Introduction

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AIMS OF THE BOOK

This book is a companion to one published in 2014 titled *Educational Reform and Internationalisation: The Case of School Reform in Kazakhstan* (Bridges, 2014). Both books are in-depth studies of the reform of an education system of a post-Soviet country, Kazakhstan, now thirty years into independence. The first volume charted the background to and the beginnings of the transformation of the school system. In the Foreword, Shigeo Katsu, president of Nazarbayev University, laid out the challenges: Kazakhstan was only founded thirty years ago, and many wondered whether the endeavour had any hope (Lillis, 2022); the country's education system seemed to be behind those to which it compared itself; it was a high-stakes reform, since then president Nazarbayev considered education to be the mechanism for economic success; there was a forthcoming growth in young people of around 50 per cent; and there was reform fatigue. These all formed a potent mix. The first book covered the period from independence to 2013 and showed the ambition of the country, with a programme of reform of *all* elements of education and with three reference points: Soviet/Russian, Kazakh and international (Fim'yar, 2014).

This second book covers the period from 2015 to 2022 and the scaling up of the experience of the Nazerbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and its implementation across the whole school system. It focuses almost exclusively on the evidence of the outcome of this ambitious programme, charts the actors' descriptions of their aims and presents the research evidence of the results in the cities and regions. Both books have the same aims and involve many of the same people. The aims are, first, to study fully a sustained drive to reform

a whole school system in a country that aims to bridge the traditions of the Soviet states with the experience of those in Western Europe, with the multitude of additional influences this programme involved, and, second, to inform the debate in Kazakhstan among researchers, policymakers and practitioners. There are not many opportunities to research such a sustained educational endeavour over time and fewer still to bring such research directly into the processes of policy development at the highest level, but this was what this research team was able to do.

The authors are, without exception, actors in the transformation exercise from either the Autonomous Educational Organisation (AEO) NIS or the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education in Kazakhstan, or from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Part of the reform strategy was to form partnerships with international organisations, and one of these was between the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and the NIS, and another was between the University of Cambridge and the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University. The partnerships held certain principles, one being that research would be undertaken at every stage and we would contribute to evidence-informed development. This research was carried out by different groups: a dedicated team at the Faculty of Education, colleagues at Nazarbayev University and, latterly, by the NIS themselves, who have established their own research department and worked alongside the Ministry of Education in collecting data, too. Many of these people have been involved in some form for a decade or more. This book is in the tradition of educational research which studies a case and engages the actors in critical reflection and data collection (Sáez Bondía and Cortés Gracia, 2021).

One of the characteristics of the reform strategy is that it has become a data-informed activity, and this has developed and grown since the beginning. The AEO NIS now has a large research department which regularly and systematically collects data on all aspects of the education changes and current practice. Other aspects of the educational system and its outcomes continue to be researched by other university departments, and the Ministry, of course, collects monitoring data.

KAZAKHSTAN AND EDUCATION

Many contributors in this volume make connections between Kazakhstan's recent history and its contemporary social context. Kazakhstani readers will be familiar with these references, but for the sake of international readers, for

many of whom Kazakhstan is little known, it may be worth highlighting some of these features.

In brief, the country has a geographical, historical and cultural legacy that is key to a reading of its educational development. It is the largest landlocked country by land area and so has vast rural areas with small, scattered communities to serve. It was part of the Great Silk Road trade route, established communication from China, across Central Asia and to the Black Sea, and was not just commercially important but also provided a rich resource of cultural exchange. China is endeavouring to revive the concept through a modern Silk Road Initiative, and this collaboration is an active new area of trade links and development. Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet Union from 1936 to 2001 and, earlier, of the Russian Empire, and this experience continues to have a profound influence, especially among the generation that lived through it. Many older teachers remember with some nostalgia the relatively high status and salaries they enjoyed in this period, which laid a strong foundation for universal participation in education. The educational practices and beliefs still permeate current pedagogy in Kazakhstan, with which the reform engaged and is still engaging.

During the Soviet period, too, large populations of people from different parts of the Soviet Union (and especially any that showed resistance to the regime) were deposited in Kazakhstan. Partly because of this, it is a very culturally diverse country with over 102 nationalities and a population of circa 18 million. Unsurprisingly, interethnic harmony is a valued aim, and in the new capital, Astana, there are symbols of this, such as the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation where the 7th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions (another peace initiative) met in 2022. When independence came in 1991, Kazakhstan was a poor country and had multiple other issues. In the school system, the government has been at pains to respect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population, which is partly what lies behind its 'trilingual' policy for schools and ensures that minority communities can have schools that provide early education in their mother tongue. The Soviet nuclear programme had been located in Kazakhstan, and one of the first acts of the new president was to dispose of nuclear weapons and declare Kazakhstan a nuclear-free zone. Today, the country is a strong advocate of nuclear disarmament. There were environmental problems in the Aryal Sea, which was severely depleted by the Soviet use of its water to feed vast fields of cotton, and there had been little development socially or educationally. Kazakhstan is rich in minerals and in particular uranium and oil, which have fuelled the economic riches that come with petrodollars.

