

Competitive Education and Armenian Realities

(An invitation for reflection)

Against, or for the sake of?

When you fight against something, you should at least understand and be able to say what you are fighting for. If you fight for something sacred, you should have some connection with what you are fighting for. Otherwise, however vehement your fight, it will do neither you nor your sacred goal any good. The basis of sectarianism is the absence of a holistic vision. And sectarianism is a phenomenon peculiar not only to religion but to all aspects of human life. One of the crudest manifestations of this malignant phenomenon is sectarianism in the field of education, in which we are being dragged into headlong as nation under the slogan “ours is different.” If “ours is different,” then it does not matter what the others do and there is no need whatsoever to pay attention what is going on in the world.

As always, once in a while we wake up and rally against external threats. Lately a whole movement has been formed and a huge wave of protests has emerged against the “so-called” foreign-language schools. Quite serious people have started defending Armenian education in a very peculiar way, seeing a mortal danger in foreign language education. They are clear about what they are against, but what are they for? What constitutes Armenian education, or, more generally, Armenianness, and what is the goal of this struggle? These questions remain unanswered.

National as it was meant by the Holy Translators

First, when we talk about the national schools, we have to take into account four factors: 1) language, 2) the system of moral values, 3) the content of knowledge, and 4) world view. Let us talk about the teaching in Armenian language and skip the last three points since these have either been ignored or not been acted upon. Based on the competitions organized by Ayb Educational Foundation, we observe to our dismay that our children's weakest subject is Armenian language. They lack the basic skill of expressing their own, original thoughts in writing, speaking and discourse. “Armenian education” first and foremost means learning how to formulate one's own ideas in Armenian. Language is a most powerful tool for shaping our inner world, our philosophy, our world view, our identity, and our cognitive, analytic and creative abilities. It is much more than simply a matter of following rules of grammar or mimicking literary works, or a mere means of communication. A simple comparison of the methods of teaching the English (IB AS/A level or International Bachelor systems) and Armenian languages points to essential differences in approach. The main goal of well-designed, high-quality English language textbooks is to teach children analytical thinking, original expression, logic, and the art of writing. When you look at our recently prepared, unattractive textbooks, they are out of synch with global developments. Indeed, they turn off any desire to think and learn. Sadly, the

Armenian school itself is killing Armenianness. With some exceptions, the same can be said for most of the textbooks in other subjects published since Armenian independence. How is it possible to debilitate your own children and coming generations this way? This is what happens when you are cut off from the global education, unable to see the big picture, and become self-absorbed solipsists.

This is ironic, since we are in all likelihood one of the few nations that have consecrated the concept of translation and have a Feast dedicated to the Holy Translators. The inspired achievements of Sts. Sahak, Mesrop and their disciples served as a turning point in our national identity and worldview. What was the essence of their achievement? First, translation was believed to be the art of arts and a great gift of transmitting the divine message to people. Second, translation facilitated connection and interaction with the world, permitting us to turn what the best that was globally available into our own. And it is important that this was the founding inspiration for our national school. Our fathers avoided self-isolation and made excellence the basis of the national consciousness.

Ayb Armenian School

Today we face the need to create a new educational culture to meet the challenges of a modern, interdependent world. The Ayb Educational Foundation's initiative to developing an effective model for the 21st-century Armenian school is one of the turning points in this effort. Carefully examining international experience, we have brought to Armenia the best educational technologies (laboratories, methodologies, adaptations, contests, textbooks) and integrated them into a coherent vision for a national educational institution. We do not simply copy this or that system; instead, we are creatively working for excellence by selecting the best each system has to offer. In cooperation with the world's leading educators and scholars from Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, we have developed a program that has educational content tailored to Armenia's needs and challenges. Translation of the world's best textbooks into Armenian is already in progress; an innovative method of teaching English has been designed in cooperation with the American University of Armenia, integrating us in the global field of education. Also underway is the most pressing and difficult task: preparation of a new generation textbooks for Armenian language and other Armenian-connected subjects.

