

1 EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN KAZAKHSTAN: The First Decade of Independence

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Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kazakhstan went through substantial changes in political, social and economic life which brought about changes in value orientations and educational expectations. Central here was the establishment of a market economy, and this was widely seen as having important implications for the education system, which still operated very much on Soviet lines.

The Soviet model had brought important benefits:

- free education for all children
- a well-developed infrastructure for educational provision and administration
- well-qualified teachers
- many research institutes, universities and regional scientific centres, encouraging high levels of Science and Mathematics knowledge.

One of the most distinctive features of the Soviet educational system at the pre-college level was the attempt to provide uniform Science and Mathematics instruction for all students up to the completion of secondary school (Ailes and Rushing 1991, 109–10). The content of education during the Soviet era, however, was highly specialised, driven by the employment demands of a massive command economy. Education was used to reinforce state philosophy in a much more narrow and insistent manner than is characteristic of broader notions of civics education. Mathematics and Sciences were emphasised, while the Humanities and Social Sciences were laden heavily with Marxist-Leninist ideology (Kanaev and Daun 2002). DeYoung (2006) notes that even Science was not immune to the ideological filter:

Another critical component of Soviet educational philosophy was trust in the scientific method and of the teaching and learning of ‘facts’. It was believed

that nature and society could be scientifically understood via the collection and presentation of data, and that the ‘correct’ interpretation was available via the teacher, who presented the facts armed with the theory of Marxism-Leninism (DeYoung 2006, 500).

Among other important features of the Soviet system was the role of the Russian language as a common bond uniting the multi-ethnic population of the USSR, Kazakhstan included. As Kreindler (1991, 219–31) describes, the Communist party supported Russian not only as a common *lingua franca*, but also as a key component of a common cultural foundation. Russian was assigned a central role in fostering rapprochement (*sblizhenie*) of the many nationalities inhabiting the USSR. According to official Soviet ideology, linguistic and other differences among nationalities in the USSR would progressively weaken and eventually lead to their merger (*sliianie*). In this regard, native languages and literature were seen as less important than Russian language and literature during the Soviet period. Despite the existence of a long liberal local tradition in pedagogical philosophy (e.g. Ushinsky 1949; Vygotsky 1978), there was uniform application of pedagogical practices. The creation of school lessons, textbooks and teaching manuals was highly centralised (DeYoung 2006, 500). As already noted, the educational emphasis was often on ‘factology’: the learning of facts and figures, rather than on creative thinking and problem solving (UNICEF 1999, 8). From the elementary level through to higher education, the Soviet educational process was heavily based upon prescriptive and rote learning. Questions directed to students generally sought to elicit ‘correct answers’ – in other words those found in the textbooks – not the students’ interpretation or judgment with respect to the presented material (Ailes and Rushing 1991, 120). After independence, in Kazakhstan and elsewhere, this approach did not equip students with the practical skills required by the new market economy.

Challenges in researching educational reforms in post-Soviet and post-Socialist contexts

Educational reforms in the post-Soviet and post-Socialist contexts are somewhat difficult to research due to:

- challenges around conceptualising educational change within a context of societal transformation
- incomplete information and its unreliability
- variations in ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ interpretations of events.

It is possible to distinguish between two broad categories of studies. The first applies particular models of educational change and concentrates primarily on understanding planned change at different organisational levels, such as those of the region, the district and the school (see Fullan 2001; Fullan 2003; Polyzoï and Dneprov 2003; Polyzoï and Nazarenko 2004; Elliott and Tudge 2007; Webster et al. 2011; Loogma et al. 2012). The second group of studies focuses on educational transfer, in particular the complementary practices of ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy lending’ (Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2006). Steiner-Khamsi (2004) interprets policy borrowing as a strategy that is used to resolve protracted domestic policy conflict, and suggests that it results from a re-orientation in transnational educational space (Silova 2005). Furthermore, borrowing, whether at the level of discourse or actuality, has a certification effect on domestic policy talk (Steiner-Khamsi 2004). Phillips and Ochs (2003, 451–2) postulate ‘borrowing’ as a sequence of four director stages:

- cross-national attraction (impulses and externalising potential)
- decision
- implementation
- internationalisation/indigenisation.

They assert that policy borrowing refers to ‘the conscious adoption in one context of policy observed in another’ (Phillips and Ochs 2004, 774).

Steiner-Khamsi et al. (2006, 218) distinguish between three common phenomena:

- Very often the language of the reform is borrowed, but not the actual reform (Steiner-Khamsi 2005)
- Borrowing occurs even when there is no apparent need; that is, when similar reforms already exist in the local context (Steiner-Khamsi and Quist 2000)
- If the actual reform is borrowed, it is always selectively borrowed and sometimes locally re-conceptualised to the extent that there is little similarity left between the copy and the original.

