 5,080 teachers who were surveyed within the All Population Survey.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Teacher Challenges in Coping with Innovations

One would expect that teachers practicing innovations would bring about better awareness of and more clarity in coping with innovations in the teaching process. However, the study data revealed that teacher challenges remained throughout the phases of the study. Teachers identified difficulties related to all aspects of the teaching process.

This included lesson planning and preparation, planning for individual differences, selecting useful resources, designing group work, and identification of assessment criteria.

Based on the teachers' self-reporting of the difficulties they face in the teaching process, the most common challenges could be classified as follows:

Individualization of teaching instruction and planning developmentally appropriate teaching practices: teachers reported being challenged when working with weak and low achieving pupils, taking into account individual characteristics of pupils in the teaching process, and developing various tasks differentiated based on pupils' skills and capacities. Teachers were also challenged when trying to take into account pupils' previous knowledge and skills, as well as developing tasks which were of pupils' interest.

Planning active learning lessons and using interactive teaching methods: teachers were progressively reporting difficulties planning and preparing lessons, selecting learning materials for pupils, preparing tasks for all stages of active learning lessons, choosing or preparing tasks for applying the pupils' knowledge, and meeting the lesson goals when executing tasks.

This research found that implementing interactive teaching methods, a requirement of the new curriculum, proved to be a challenge. Many teachers reported using either a blend of interactive and traditional teaching methods or continuing using traditional teaching methods. Throughout the Study phases teachers progressively reported difficulties implementing interactive teaching methods while ensuring compliance between teaching goals and methods. Other reported issues include choosing between types of classroom activities (whole class activities, or group work, peer activities or individual work) and organizing all lesson parts based on active learning.

Fostering motivation of pupils' learning: the Study revealed challenges teachers face during lesson delivery such as motivating pupils for learning; getting their attention and keeping them focused throughout the lesson; and strengthening pupils' motivation for group work and engaging them in a cooperative learning.

Using new assessment strategies: in 2013 half of the teachers believed that understanding and content memorization are qualities and skills required by the new learning standards. This misconception was confirmed by the 2013 data which indicated that the majority of teachers assess a level of memorization of the knowledge acquired by pupils.

Teacher challenges in meeting new curriculum requirements at the level of their teaching practices, as well as their professional needs remaining unmet, necessitated the analysis of professional development opportunities provided in the Curriculum Reform process. Teacher perceptions of the provided professional development opportunities are presented below.

Chart 1. **What does determine the overall quality of education in your opinion?**

84.5   74.5   82.7

2010 2012 2013   (n = 2700)
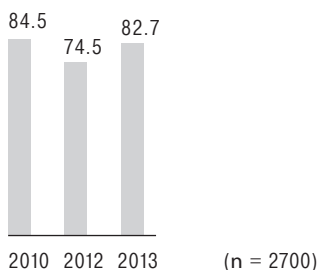
4.2. What teachers want and what teachers need in order to meet the Curriculum reform challenges

Teacher respondents demonstrated a high motivation towards professional development:

Throughout the Monitoring Study phases teachers were continuously prioritizing professional development as a primary condition for quality of education. The majority of teachers surveyed reported their interest in professional development and expressed a strong demand for in-service teacher training courses.

The Study also revealed that teachers were continuously reporting unmet professional needs as well as needs emerging in the process of new curriculum implementation. Because curriculum reforms require the application of new skills in classroom management, teaching children with special educational needs, and differentiated instruction, more than half of the teachers surveyed in 2013 reported that they had insufficient knowledge of subject curricula, teaching instruction, assessment strategies, and ICT skills.

The need to improve ICT skills was indicated as a major issue for professional teacher development throughout all the Study phases. The majority of teachers repeatedly identified a difficulty with the ICT application and searching for information as the main areas in which they needed to be supported.

It is also especially important to analyze the supply of professional teacher support in the process of implementing a new curriculum. The Monitoring Study findings present the teacher perceptions of three factors: delivery, diversity, and participation in the professional development process provided.

4.2.1. Diversified Delivery as an Issue Highlighted by Teachers

Professional support to teachers for the quality implementation of new curricula was designed to be provided at three levels: 1) in-service training delivered by teacher training providers contracted by the MoE; 2) support provided by local education departments with the participation of local level actors such as curriculum centers methodologists,

Excellency centers and best performing schools; and 3) school-level support provided by school administration, methodological councils, school-based curriculum centers, and school methodologists. All the listed actors are directly responsible for the quality and effectiveness of the teacher professional support provision.

Teachers implementing a new curriculum were provided with a single 10-day grade-specific in-service teacher training course during the summer break just before the school year started. Training on the new curriculum being initiated and funded by the MoE was delivered by teacher training providing organizations. The training program covered various aspects of the new curriculum such as the use of interactive teaching methods, new assessment methods, planning and individualization of teaching instruction, creating conducive learning environment, the use of new textbooks and teacher aids, building partnership with and fostering involvement of parents and community members, etc.

