



Understanding the Political Economy of Education: Exploring Debates in Central Asia

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INTRODUCTION

Education is not immune from larger societal issues and processes. The content and outcomes of educational policies and interventions both affect and are affected by the relationships between political and economic structures, institutions and agents at local, national and global levels that political economy analysis can unpack (Novelli et al., 2014; Robertson, 2012). The common point within various existing definitions of political economy analysis is the interplay between political and economic processes, the allocation of power and resources, as well as the underpinning system and processes that generate, maintain and change these dynamics through time (Daoust & Novelli, 2020). The research literature

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in the field of the political economy of education covers a range of disciplines. It utilises different approaches to political economy, varying from a minimal neoclassical perspective that is interested only in political factors hindering market performance to a very broad ‘cultural political economy’ that seeks to investigate how geography, gender, culture and politics relate to economic issues; equally, the field varies in its focus from an ‘orthodox political economy’ which provides reductionistic policy solutions to a ‘critical political economy’ which explores the tensions, inconsistencies and inequalities found in society and in educational systems (Novelli et al., 2014). Therefore, educational injustices are not limited to economics and human capital; rather, a complete picture of educational inequalities can be obtained by combining economics, politics, geography and culture (Novelli, 2016). Acknowledging the dual role of education as both a powerful mechanism of social reproduction in societies and a driver of social change (Robertson & Dale, 2015), this book attempts to contribute to the international conversation among researchers, policymakers and practitioners about critical political economy analysis of education and promote it as a helpful analytical tool for educational debates in Central Asian countries.

The transformation and evolution of education systems in Central Asian countries are closely related to the challenges and opportunities all these republics have faced since gaining independence in 1991. In the midst of profound economic, social and political changes, education became an object of contention. Inheriting a relatively good education system with almost universal school attendance rates, each country had to establish a national education system with updated curricula content to prepare graduates for the national and global competitive labour market (Bridges, 2014; Chapman et al., 2005). Commenting recently on the post-Soviet transformation of education, Silova and Niyozov (2020) argue that these countries have a mixed transition: on the one hand, maintaining Soviet educational legacies and, in some circumstances, reviving pre-Soviet traditions, but on the other hand, making a set of policy changes signifying the adoption of Western educational principles including, among others, decentralised management and funding of education, higher education privatisation, standardised student assessment, and liberalisation of textbook publishing and internationalisation of higher education by aligning university curricula with the Bologna Process, establishing international or joint universities and

sending students from the region to universities in other parts of the world.

Although these countries have followed diverse paths since the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), there has been a noticeable convergence across the region in the rhetoric of education policy discourse with the pervasive emphasis on the political and economic aims of education, where questions around the quality of education have gained more prominence in scholarly research compared with questions of equity (Chankseliani & Silova, 2018; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021; Tabaeva et al., 2021). While the influence of liberal, neoliberal, nationalist, or Islamic values on Central Asian communities and education is growing, the ability or likelihood of these new and re-emerging discourses to ensure equitable development is an important question (Niyozov et al., 2020). Reflecting on the role that education systems play in supporting or undermining the adaptive capacity of societies to cope with ever-changing tensions and pressures associated with both the legacies of the past and the challenges of the present, it has become very important to reflect on the role of education in strengthening or undermining socially cohesive and flourishing societies. This reflection is particularly important for newly independent states, including Central Asian countries (Heyneman & Todoric-Bebic, 2000).

To set the scene for the present book, the next part of the chapter provides reflections on some challenges related to education and social cohesion in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as contributions of this book are related to these states. These reflections are followed by an explanation of the project that united all the authors of this book chapters and the introduction of the contributions to this volume.

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Education has a multifaceted impact on social cohesion (Novelli & Smith, 2011). As a long-standing concept in social thought, social cohesion has different interpretations (Green et al., 2006). While some definitions relate it to a ‘common identity and a sense of belonging’, others stress ‘active civil society’ or ‘equality and social solidarity’ (Green & Janmaat, 2016, p.171). Most definitions associate the term with social justice and equity, linking it with societal features, such as solidarity, respect, inclusion, positive relationships, collectivity and common purpose. In line with this, one of the implicit agreements within the recent proposal of

a new ‘social contract for education’ (UNESCO, 2021b) is that schools and teachers should be facilitators of empathy and support for different histories, languages, cultures and a variety of social movements.

A helpful analytical framework to reflect on the existing challenges for education to promote social cohesion in selected Central Asian countries is a critical ‘4 Rs’ perspective that connects analytical dimensions of redistribution, recognition, representation and reconciliation (Novelli et al., 2015). This framework combines Nancy Fraser’s (1995, 2005) perspectives on social justice and the work of Johan Galtung (1976, 1990) and John-Paul Lederach (1996, 1997) on peacebuilding and reconciliation. This framework acknowledges the various kinds of injustice and inequality that frequently promote contemporary conflicts and crises, as well as the need to address the legacies of these conflicts in and through education. Pointing to the close interconnections between the four Rs, the framework focuses on inequalities within the education system. Redistribution is related to equity in education access and resources for all groups in society, including previously marginalised and disadvantaged. Recognition is related to respect for and affirmation of variety and identities in educational institutions, procedures and curricula, including those relating to ability, gender, ethnicity, language, culture and religion. Representation refers to participation in governance and decision-making at all levels of the education system regarding the distribution and use of human and material resources. Reconciliation entails addressing prior events, injustices and consequences of conflicts, along with developing trusting relationships.