The second group also involves studies which examine the role of ‘development assistance’ in shaping, or at least striving to influence, educational reform in the former Soviet countries (Gilbert 1998; Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2006; Asanova 2006; 2007; Silova and Steiner-Khamsi 2008; Takala and Piattoeva 2012). Silova (2005, 53), in her research on Central Asian states, claims that ‘travelling policies have been “hijacked” by policy makers and used for their own purposes’. These studies are to a varying degree based on personal experience, document analysis and interviews with key actors.

International observers who visited Central Asian countries in the immediate aftermath of independence from the Soviet Union argued that there were three general types of educational ‘crises’ in newly independent countries during the 1990s: expenditure decline, decentralisation and destabilisation, and ‘structural anomalies’ (Heyneman 1998). The next part of the chapter will explore these crises in turn.

Expenditure decline

In the Soviet Union, the central authorities played a vital role in the educational development of Kazakhstan, by supplying economic resources to these areas and by providing models and infrastructure for educational development (e.g. Silova 2005; DeYoung 2006; Asanova 2006; 2007a; Takala and Piattoeva 2012). Kazakhstan inherited a comprehensive educational system from the Soviet period which included: kindergartens, a network of comprehensive schools, boarding schools, vocational schools, special education schools and schools for gifted and talented children. Following Kazakhstan’s independence, this educational network started to deteriorate as public expenditure on education rapidly declined. The first decade of independence in Kazakhstan witnessed a substantial decrease in economic performance, employment prospects, health services and gender equity, and there was also a general decline in public spending on education at a time when there was a need for the adaptation of education systems to the new economic and social structures (e.g. Asian Development Bank (ADB) 1995; Heyneman 1998; Silova 2005; DeYoung 2006; Shagdar 2006). One respondent in our research study in 2012 noted:

There were difficult times because the system was ruined and a new system was going to be built . . . (Participant C, Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools; NIS)

Economic and fiscal crises during the process of transition led to severe cutbacks in education during the 1990s and it was difficult to provide basic education for all children, let alone undertake a fundamental reform of the system (ADB 1995; Silova 2005, 2009). As one respondent in our research interviews noted:

. . . And in this situation, under great financial difficulties, when there was no money, we had to maintain our schools and support their heating. So, we encountered a problem of school closing . . . (Participant B, NIS)

Another respondent said:

We had a problem with children in places where there were no schools. We organised transportation for children. We did not have any money, but we had to find them. (Participant J, NIS)

In Kazakhstan public expenditure on education as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) declined by more than half – from 6.8% in 1990 to 2.9% of a much smaller GDP in 1994 (ADB 2002), not exceeding 3.6% after 2000 (NHDR 2004). Predictably, a lack of investment in general secondary education was reflected in rundown facilities, shortage of school buildings and furniture, outmoded equipment, lack of educational materials for teachers and textbooks for students (Shagdar 2006; Silova 2009) and lower school participation rates. Teachers' salaries were very low; their payment was often delayed, and as a consequence many qualified teachers resigned. By 1993 one seventh of the teaching staff who were in the system in 1990 had left education, many of them to seek more lucrative employment elsewhere (ADB 1995; DeYoung and Nadirbekyzy 1997; DeYoung 2006). Government support for public schools fell from 8% of the nation's budget in 1990 to 3.6% in 1995 (Jurinov 1996). The monthly salary of a teacher with a normal teaching load in 1995 was 2700 tenge, or about US \$41. Yet, teachers were rarely paid on time, and salaries were delivered two or three months late (DeYoung and Nadirbekyzy 1997, 76).

After the peak of the crisis (1991–4), the education system had to search for ways to overcome financial difficulties and diversify its sources of funding. New principles of financing were introduced by the government to improve the education system along market-economy lines, such as the introduction of a funding mechanism using a standard rate per student method and education grants and preferential credits for higher education students.

According to the ADB report, in Kazakhstan 'there was virtually no new construction and little maintenance of educational facilities and equipment' (ADB 1995, 4). In the 1990s, more than half of the country's schools were operating on two or even three shifts per day (ADB 1995). Resources were scarce for the import of textbooks, while a viable domestic textbook production capacity was slow to develop (80% of all textbooks and instructional materials were produced in Moscow before 1991).