By 2013 almost all teachers were trained on new curricula and the vast majority of them evaluated the effectiveness of the trainings as "excellent" and "good". Almost half of the teachers surveyed in 2013 thought that their professionalism increased either "significantly" or "to some extent" as a result of the in-service training which had been provided.

However, in spite of the positive evaluation of the effectiveness of the in-service teacher training provided, many of the teachers surveyed were concerned with different aspects of those trainings. Throughout the Study phases more and more teachers assessed training materials as being difficult to understand and criticized the training design for overloading them with too much information. Teachers were concerned about the quality and preparedness of trainers, the length of the training, and the quality and content of training materials. As the Study data shows, teacher concerns regarding the quality of the in-service training progressively increased. The issues that they continually raised highlight questions about *the reliability of the in-service training content and the capacity (reliability) of trainers*.

Teachers shared their perceptions of the potential for supporting actions to improve their teaching practice (Charts 2 and 3). They recommended examining the content, delivery context, and methods of the in-service training they had been provided with, in order to improve the effectiveness of the training. According to surveyed teachers, more regularly provided training sessions would be more beneficial than a ten-day kick-off training. In addition, teachers cited a need for improved training materials[3] and didactic resources.

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[3] Content of training on new curriculum was developed by the MoE in the initial stages of the curriculum implementation and served as a basis for delivery of those trainings by other organizations. There is no reliable information regarding the revisions of the training materials and content of the program.

Chart 2. **What would you recommend for the improvement of the new curriculum application in elementary schools?**
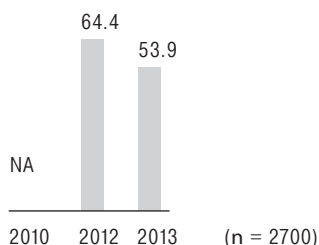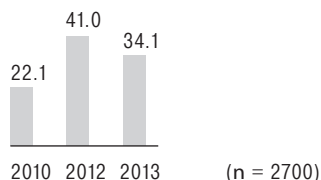More effective inservice teacher trainings should be organized…

Chart 3. **What would you recommend for the improvement of the new curriculum application in elementary schools?**
Trainers on new cirriculum often visit our school, provide advising to teachers, clarify some of the issues, and help with preparation of teaching materials

The concerns of Azerbaijani teachers regarding the quality of in-service teacher training echoed theconcerns of teachers in the Kyrgyzstani school context: "*teachers are highly concerned about … quality of professional development in terms of content and pedagogy, structure and relevance;… course insensitivity towards teachers' needs and teacher trainers' poor professional expertise*" [Joldoshalieva, 2006. P. 796]. However the Kyrgyzstani teachers' concerns were related to in-service training provided by the State Teacher Training Institute following a centralized model of teacher training provision. This probably means that Azerbaijani teachers favor needs-based professional development programs, rather than the specific mode of provision such as the traditional INSET model. Research suggested that conventional forms of professional development such as courses and workshops may serve only limited purposes of professional teacher development and it has definitely moved away from the INSET model towards more diverse forms including involvement in informal activities [Avalos, 2011].

Teacher concerns with regards to training content and teacher resources are also shared by international consultants. The new curriculum contains a list of recommended strategies and methods for achieving the learning outcomes indicated. However it lacks explanations and rationale for the use of those methods or for the sequence of suggested activities. Likewise, teacher aids for the new curriculum did not clearly and consistently lay out the theoretical foundations for the new pedagogical approaches. This concern was raised in the new curriculum evaluation conducted by A. Crisan [UNICEF, 2007]. The latest was regarded as "eclectic…coming from very different theoretical backgrounds" and representing different methodologies. [UNICEF, 2007. P. 20] Such a lack of clarity was going to create confusion and lead to misunderstanding among teachers and methodologists. This

actually confirms that teacher perceptions should not be underestimated as a reliable source of information for the design and improvement of professional development programs.

Research [Joldashaliyeva, 2006; Niyozov, 2004] informs us that in many countries in the region professional teacher development activities "are subjected to top-down approaches and outside-in training, where their (teachers in Tajikistan) knowledge and wisdom are largely ignored" [Niyozov, 2004. P. 57].

Azerbaijani teachers in the Curriculum Reform process heavily depended on in-service professional development opportunities offered as short-term training courses. However, according to the surveyed teachers, there is a need for more diverse professional development opportunities inside and outside of their schools. In order to ensure quality implementation of new curriculum during the Curriculum Reform process, on top of in-service teacher trainings, teachers were supposed to be supported at the level of local districts. However, the research revealed that on-going support from local level actors was not effective enough to meet teacher challenges and support them in their everyday teaching work.

