

Inclusive Education Reform/s in Azerbaijan: An Attempt of Critical Policy Analysis

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Key words: inclusion, education policy, children with disabilities, pilot project.

Executive Summary

From 2003 to 2011, Azerbaijan heavily invested in the inclusive education reform. By 2011, inclusive education was piloted in 17 schools and 13 kindergartens in several regions in the country. 268 CWD were mainstreamed to inclusive classrooms. Inclusive education course was developed and adopted as an elective course at the State Pedagogical University, as well in-service teacher training institute. However, regular schools in Azerbaijan do not yet accept children with disabilities (CWD). The paper presents analysis of inclusive education reform in Azerbaijan using the UNESCO education policy planning framework, and examines which various factors might have contributed to the limited impact upon the national education policy.

The First Policy Cycle: A Case of an Externally Influenced, Issue-Focused, Incremental Approach to Inclusive Education Reform

In 2005, the MoE began the implementation of a State “Development program on organization of education of children with disabilities”. At the national level, inclusive education reform targeted CWD only.

The MoE chose the incremental path of reforming education of CWD through introducing the new policy on a pilot basis. The pilot project offered parents of children with mild and moderate disabilities an opportunity to mainstream their children on a voluntary basis. Teachers and TAs were trained and mentored on inclusive education methodology. Technical assistance was provided by the Council for Exceptional Children (USA). The MoE was making short-term decisions to ensure a smooth implementation of the pilot project such as decreasing a standard classroom size for inclusive classrooms, creating TA positions in pilot schools, allowing special psychological-medical-pedagogical commission to refer CWD to pilot project schools, allowing pilot schools to accept those children, and providing transportation fees to families of mainstreamed children.

The MoE never formally commissioned an evaluation of the pilot projects. Donor organizations funded four consequent research studies conducted during 2003-2011 which revealed a positive impact of inclusive teaching practices to children, both those with disabilities and typical ones, as well as parents and school community.

By 2011, the MoE had three policy options for planning further reform: (I) scaling up piloted inclusive education practices all around the country; (II) creating an inclusive school per district acting as a hub capable and resourced to mainstream CWD; and (III) transforming special institutions into schools with inclusive education component (“hybridization” of special schools/institutions). The MoE supported the third option, likely because it considered that this option will be able to provide solutions to multiple issues such as replication of inclusive education, deinstitutionalization, prevention of institutionalization and community-based service provision.

In 2011, in partnership with UNICEF, the MoE developed (i) The Inclusive Education Law which was submitted to Parliament; (ii) The Second State Program on Further Development of Inclusive Education (2012-2016) which was submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers. The Inclusive Education Law has never been adopted, and the Second State Program has never been approved. Probably these entities conducted own pragmatic evaluation of the proposed option and realized that their implementation will lead to a significant increase of the Government’s allocation of resources. The policy cycle was externally broken.

Summary of Some Important Lessons Learned

The case of Azerbaijan allows generating some conceptual lessons which seem to be important for further national inclusive education reform, as well as international discourse about peculiarities of country-specifics of such reforms:

- In Azerbaijan, in the beginning of the reform, segregated education of CWD was not recognized as a problem. The Government initiated the inclusive education reform without a comprehensive analysis of the situation. The reform efforts began without a clear understanding of the size and scope of the problem. A precise data on a number of CWD was not available in the beginning of the reform.
- The demand for inclusive education reform was not generated within the system and was not perceived as a need, but instead was heavily influenced by external forces- the civil society and donor community. The idea of inclusion was not known to the education community as well as to society at large. This fact that the reform was a creation of external players meant that the country itself had no feeling of 'owning' these ideas. A dominant pedagogical community being led by traditional pedagogical ideas resisted inclusive education ideas and were not invited to the dialogue.
- The Government attempted to generate its own reform ideas which were influenced by the prevailing traditional perceptions and views. The government tried to find a balance between the international demand for inclusive education and the national belief in special, segregated education. The search for the balance between these excluding ideas resulted in “translation” of the idea of inclusion into the “hybridization” of special schools-so called special school with inclusive education component.
- The first cycle of the national inclusive education reform was lacking a whole school approach. CWD were attempted to be integrated into mainstream schools without major changes at the level of regular schools. Neither the MoE nor donors invested in strengthening the leadership and learning environment in pilot regular schools. The Government, donors and civil society were probably too optimistic in believing that changes introduced at the level of teaching practices, without changes at the level of schools and their ethos, would be sufficient for changing prevailing pedagogical values.