The first five years of independence were a great struggle for survival, but later, prosperity and peace came. There was an economic recovery and most people benefited from it. Lillis talks of the Nazarbayev generation 'who had lived their entire lives in a period of peace, rising prosperity and political stability under the rule of one man in a country where 40 per cent of the population had been born since he came to power' (Lillis, 2022: 21). There has been an ongoing debate about human rights and the extent of democracy in the country. Bridges and Sagintayeva observed in 2014 that President Nazarbayev, in a press conference with David Cameron, the then prime minister of the UK, noted that it had taken the UK many centuries to achieve democracy. He emphasised that he had the same goal of establishing democracy, but cautioned: 'So democracy is the outcome . . . the final goal, not the beginning' (Bridges and Sagintayeva, 2014: xxiv).

This stability, both in the country and in the region, allowed for the development and funding of education, which has been crucial to the work described here. More detail of this work is in the chapters that follow. The stability also allowed for a fairly calm debate about the three cultural cornerstones influencing education: Soviet/Russian, Kazakh and international. Kazakhstan had firmly stated its intention to create an education system which honoured its recent and distant cultural heritage and aspired to become equal, especially in quality, in the international arena. There were competing cultural demands in the construction of the new curriculum and assessment, but notwithstanding debate and dissent which will no doubt continue into the future, a broadly acceptable consensus was achieved.

Recently, there has been recognition that Kazakhstan is again at an important point of transition, with Chatham House arguing that 'Kazakhstan is at a turning point in its history' (Bohr et al., 2019: iv). This has been enhanced by the instability and anxiety caused by events in 2022. Regional discord and the war between Russia and the Ukraine have resulted in destabilisation. In January 2022, while celebrating the new year, violence broke out connected to disputes around pay and prices. This became widespread and President Tokayev called upon Russian soldiers for support; 227 people died. The causes are unclear, but the disturbance and civil unrest were unsettling. There was a rearrangement of many civil organisations, and the constitutional development has been quickened, with major new proposals underway as we write. There has been a new set of far-reaching reforms and legislation introduced to bring about political and social change (Barro and Cornell, 2022), and they appear to be a further move towards democracy. Education and its development is again a major part of the

debate. What long-term impact this will have on educational values and priorities is not yet clear, but the AEO NIS and Nazarbayev University appear to be valued and supported, and even seen as national assets. The process of reform continues. It is acknowledged that the scaling up of the NIS practices and policies to the whole system has been and still is a challenge. What is clear is that education, including its international dimension, is of even more importance in this volatile global climate.

KAZAKHSTAN'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system was inherited from the Soviet one, and Bridges (2014) provides a clear and detailed discussion of the issues that are part of this legacy. Briefly, there are 7,398 schools in Kazakhstan and class sizes have increased in recent years. Early-years education is a current concern, and the reforms have focused upon the 'secondary' school system, as it is called in Kazakhstan. There is lower secondary school – years five–seven – and upper secondary school – years eight–twelve/thirteen. There are three tracks after year fourteen, one academic and two vocational. The state funds all stages of education and there are few private schools. The recent reform or transformation of the school system has involved large-scale change of the curriculum, the assessment system, teacher pedagogy and training, and teachers' salaries tied to a new appraisal (called attestation) system. The history and chronology of these changes are described in the Chapters 1 and 2.

THE THEMES AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is divided into three parts. Part I, Foundations of Scaling Up, focuses on an analysis of the key planks of the reform undertaken, for example, trilingualism, new structures and processes for scaling up, using and developing research in education, new approaches to teacher professionalism and addressing the key issue identified in research leading to the reform, namely, equity. Chapters 1 and 2 are written by key figures in the AEO NIS, architects of the new initiatives that informed the translation to the rest of the country. There are descriptions of the historical and cultural aspects of and the background to the two stages – piloting and rolling out – as well as a presentation of available evidence.