The relatively high quality of education achieved prior to independence was being rapidly eroded. A respondent from our 2012 research study commented:

The educational system, of course, did not perish, did not die . . . but it took some very unmanageable changes. (Participant B, NIS)

There was a decrease in the educational achievement of students and growing regional differences within the country. Students in rural and remote areas scored significantly lower than their counterparts in urban schools, school enrolment rates were decreasing, and student drop-out rates were rising (see UNDP Report 1996; Chapman et al. 2005; Silova 2005; Silova et al. 2007). The challenge for the new Kazakhstani government, with no prior experience of independence, was to avoid further disintegration of the education system and to recapture previous levels of educational access and quality, while at the same time adapting to new economic and political forms of organisation. As it was acknowledged:

That is, it is as if there has been no conscious reform strategy in the first five to seven years. In this chaos was this slogan: ‘The educational system ought to fit in the market economy’ . . . The private educational establishments and new types of educational establishments, like gymnasiums, lyceums started appearing. (International Adviser, C)

During the same period state employment declined. In Kazakhstan, while nearly 2.2 million jobs disappeared in state enterprises and organisations, over 1 million jobs were created in the private sector, although many of them were part-time (ADB 1995).

Indeed, a ‘transformational shock’ after the collapse of the USSR was observed in many post-Soviet countries. At the same time there was a growing demand for skills in languages, computers, business, economy, banking and accountancy services. These tendencies demanded a general education system with a flexible curriculum and the capacity to provide pupils with skills required by the market economy.

Decentralisation and destabilisation

According to international observers, decentralisation and destabilisation emerged in most post-Soviet republics due to the disagreement among education and other government policy makers, some of whom called for radical change in administrative and governance practices (ADB 1995; Heyneman 1998).

The Law on Education (1992) established the Ministry of Education (MoE) as the central state body that defines and executes state policy in the field of

education. (It later became known as the Ministry of Education and Science – MoES.) The ministry provides strategic planning and funding, including the preparation of draft education budgets and the setting of national guidelines and standards, curricula and syllabi; preparing state orders concerning the training of specialists; providing assistance in the organisation of the educational process in the Kazakh language and establishing international agreement on educational issues. In accordance with legislation, MoES supervises educational institutions funded from the regional budgets.

However, when calls for new practices were made, there were few funds to support different organisational strategies and little power at ministry level to prevail upon the remaining school bureaucracies at the regional levels (DeYoung 2006, 502). In Kazakhstan the ministerial portfolio changed hands several times between 1992 and the late 1990s. The frequent changes in the leadership of MoES resulted in staff attrition and reorganisations, affecting its capacity to co-ordinate and monitor a range of initiatives. ‘One minister is a former university rector, the other – a secondary school teacher, and they change focus to their favourite subsectors’, said a local expert (ICG 2011, 33). The ministry’s division on secondary education alone saw dramatic cuts in staff from 220 in the early 1990s to 26 several years later (Asanova 2007a, 76).

The decentralisation of the school management system, begun in 1995, was viewed as an opportunity for delegating management functions from the central ministry to the local level. However, the decentralisation process suffered from an incomplete legal framework and was not supported by the necessary human resources. A serious constraint was the stock of qualified education administration at the local and school levels (ADB 2004, 33).

Structural anomalies

Another legacy of the Soviet system affecting the educational system in Kazakhstan, according to some commentators, was the presence of economic and structural anomalies (Heyneman 1998; DeYoung 2006). Soviet schools had been unconcerned with market forces or with efficiency or accountability. In addition, local education departments and individual schools did not have budget allocations or decision making power to rethink and reorient emerging curricular goals or staffing needs (DeYoung 2006). In Kazakhstan, partial devolution of financial responsibilities to province and district educational authorities resulted in huge cuts of funding from the educational sector. Regional education budgets reveal stark disparities. As a

result, the challenge for school directors (i.e. headteachers) in Kazakhstan, many of whom started their careers in the Soviet era, was to learn how to raise and allocate funds for instructional purposes in their schools.

In the face of transitional difficulties, resource constraints and structural rigidity, the government initiated reforms in the mid-1990s with an effort to adjust the education system towards the needs of a market economy.

Around 1997–1998 . . . various documents began to appear . . . the law on education was revised/modified. In our Law on Education from 1998, in which they have tried to assign . . . to give a role to the private sector for the first time . . . to reiterate that there will be general, all-inclusive secondary education . . . (Participant A, NIS)

Based on the analysis of the literature and data gathered so far, it is possible to summarise the following initiatives that were undertaken in the 1990s:

- legislative reform
- the creation of new structural institutions with the aim of providing scientific, consultative and organisational support (e.g. the Kazakh Academy of Education named after Altynsarin and the Republican Scientific Practical Centre, Daryn, for gifted children, amongst others)
- the revision of the general education curriculum with the aim of making it more flexible and responsive to learner needs in the context of economic transition (e.g. the learner-based curriculum)
- incorporation of a native language and culture in education – New Language and National History textbooks
- decentralisation of public spending on education (the role of *oblasts* and *raions* authority had changed)
- attempts to rationalise the education system to increase its external and internal efficiencies
- the creation of competition in the sector through the promotion of private education
- co-operation with international organisations and its impact.