Armenian International School in the Diaspora

Two thirds of our people live outside Armenia and we need to develop a coherent and inclusive approach to Armenian education in order to foster a viable Armenian identity among our youth. Today alienation and assimilation pose an imminent and overwhelming threat to Armenian identity. Armenian schools in the Diaspora are closing and those that have survived are inadequate in both quality and quantity. While at beginning of the last century Armenian education was a mark of distinction for the upwardly mobile, today it has lost its luster. And Armenian young people often find more attractive

opportunities for self-actualization in more supportive foreign environments. As a result, we are demoralizing our youth, who come to view the Armenian nation as mere relic of the past that has nothing left to say. Without competitive Armenian schools, the prospects for much of the Diaspora are short and fading. Of course, a special approach needs to be tailored to the Diaspora, taking into account requirements and needs of the given country. The Melkonian educational institution is one of the best examples of that approach. An English-language school with an Armenian focus (all subjects other than Armenian studies were taught in English), Melkonian delivered a quality of teaching Armenian that many schools in Armenia would envy. Ayb Educational Foundation proposed an international model of the Ayb Armenian School, to be opened in 2011, which has been favorably received by the Government of Cyprus. The plan is to begin establishing Ayb Schools throughout the world starting from Cyprus, which is uniquely positioned to launch this effort.

International Pan-Armenian School in Armenia

Naturally, we cannot limit ourselves just to creating Armenian Schools in the Diaspora. Youth from the Diaspora need to have their place in Armenia as well. We cannot invite those young people just to be tourists, eat, drink and have fun. We have to offer them an educational experience that meets the highest international standards, in particular, effective and inspiring teaching of Armenian language, literature and history. This poses no threat to our Armenianness. On the contrary, if well designed, it is an indispensable means to that important goal. For example, the Dilijan International School espoused this goal: to bring young people from Diaspora to Armenia, teach them the Armenian language and connect them with the motherland. I believe that that is an unquestionably noble goal, worthy of support. In any event, retreating into ourselves is not an option, we have to find and assume our rightful place in the world. It is our duty to spread our language and culture among the foreigners by creating a network of our friends worldwide. Among the important motivations and conceptual underpinnings of the Ayb international school's establishment in the Diaspora, and the Dilijan International School's establishment in Armenia is to strengthen the role of our nation and our presence in the world by educating foreigners about Armenians through world-class education and raising their consciousness and support for Armenia and Armenians.

That said, creating an effective educational environment is a subtle task. The guiding vision and motivation that inspire an educational institution are decisive. Good intentions are not enough to assure success. Education cannot be viewed as business. Education is a mission and a virtue. The school lays the foundation for social life in a community. The individual, as a member of the society and a bearer of a common sense of community belonging, is formed at school. School is the junction where the heritage of the nation and universal achievements in arts and science meet; it is the key link for learning to the connection between individual merit and social responsibility. Therefore, fostering social engagement and responsibility is an overarching goal, essential for putting schools and society on a solid

foundation. Otherwise, even the “best” school will become a patchwork that can never serve society.

I think the Dilijan International School proposal requires a wide public discussion. Up until now, there has been little substantive discussion. Of course, as people think about founding an international school in Armenia for Diaspora children, it would also be good if they addressed the needs of Armenian children and helped promote the competitiveness and quality of the Armenian schools. By this, I mean direct investments in the Armenian education system. This will foster a healthy field of competition, while addressing concerns about the threat to Armenian education and risks of dividing Armenian society along elitist lines.

As for legislative changes, there is no need for them; and I do not think that this was the goal of the founders of Dilijan International School. It is always possible to create international institutions by means of appropriate interstate agreements, without opening loopholes that could have uncontrollable and unpredictable consequences. By creating such legislative loopholes, we have already done enough damage to our educational system and done a disservice to many students, permitting well-connected shysters and sects to “make deals” and “set up shop.” For many, it is just a business, and it does not matter who they hurt; all they care about is the bottom line.

Conclusion

We are one nation dispersed the world over. From a national perspective, there are no issues that relate merely to Armenia or merely to the Diaspora. Education is the crux of the nation’s existence. But in recent memory, it has not been the subject of a broad national discourse. We have not tried to create an educational vision and implementation plan adequate to our being spread all over the world. It is imperative that we create our own national brand of high-quality education and spread it worldwide. Education is the sphere in which we need to focus our resources to ensure a competitive generation and save our children from alienation. It is time to face some simple realities: no national, political, economical issue can be adequately addressed without education. Everything starts – and ends – with education.

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