As already stated, one of the features of the recent educational landscape in Kazakhstan is the increased engagement with and use of research. Chapter 3

discusses some of the issues and 'problematics' of developing research capacity and research programmes in the context of the last decade of educational reforms in Kazakhstan. More specifically, it focuses on the development of research in the newly established Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NUGSE), that came into being in collaboration with two university departments: the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The chapter considers some of the issues raised by this somewhat asymmetrical international collaboration, by the 'translation' of international practice into this new environment and by what might be understood as a 'research culture'. Also discussed are the impact of the structural hierarchies built into the foundation of Nazerbayev University, in particular the valorisation of international expertise, and the symbolic capital of Western academic credentials in research collaboration; the problematic nature of the discourse of the 'international' and the 'world class' in educational research; the charge of neocolonialism levelled against the whole enterprise; and the significance of 'research culture' and its resonance with the wider institutional, social and political culture in which it is embedded.

Chapter 4 looks at the ambition of Kazakhstan to introduce multilingualism through the national 'Trinity of Languages' project. While Kazakh, Russian and English had always been taught in independent Kazakhstan, the new policy of trilingualism called for the use of these three languages to teach different curriculum subjects. This chapter focuses on an analysis of the relationship among the three languages as envisioned in policy and enacted in classroom practices, based on interviews with teachers and observations of their science classes. Data are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of translanguaging and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). The analysis shows that teachers' stance on translanguaging appears to be rather ambiguous, most probably due to the way the participating teachers must implement the language policy. Although the use of Kazakh or Russian was unavoidable in English-medium classes due to teachers' and students' limited proficiency, translanguaging was not acknowledged as a valid practice.

Chapter 5 is the last in this part and explores inclusion and equity. The concerns for equity or inequity of outcomes were part of the initial impetus for the reform. The Soviet tradition treated matters of disability as separate from education for the majority of young people, so special schools and separate education was a common aspect of education in Kazakhstan. There has been a strong desire for change, and colleagues at the NUGSE report on their recent research in this chapter.

Part II of the book, Piloting Initiatives and Scaling Up to the Whole System, presents selected research studies which examine the goals and outcomes of national- and local-level piloting of new policies, approaches and programmes, while trying to verify, or correct, assumptions made and determine whether the reforms will be a good fit to replace the old curriculum and practices, and what operational strategies are required. There is a discussion of the concept and practice of piloting in the introduction to the section. This part brings research evidence from various recent initiatives including the piloting of the renewed content of education, per-capita funding in schools and monitoring studies of leading schools and teacher leadership in Kazakhstan. These research projects were undertaken in collaborations between local and UK-based researchers and experts, as well as by a student studying for her PhD. Part II highlights insights from projects and discusses processes, challenges and lessons. Drawing on empirical data, the authors explore and review the ways in which practitioners respond to national-level and/or local-level programmes and enterprises in schools in Kazakhstan.

Chapter 6 explores what was behind a plan to pilot the renewed content of education and what policymakers wanted from the piloting phase. Drawing on empirical evidence collected in 2016–2017 at six schools in three locations in Kazakhstan, the authors assess the outcomes of piloting the renewed content of education in schools and argue that it was a very worthwhile step for large-scale implementation and policy formations. Chapter 7 is an exploration of the reform of student assessment and the construction of the content and standards, and presents the data of this ambitious plan and its outcome. In Chapter 8, the authors examine and report on research into the introduction of the per-capita school funding piloting project. How the piloting process has supported the implementation and how per-capita funding works in schools are explored. Chapter 9 explores a new structure in Kazakhstan, the professional potential of leading schools and their role in supporting the implementation of the renewed content of education around the country. The authors draw on data collected from 1,049 leading schools spread across the country and on responses from more than 9,000 teachers in 2018–2020. Chapters 10 and 11 both focus on the development of teachers and their engagement in research. Chapter 10 explains the emergence of the Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan (TLK) initiative and locates it within the wider discussion of education reform in Kazakhstan. It includes examples from Gulmira Qanay's PhD work and explores teacher professionality, the possibilities for its transformation and the obstacles to that endeavour in

schools in Kazakhstan. Chapter 11 examines the introduction of action research both with NIS teachers and, latterly, with schools in Astana in the SHARE project. Research explores what this project meant to, and how it was seen by, teachers.

Part III is titled Evidence of Implementation and is comprised of three very important case studies. The teams of researchers went to three regions of Kazakhstan to examine how the reform or transformation was being rolled out and to what effect. These case studies illustrate and illuminate the challenges and key factors affecting the scaling up of the reform to the whole school system in a short time. They point to the tasks and challenges of educational reform in a large country with widely different cultures. The final Conclusions section and cross-case analysis tries to draw out what we can learn from this sustained endeavour and looks further at recent reports on Kazakhstan and its progress.

This book provides a chance for practitioners, policymakers and scholars to learn from a rare long-term research study of a national educational system undergoing change in the context of a complex national history and an increasingly global arena of educational policy development. The contributions provide a rich resource for learning for all stakeholders, be they in a ministry, a regional authority, a school, a community surrounding a school or a university.

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Part I
Foundations of Scaling Up