Concluding remark

A new inclusive education policy cycle started with adoption of the National Strategy for Educational Development in 2013. However, the advantage of the new cycle is that it has started in the context of positive attitudinal changes generated by pilot projects undertaken in the previous cycle. Regular schools which were involved in pilot projects during the first policy cycle continue inclusive teaching practices after the pilot project is over. This is probably an important evidence of a paradigm shift, and creates hopes for success of inclusive education developments in the country in the future.

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What was the Driving Force for Conducting this Research?

- **A first wave** of the Inclusive Education (IEd) Reform in Azerbaijan (2003-2011)
- **A second wave:** implemented since 2012
- **A limited impact of the first wave reform upon the national education policy** in achieving the main goal of inclusive education: to allow all children with special needs the opportunity to attend a regular school within their community.
- **Which factors contributed to that limited impact?**
- **What were successes and failures of the first reform wave?**
- **A Purpose:** to identify *“the elements in the policy planning process that appear to have contributed to the success or failure”* (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p. 16) of IED reform process in Azerbaijan.

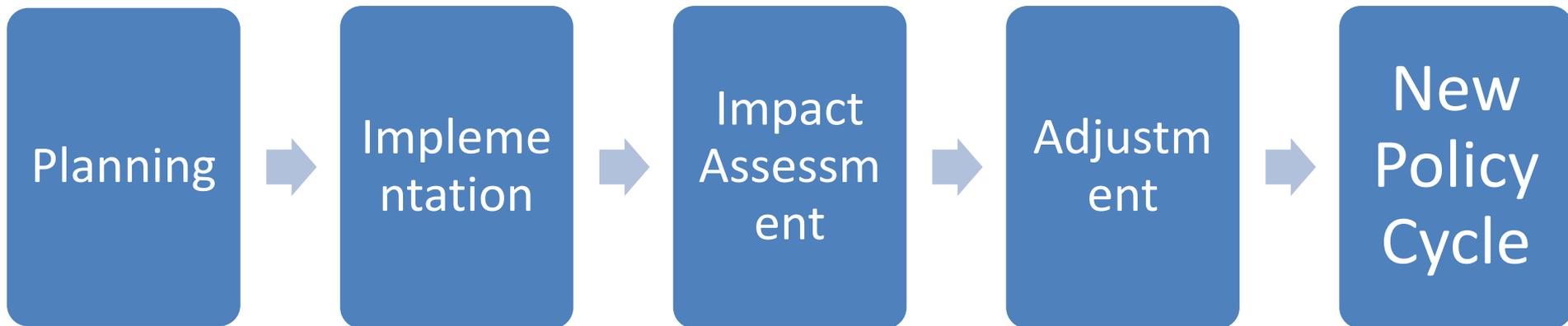
Methodology

- **Policy analysis:** using the framework of W.D. Haddad and T. Demsky (1995)
- **Limitations:** The study is not aimed to examine the overall national policy, but rather to analyze some of its aspects and to share some of the lessons learned.
- **A Reform Memory:** Sufficient data on pedagogical, political and other aspects of the reform is available to allow a discussion of the first reform wave.
- **A Special Note:** Although internationally the term ‘inclusive education’ is increasingly understood more broadly as a reform that supports and welcomes **diversity amongst all learners**” (UNESCO, 2009, p.4), in Azerbaijan IEd reform only **targeted CWD**, and particularly those who were educated either at home or special schools and institutions.