Only half of the teacher-respondents indicated that they were supported professionally at the local district level. They listed two main formats of professional support: i) support provided by methodologists in local education departments and ii) support provided by Excellence Centers established at the best performing schools, serving as centers for continuous professional advice to teachers in local schools.

Support from Excellence Centers was reported to be less significant than support provided by methodologists. In 2013 the majority of surveyed teachers assessed meetings with methodologists regarding new curriculum implementation as either "very useful" or "useful to some extent". However the Study data revealed that teachers prefer having ongoing professional support. Almost a quarter of the teachers surveyed in 2013 cited that they were having difficulty getting on-going support from methodologists. About 10% of teachers reported that they have never had any methodological support with the new curriculum implementation.

When teachers were asked to analyze the impact of other local level professional development activities, they listed educational conferences or seminars, observation visits to other schools, and research as having the least impact.

In spite of this, the majority of teachers surveyed in 2013 perceived school-based professional support as helpful. Still, almost 20% of teachers in 2013 assessed support provided by school methodological councils, school administration, and exchanges between experienced and young teachers as just "satisfactory" or even "bad." Interestingly, more than half of the surveyed teachers indicated that when faced with challenges when implementing new curriculum they approach either teacher colleagues (*informal support)* or engage in

self-learning (*self-initiated support)* rather than turning to the school administration or to the school methodologist who are formally responsible for supporting teachers.

According to the 2013 survey results, teachers are attaching greater importance to diverse forms of professional development. For example, about half of the teachers surveyed in 2013 reported that participation in teacher networks had a high impact on their professional development. The data on professional teacher development shows that teacher opinions changed from a strictly positive review of all the professional development activities provided in 2010 (baseline phase), to a more critical assessment of activities in 2013. This suggests that teachers are looking for more diverse professional development opportunities. Teachers are most satisfied with activities that are oriented to their individual needs and provide long-term opportunities for collaboration among participants.

Teachers have a need for diverse forms of professional support. Community level support includes strengthening mentoring and experiential exchanges between schools, and strengthening professional cooperation and collaboration among teachers from different schools. At the school level teachers want every school to have a methodologist who is always available to support them. Teachers desire to change the methodologist's traditional role of inspecting, checking, and controlling to one of supporting them and sharing experience and knowledge as an experienced colleague. Teachers also recommended strengthening the within-school collaboration and sharing between teachers and establishing a system of peer coaching and mentoring between more experienced teachers and younger teachers. Suggestions made by teachers regarding changes that should be made to improve their professional support within the Curriculum reform indicate the same growth of the rational choice in favor of cooperation between teachers. That demand for more professional cooperation among teachers increased threefold between the 2010 and 2013 study phases. In 2013, teachers attached a greater importance to collaborative learning between teachers and engaging in joint professional projects, in addition to in-service training sessions. In the recent study conducted in 2015 the number teachers who reported a high demand for participation in teacher networks increased by 11% compared to 2013. A remarkable fact is that since 2013 a growth of informal social networks where teachers with common professional interests share information and exchange conversations has been observed in the country. These informal networks serve as a platform for professional development moderated by teachers themselves. Currently, approximately 30% of teachers are active users of online educational networks created and moderated by educators[4].

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[4] From interview (March 2016) with Aygun Azizova, a social media education expert

4.2.2. In Search of a Collaborative Learning Community

The findings presented above demonstrate that teachers are demanding new forms of professional development that have the potential to create collaborative learning environments within schools. The new curriculum implementation puts new pressures on the teacher. Other research on professional teacher development has also pointed to a collaborative culture as an important factor contributing to the effectiveness of professional development. For example, "collaboration proved to be an important part of teacher learning which could be mediated through dialogues, discussions, conversations and interactions centered on innovations, new resources or new methods."" [Avalos, 2011. P. 16].

Exchanges of internal learning experiences within the school will in turn enable the development of *professional learning communities* where professionals learn from each other and support each other through generation and exchange of ideas [Sahlberg, 2005]. Peer mentoring is regarded as one of the most effective models of individual teacher development and one of the most popular continuous professional development forms (CPD)[European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013]. The research provides evidence that school structures supporting "teachers in providing programs for development and creating teacher networks" are very important [Joldoshaliyeva, 2006. P. 800]. The productivity and adaptability of schools can be enhanced by creating the structures that facilitate collaboration among teachers.

It seems that the challenge of new curriculum implementation motivated teachers to work in the professional community. "Teacher professional learning …requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively" [Avalos, 2011. P. 11]. The importance of dialogue and collaboration among teachers has been repeatedly stressed by many researchers [Sachs, 2004; Fullan, 2005; Polard, 2005; Tschannen-Moran, 2000; 2011]."In order for teachers to rise successfully to the challenge of adapting their teaching practices to meet the changing expectations of various reform initiatives, they must have opportunities to participate in dialogue with other teachers to support and challenge one another" [Tschannen-Moran, 2000. P. 311]. Teacher collaboration has personal, professional, and political impacts on their professional growth. The political aspects of teacher collaboration refers to bringing a variety of education actors into a dialogue with teachers, including school administrators, local education leaders, education researchers, and policy makers.