In the overview of education policy-making in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, some major initiatives are distinguished and will be discussed in more detail.

Education policy framework in the 1990s

Since independence, public policy in the education sector has encountered two basic, interconnected problems. On the one hand, there was a desire to

preserve and maintain positive aspects of the education system inherited from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, there was the need to develop the new approaches that must come with the economic and social reforms of a newly independent country. A respondent from the research study (2012) described that time: ‘the process of survival was parallel with the process of the formation of state’ (Participant F).

The chronology of education reforms in Kazakhstan in the 1990s is presented in Table 1 (only the key strategic policy documents are listed):

Table 1: Chronology of educational reform in Kazakhstan 1991–2000

Years	Legislation and legal framework	Focus
1991–1993	Law on Education (1992) Law on Higher Education (1993)	Formulation of legislation for the education system of an independent Kazakhstan
1994–1996	Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995) Concept of Secondary Schools of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1996) A programme of preparation of textbooks and teaching materials for comprehensive schools (1996)	Conceptual revision of the content of education. Commencement of implementation of long-term national programmes in two strategic areas: new textbooks and the introduction of computers into schools.
1997–2000	Kazakhstan 2030: Prosperity, Security and Improvement of the Well-being of all Kazakh Citizens (1997) The State Programme of informatisation of the secondary education The Law on Languages (1997) Resolution of the Government ‘On measures of further reform of the secondary education system in the Republic of Kazakhstan’ (1998) Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan ‘On Education’ (1999) National Programme on Education (2000) The Government Resolution on a Guaranteed State Minimum for Educational Organisations’ Network (2000)	Development and approval of the strategic documents. Changing from mainly Russian to Kazakh as the primary language of instruction. Restructuring and rewriting the curriculum of the Humanities (especially, a new History narrative). The reopening and modernisation of small schools that were closed as a result of the rationalisation process in 1995–97.

These laws ratify the democratic character of the education system and the administrative and financial decentralisation of educational institutions. The 1992 Law on Education determines the common purpose of education as follows: ‘the main task of the education system is to create the necessary conditions for bringing up and developing individuals on the basis of national and common human values, and of specific and practical achievements’ (p. 1).

According to Clause 30 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995), education is non-discriminatory and every child in Kazakhstan has the right to education and is guaranteed a free primary, general secondary and basic vocational education and free secondary and higher professional education on a competitive basis, regardless of origin, ethnicity, social and property status, gender, language, education, religious affiliation, place of residence, health status and other circumstances. Furthermore, the 'Kazakhstan 2030 Strategy: Prosperity, Security and Improvement of the Well-being of all Kazakh Citizens' states that 'health, education and well-being of citizens' are the main components of human development. An interviewee from the research study (2012) commented:

. . . the legislation on education was quite progressive at that time because in each law there were points about competencies, the organisation of education process, and more practical approaches . . . (Consultant, International Organisation A)

Attempts were made to improve the structure and content of school education. The education system was founded on the principle of a continuous educational process through four levels: preschool education and upbringing, primary and secondary education, higher education and postgraduate education. Secondary education in Kazakhstan in the 1990s consisted of three stages: elementary (four-year programme, Grades 1–4); basic (five years, Grades 5–9) and senior secondary (two years, Grades 10–11). Secondary (basic) education was compulsory. In a subsequent update, the content of education was focused on the specification of educational domains and the refinement of subjects at each stage of school (*The Concept of Comprehensive Schools of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 1996).

Daly (2008, 26) states that between 1989 and 2005, Kazakhstan lost two million of its six million Russian Soviet inhabitants. As a result of demographic recession, the number of schools was reduced. A respondent in the research study (2012) stated:

. . . people from rural areas started moving to town. One part of the Russian speaking population started moving to Russia; the Germans started returning to Germany . . . A demographic problem, the birth-rate went down . . . The number of children at rural schools dropped down. (Participant C, NIS)

By 1999, the size of low capacity multi-grade schools dropped more than half (UNESCO-EFA 2000, 28).¹ The attendance rate decreased, and there was a severe understaffing issue. For example, due to the shortage of teachers, about 150000 pupils in 959 schools were unable to complete their studies