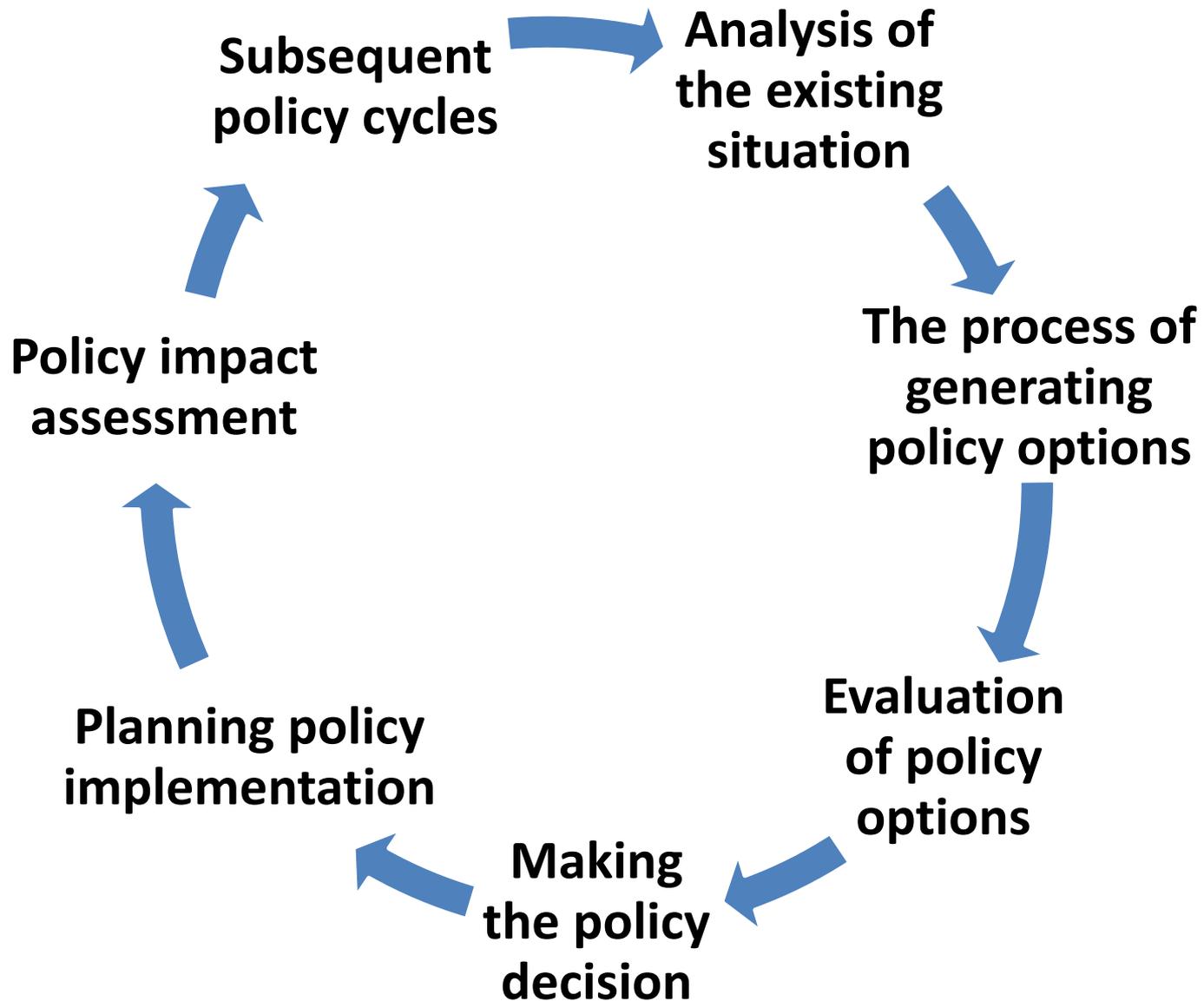
**Azerbaijan: A Case of an Externally Influenced,
Issue-Focused, Incremental Approach**

**THE FIRST POLICY CYCLE OF INCLUSIVE
EDUCATION REFORM IN AZERBAIJAN**

Applied Framework for Policy Analysis (UNESCO, 1995)



Conceptual Framework for Policy Analysis (UNESCO, 1995)



