Tricks and Trades of the Matrix - Western Private Education in Georgia “not-as-billed”

There is no such thing as a neutral education system. It either teaches people to buy into the existing status quo and support it, or gives them problem-solving skills in order for them to change it. This is why foreign governments are often glad that their actions in countries they are trying to influence are controversial. The more people complain about the political positions the invaders adopt, and who they encourage at the expense of whom, the less attention is paid to their third column, education.

Where embassies and aid agencies lead, schools and educational reform inevitably follow. But no one wants to notice this, because the potential rewards of exploiting the system – finding the one little door in the Matrix - are so great that people will put up with almost anything in the name of advancement, even the progressive destruction of future generations.

What are the benefits of such reforms? Do they do more to help or harm a country in transition?

People tend to view the same things differently in various parts the world. Citizens of monarchies understand the principles of monarchy, citizens of republics would generally never dream of going back to such a system. This is largely due to differences in education: what seemed natural in previous generations, for example the conquest of “primitive” peoples overseas for their own good, now seems unusual because changes in education have led people to that view, without them having to examine the issue too closely.

Political policy, and the way aid is distributed, tell us a lot about the real attitude, rather than the professed one, more important countries have towards a less important one. But bigger countries also use another lever of influence, which is less remarked on because nobody wants to believe it is being used as a lever.
The usual culprit

Take, for example, the Republic of Georgia, which is generally ignored when education policy is being discussed. Georgia is a US ally, so everyone argues about what the US does there, whom it supports and what relation there is between its principles and what it actually does. But those who object to things like aid money being diverted to fund political corruption still want a US-based education for their children, because it will help them go to places controlled by the same US.

Georgia has little to offer its financially advantaged citizens in terms of education. To quote a former student, Anna Simonishvili, “Georgian Schools are not providing the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be successful in their academic and professional lives. The level of education is really not even enough to be able to pass school and national exams and enter top universities in Georgia.”

But despite this, there is still more help available for institutions which provide a Western education than a Georgian one. International exchange programmes are massively oversubscribed, and few of the resources poured into the country are used for developing native Georgian education to a decent level. Even those who queue up to bash the US are left with no choice but to support the US-model of education in Georgia, designed to knock this view out of them, because only this can make them rich and important enough to provide them with a platform from which to do anything about the erstwhile invaders.

Hence there is a lucrative market for private schools offering an education that will get children out of Georgia into other US client states, and will actually teach them something worthwhile now that Georgian public education has been diminished to bring this market into being. Few can afford this education, but that only makes it more prestigious. No one dares question what is taught, or why, or what avenues are open to those with such an education, as that might make this option go away too, and leave average Georgians with nothing.

New school, old tricks

Consider the New School and American High School in Tbilisi, once touted as the obvious places to educate ambitious young Georgians. These are among many schools to have disappointed a succession of parents and students. As in other cases, this did not have to be so. They have willfully disappointed their clients because if they had done their jobs properly Georgians would be equal citizens of the world, exactly what the foreign sponsors of this education dare not contemplate.

The New School is a small school, with perhaps 30 foreign teachers and about twice as many Georgian staff. It openly caters to those who want to obtain a school leaving certificate which gets out of Georgia, regardless of what it takes to achieve that. Therefore it treats them as a captive audience.

At the New School and other, the American Way, often under the guise of an European/International education, is the only way. If you don’t agree, you have no future. If you do, you will do anything the school asks you to. You don’t need to twist the arms of politicians or aid recipients when you have persuaded them to think that they never had arms to begin with.

The New School is advertised as an “International Baccalaureate (IB) programme, with unique academic rigor and emphasis on students’ personal development”, but does not feel the need to conform to most IB regulations. It simply puts up the facade of being a true IB school to make more money. But all this is a test. If you put up with it, you will start to accept what you are told, for the benefits you might obtain. Inevitably, this means you learn to see things as Americans do, since America is the source of the curriculum. But what advantage does this actually provide?

Nowadays, almost as many Georgians live outside the country than within it. How many prominent Georgians living in other countries can you name? The few you can name have generally had their careers in sport and the arts, where educational qualifications are not a priority.

Few can actually get a good job in the West just by thinking like an American, because they are still Georgians. The American matrix, as adopted by the IB schools, makes Georgians ever dependent, forever needing Uncle Sam to show them how to do the things they once did on their own when allowed - which is why they were first targeted for indoctrination.