4.3. Teachers as Decision Makers in their own Professional Development

What is the role of teachers in professional development programs? Do they have decision making power over the design of the programs? Are teachers' voices heard in the preparation and implementation of the programs? Research indicating that teachers' professional needs remain unmet seem to signal that there is a high demand for encouraging teachers to provide input with regards to their own professional

learning needs and thus to contribute to the effectiveness of professional support initiatives. On the other hand, discussions about Curriculum reform lack teacher participation.

Another challenge is developing a collaborative culture and trust between teachers at the school level, as well as at the level of the professional community at large. "Trust aspect cannot be minimized in a social system undergoing a drastic change from an environment of non-trust (under a Soviet system) to a more open one" [Moyer, Silova, 2008]. The education system in Azerbaijan is still making important decisions from top to bottom without interactive discussion and dialogue with teachers and the educational community at large. Yet there is a demand for broader participation and more dialogue.

There is a need for a meaningful mechanism to channel teachers' thoughts, views, and perceptions to policy makers and education authorities. For the most part a conventional teacher training system is still prevailing, one in which teachers are perceived as beneficiaries of professional development programs rather than teacher-learners encouraged to make decisions based on their individual needs.

If an inclusive process of engaging teachers in discussions about their professional needs cannot be created, those needs will continue to remain unmet. According to TALIS [2012], in countries where professional teacher development is predominantly defined by a top–level educational authority, teachers' needs for professional development remain high. "Able teachers are not necessarily going to reach their potential in settings that do not provide appropriate support…" [OECD, 2005]. Teachers are best placed to determine the appropriateness and relevancy of professional development opportunities. Inclusion of teachers in the design of professional teacher development programs will increase the impact of learning activities on the quality of teaching at the classroom level. Such a participatory approach to strengthening the teachers' role as decision makers in their professional development is supported by this research.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper deals with how Azerbaijani teachers perceive the professional development opportunities provided for the implementation of new curricula. Quantitative research findings derived from the Monitoring Study provide evidence for the way teachers need and want to be supported professionally.

According to our findings, teachers recognize the need for change and do attempt to change their teaching practices. However it seems the Curriculum reform introduced in 2008 has only partially been able to bring about positive effects to the professional lives of Azerbaijani school teachers. Similar to the results seen in other countries in the region "it has resulted in uncertainties and multiple responsibilities" [Joldoshaliyeva, 2006. P. 801], requiring more professional development efforts towards ensuring continuous support for teachers. The

findings also revealed that the professional development provided to support teachers has not been fully able to meet either their preexisting needs or needs emerging during the reform process.

The changing needs of society, changing expectations of schools, and the changing sets of needs being brought about daily by each pupil make teaching a demanding and a very dynamic task. The complex considerations that teachers take into account when making the myriad decisions that they face every day requires that there should be a deep understanding of their purposes and how such purposes may be accomplished [Leithwood, Steinbach, 1995]. This probably necessitates "re-conceptualization" [Moyer, Silova, 2008] of professional teacher development and a movement towards the development of a culture of trust between teachers and between teachers and policy-makers.

The current stage of the professional teacher development provision seems to have brought about change in the mindset of Azerbaijani teachers regarding the improvement of their teaching practice. The reform process has directed teachers from formal structures such as in-service courses and workshops towards ongoing mediations and more interactive and collaborative forms of professional support. However, "diverse formats of professional development have impact of some kind or degree…not every form of professional development, even those with the greatest evidence of positive impact, is of itself relevant to all teachers. Some of those forms are more appropriate and conducive to learning than others" [Avalos, 2011. P. 17].

Research conducted in different cultural and school contexts as well as on various forms of professional development confirm that many factors may equally affect this process, such as the nature and operations of educational systems, education policy environments and reforms, school cultures, prior beliefs and perceptions, historic factors, school ethos and social environments (beliefs, traditions), social and cultural values, and other contextual elements. The importance of these various factors cannot be discounted when evaluating the impact of professional support.

The present research might be considered as one of the first steps on the way towards the development of a culture of trust and collaboration between teachers and policy makers in the Azerbaijani education system. After presenting the results of the baseline phase of monitoring study to policy makers, the decision on piloting mentoring might be considered a promising example of such collaboration. A new research agenda exploring teachers' perceptions, views, and thoughts, thus informing policy-makers and the professional community, should become an integral part of the reform agenda. Education researchers could play an important role facilitating the dialogue between teachers and policy makers in order to build an effective partnership within the national education community.

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