The Country Context: Analysis of Existing Situation

Major conventions
related to human&child
rights ratified

The Education Law
(2009)

The Special Education
Law (2001)

The issue of inclusive
education was not
known to a wider
education community
and society at large even
as a term

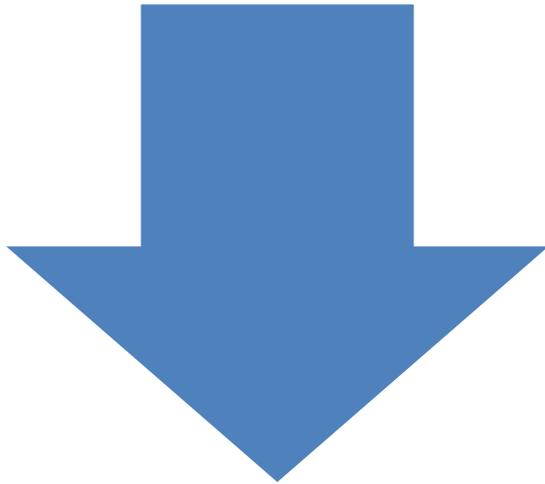
“INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND SOCIETIES CAN ONLY BE REALIZED IF GOVERNMENTS ARE AWARE OF THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM...THE SIZE AND CHARACTER OF THE OUT-OF-SCHOOL POPULATIONS” (UNESCO, 2009

Problem Definition

Lack of clear understanding
of the size and scope of the
problem

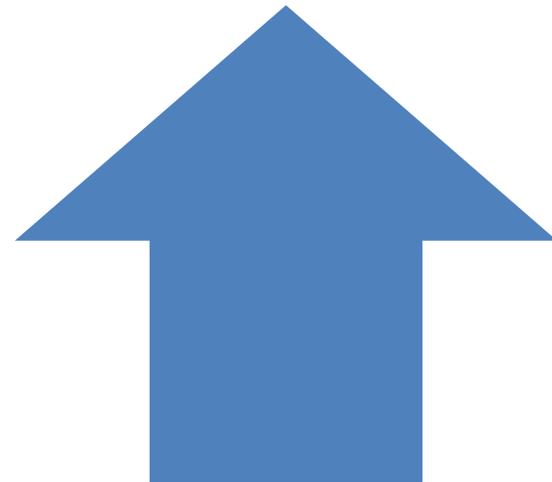
No publicly available precise
data on a number of CWD

Tradition of Segregated
Education



Gwen Burchell, 2001

According to the data
released to public in
2011, **only about 15%**
of CWD were educated
(Mardanov, 2011)



Justification for the Reform

The justification for the reform could be identified not as **inclusive vs. segregated** education for CWD

but rather **segregated education with added inclusive education component.**

**INCLUSION IS A “RADICAL CHALLENGE
TO PREVAILING IDEAS AND PRACTICES
OF EXISTING EDUCATION SYSTEMS
(BARTON & ARMSTRONG, 2003)**

A Situation Leading to Policy Formulation

A State Program
“Development
program on
organization of
education of
children with special
needs (CWD) (2005-
2009)”.

Incremental path of reform: “no.. drastic reforms.. attempted; only incremental and limited policy adjustments can be made...,” which “are expected to remedy an improving the existing situation”(Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p.20).