The worse the reality, the better the dream

Parents claim to have been tricked into going to private high schools by glossy pamphlets and slick speeches by
public relations marketers - manipulative people with questionable integrity, much like Georgian government spin doctors such as Patrick Worms, an avid reader of Seth Ferris articles. They have complained that their children can't even write, and that the maths programme has become a disaster over time.

Georgian teachers are paid lower wages for the same job in order to encourage students to emulate foreigners, not them. Plagiarism and cheating are rampant, but treated as part of the collective cultural mindset, so that these practices can be used against Georgians in future. In fact students are encouraged to get away with anything in order to criminalise the whole country through its best and brightest representatives, as if "lower level" Georgians must be inherently even worse.

The New School seeks to award the DP diploma by any means necessary, regardless of the merit of the student. This is one of the main reasons it retains its status, despite competition from other schools. As with Pakistani engineering qualifications, the diploma is worthless in itself. It merely shows that you come from a certain class, know the right people and are happy with corruption provided you yourself can gain an advantage from it.

If you look at the successive pro-Western political leaders installed in Georgia, each one has been distinguished by exactly these characteristics in the eyes of the Georgian public. Most Georgian politicians are not wealthy when they enter parliament, but acquire mysterious wealth with "MP" after their name. So the system works, and is seen by its clients to work. No matter how much people rail about US policy, they won’t ultimately bite the hand that feeds them, particularly when no other hand can feed them as a result of the same educational policy.

The US attitude to Georgia makes the New School’s business model foolproof. The school charges parents high fees to ensure that their children get the DP diploma, but then creates conditions under which it is impossible to teach well. Therefore, children cannot pass the exams legitimately elsewhere.

You play the crooked game or get nothing. When everyone knows you’re a crook, and so is everyone else from the place you matriculated, you end up with neither credibility nor decent salary at the end of the day. But the more this happens, the more parents take the only route this policy has left them with, in the hope that somehow it won’t happen to their children.

Many foreign teachers ultimately realise they are being used to disguise this method of giving students the IB/DP, employed merely to placate parents who want foreign teachers. They cannot succeed because they are in an untenable position, but are expected to sign altered exam papers and internal assessments and ignore cheating and unsupervised testing. If anyone is caught (which apparently hasn’t happened up to now), the IB/DP coordinator and the school will presumably claim that the teacher is to blame.

If a teacher authenticates submissions/exams which they know have been tampered with their name is ruined. If they don’t “go along with the programme”, they will not only lose their job but find themselves blacklisted from others for having worked there to begin with, though it is equally likely they will lose it for any number of reasons.

The US is one of the countries which revolves ambassadors because they might start thinking like the locals if they stay too long. Very few teachers at the New School stay beyond two years. This lack of consistency, along with the untenable teaching conditions and inadequate instruction, have consistently left the students below where they should be in all academic subjects, largely through no fault of their own. If Georgia is to remain in the place it has been allotted by its ally, and while Georgians make ever-greater compromises to try and buck this system, this is how things must be.

One piece of silver

The New School is only one of many which offers a Western-style education. But it is the one with the biggest waiting list. You can decide for yourself what the others are like by reading about QSI and European School.

Georgia has made some attempt to reform its public school system. But in practice these reforms have been "one size fits all". Much of what has been implemented has not considered the diverse range of student and community needs, nor cultural traditions or the nature of local economies. This is deliberate, as the more generalised and discredited public education is the more students and parents seek private education, creating greater inequality and encouraging them to think that the more crooked you are, the more you will preserve what little you have.

Ultimately, the message of the Western education imposed on Georgia is that everything is permissible as long as you can gain an advantage over someone else. Georgia’s politicians and public have been obliged to buy into this system for so long they no longer see anything strange about it. Nor could they, as all the private schools operate in
the same way and all the public schools are forced to offer junk to support these private schools. You don't need an invading army when the population will never see you coming.

It is all falling into the Matrix - as in the Matrix Revolution movie, where everyone who resists eventually falls prey to Agent Smith, who is a rogue agent. He takes them over like the Borg does. The fact that Georgia is an independent state, which produced renowned academics and professionals before the US came along, has been conveniently forgotten by those who created this situation, and continues to be by those Georgians who still wish to benefit from it.

*Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*