Pilot
projects
Evaluation
Studies

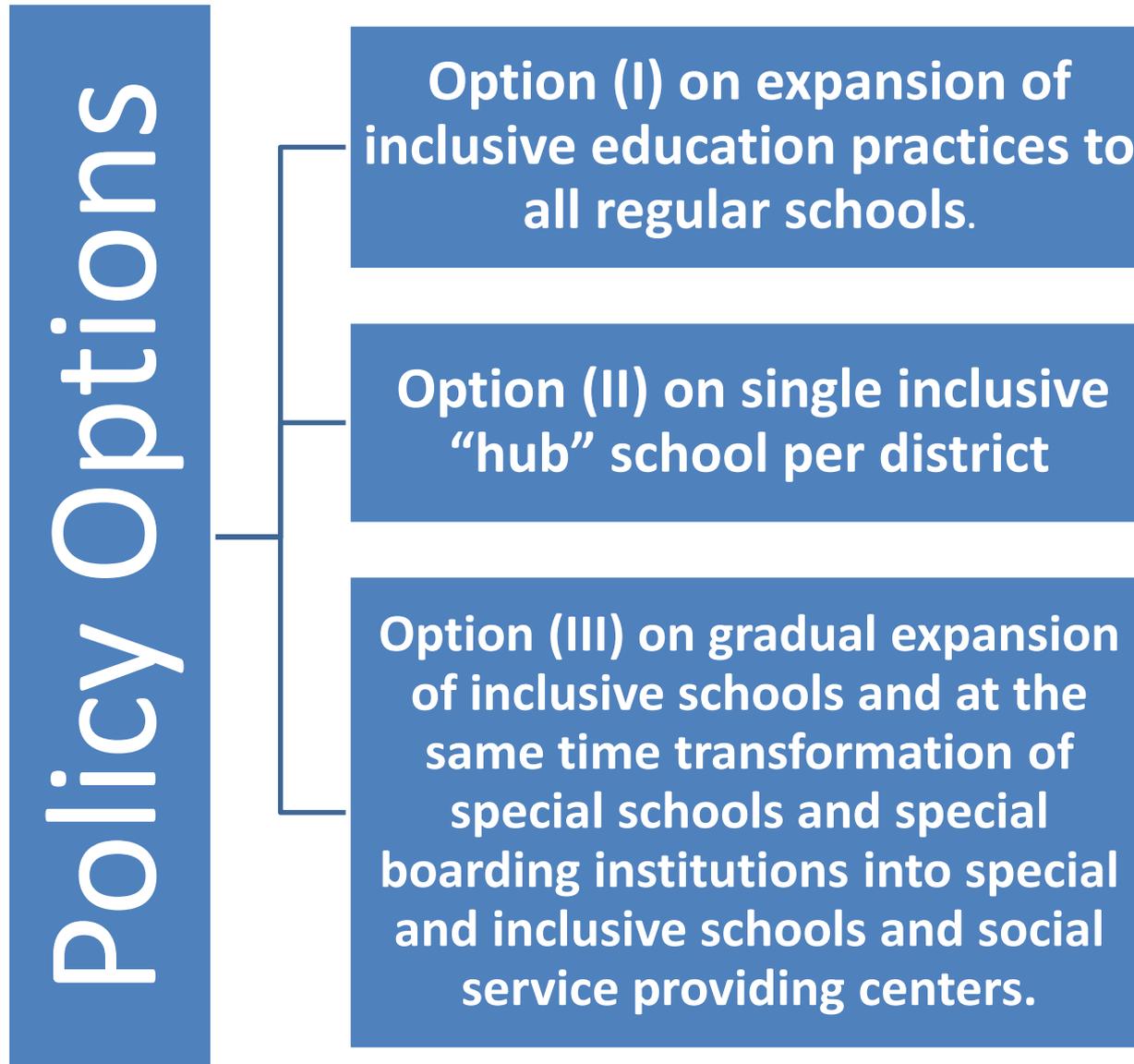
Implementation: Pilot Projects

- Three pilot projects were implemented (2004-2011).
- Technical assistance was provided by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the largest professional special education association in the USA (Lesko, Ziegler, Mikayilova, Roels, 2010)
- **Issue-based approach to policy making:** “short-term decisions involving day-to-day management” (Haddad & Demsky, 1995, p. 18):
 - decreasing a standard classroom size for inclusive classrooms,
 - creating TA positions in pilot schools,
 - allowing special psychological-medical-pedagogical commission to refer CWD to pilot project schools, allowing pilot schools to accept those children, and
 - providing transportation fees to families of mainstreamed children.

Implementation: Pilot Projects

- Parents of children with mild and moderate disabilities were offered an opportunity to mainstream their children on a voluntary basis.
- Teachers and TAs were trained and mentored on IEd methodology
- **Physical Accessibility of Pilot Schools:** Donors invested neither in making schools physically acceptable to CWD nor in the organizational development of pilot schools, for example, school improvement and school leadership. The MoE invested in strengthening the learning environment in special schools and institutions.
- **Service Provision:** CWD were provided with necessary services and specialists through contracting community-based rehabilitation centers (CBRCs) mainly run by CWD parent leaders. The service provision was funded during the first years of the pilot projects and then parents were recommended to approach the CBRCs by themselves.
- **Pilot projects:** a whole school approach was missing in spite the inclusive education concept necessitates schools re-examining what they teach, how they teach and how they assess learner's performances.
- By 2011, inclusive education was piloted in 17 schools and 13 kindergartens in several regions in the country. 268 CWD were mainstreamed to inclusive classrooms.

Generation policy options by 2011



Evaluation of Policy Options: A Dilemma

Options I & II Rejected

no proposed mechanism for provision of services to CWD at the level of regular schools
the lack of qualified specialists

a significant increase in a number of TA
transportation of CWDs

Option III as a solution to multiple issues

Ensuring Inclusion

Keeping Special Schools

Ensuring replication of IEd, deinstitutionalization, prevention of institutionalization and community-based service provision

**“NATIONAL POLICY MAKING IS INEVITABLY
A...MATTER OF BORROWING AND COPYING
BITS AND PIECES OF IDEAS FROM
ELSEWHERE, DRAWING UPON AND
AMENDING LOCALLY TRIED AND TESTED
APPROACHES.... POLICY IDEAS ARE...
RECEIVED AND INTERPRETED DIFFERENTLY
WITHIN DIFFERENT ...NATIONAL
IDEOLOGIES” (BALL, 1998)**

Making the policy decision

- In 2011, in partnership with UNICEF, the MoE submitted to the Parliament an Inclusive Education Law developed with the aim of ensuring country-wide replication of inclusive education.
- The MoE, with support of UNICEF, also submitted to the Cabinet of Ministers the Second State Program on Further Development of Inclusive Education for 2012-2016.
- Probably, both the Parliament and the Cabinet of Ministries rejected policy option selected by the MoE. The Inclusive Education Law has never been adopted, and the Second State Program has never been approved.
- Pragmatic approach when governments make policy decisions based on economic reasons (Mitchell, 2005)?
- **The policy cycle was externally broken.**
- *Later on the Minister of Education who initiated the inclusive education reform was dismissed.*

Lessons learned FOR THE Second Policy Cycle

- The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how the reform idea has been realized through being affected by “national and cultural context” (Stephen Ball, 1998, p.127).
- **The demand for inclusive education reform was not generated within the system and was not perceived as a need**, but instead was brought by the donor community. This fact that the reform was a creation of external players meant that the country itself had no feeling of 'owning' these ideas.
- **Participatory approach was not employed.** A dominant pedagogical community being led by traditional pedagogical ideas resisted inclusive education ideas and were not invited to the dialogue.
- The Government attempted to generate its own reform ideas which were heavily influenced by the prevailing traditional perceptions and views. **The government tried to find a balance between the international demand for inclusive education and the national belief in special, segregated education.** The search for the balance between these excluding ideas resulted in “translation” of the idea of inclusion into **the hybridization of special schools.**
- The Government, donors and civil society were probably too optimistic in believing that **changes introduced at the level of teaching practices, without changes at the level of schools and their ethos**, would be sufficient for changing prevailing pedagogical values. However, the history of inclusion indicates that “inclusive education required transformations in the organization and structure of schools and school systems, pedagogical reforms that mirrored new knowledge about how learning emerges, and institutional reformation...(Skrtic et al., 1996)” (cited in Artiles&Kozleski, 2016, p.8).

Concluding remarks

- The national context provides a sample which is quite hard to settle within the framework of policy making analysis.
- Regular schools which were involved in pilot projects during the first policy cycle have continued inclusive teaching practices.
- Based on mutual willingness and shared understanding with families, these schools continue to accept CWD and educate them together with their typical peers.
- This is probably an important evidence of a **paradigm shift** and attitudinal changes
- This creates hopes for success of inclusive education developments in the country in the future.