Access to education is the very minimum requirement for redistributive equity. All three Central Asian countries covered in the book—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—are committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) by 2030, including SDG 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all (UNESCO, 2020a). Committing to ensuring Education for All, Central Asian education systems have near-universal enrolment at primary and secondary levels as well as literacy. However, despite relatively quick economic growth, urban–rural differences in education quality, learning opportunities, employment and economic success continue, posing considerable challenges to social cohesion (UNESCO, 2020a).

The region’s sudden transition from the command economy of the Soviet era, the economic crisis and the concentration of economic development in the nation’s major cities have devastatingly impacted education

in rural schools (Eg ea, 2020). Despite ongoing reforms in education systems, the rural–urban school gap is a persistent challenge for Central Asian governments (Alieva & Kovyazina, 2021; Eg ea, 2020; Tajik et al., 2022). According to the Programme for International Student Assessment outcomes in Kazakhstan, poor performance can be seen in rural and urban schools in low-performing regions, while top-performing regions show the biggest disparity between rural and urban schools (Marteau, 2020). Inequitable academic preparedness of rural graduates is associated with access to higher education (Chankseliani et al., 2020). Moreover, a concern for the region is the disparities in higher education completion rates between those in urban and rural areas (UNESCO, 2021a).

Simultaneously, critical for redistributive justice is access to education for students with special educational needs. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have adopted a path towards more inclusive education, which emerged as a value in international education policy since the United Nations Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The statement challenged the notion of disability, which previously had been considered as stemming from a lack of ability and placed more responsibility on governments and society for removing obstacles to learning in educational systems (Hern andez-Torrano et al., 2022). As in many other countries, the transition to an inclusive education system is not an easy road, particularly because of the countries’ context where children with functional impairments have historically been educated in segregated educational environments (Helmer et al., 2020; Lapham, 2020; Makoelle, 2020). Although the countries introduced progressive policies and practices in support of inclusive education, pointing to the absence of a single and quick solution, the growing research in the region suggests financial investments for providing proper infrastructure and resources as well as attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills of teachers and other stakeholders as still the most common challenges in creating opportunities for all students with special educational needs to be able to learn alongside their able-bodied peers (Helmer et al., 2020; Lapham, 2020; Makoelle, 2020; Nam, 2019; Passeka & Somerton, 2022; Rouse et al., 2014).

Equally, the requirement for redistributive equity in the education system is also related to the language of instruction. Therefore, decisions regarding the languages used in education systems are complicated and controversial in increasingly multicultural and multilingual nations. When implemented effectively, ‘inclusive and equity-based language education policies’ can improve social cohesion, foster trust between governments

and minority populations, and enhance children's lives (UNICEF, 2016b, p.v). However, the significant role of the language(s) in forming a cohesive national identity should be understood within the context of a complex reality of the various important roles of the mother tongue, the national language and a global lingua franca (Durrani et al., 2017). Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states were left with the legacy of a multi-ethnic population, a segregated monolingual educational system, and low status and proficiency in the state language (Stoianova & Angermann, 2018). Since obtaining their independence, by developing the state language, the countries are still in the process of changing the balance between the state languages and the Russian language, which was dominant during the Soviet time. Simultaneously, English language has also grown to symbolise modernisation and internationalisation as these countries seek to forge closer linkages to the global economy (Ahn & Smagulova, 2022; Bezborodova & Radjabzade, 2022; Goodman & Kambatyrova, 2022). Therefore, considering the redistribution, recognition and reconciliation aspects of the 4R framework with the language of instruction policies, each country has to strike a balance between several objectives, including elevating the status of the state language in relation to the Russian language, ensuring that everyone receives effective mother tongue and state language education, and fostering proficiency in both Russian as a second/foreign language and international languages like English; in this regard, bilingual/multilingual education is increasingly being acknowledged as a powerful tool throughout Central Asia (Bahry et al., 2017). However, due to various internal and external factors informing and influencing change in Central Asia, productive areas for research are 'emerging sources of agency and language change in contexts of conflicting national and post-national, post-imperial and globalising ideologies' (Ahn & Smagulova, 2022, p. 21) and the role of education policies on the language of instruction and their implementation plays in strengthening or undermining social cohesion and prosperity of Central Asian societies.

Finally, being part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are crucial for progress across all SDGs (United Nations, 2015), and education plays a crucial role in promoting it by shaping identities and transforming gender norms, roles and duties for women and men (Durrani & Halai, 2018; UNICEF, 2016a). One of the main considerations of redistributive gender equity within the education field is the need for equity and

non-discrimination in education access for women and men. Promoting inclusive education, the reviewed countries have gender parity in school enrolment and completion, except for Tajikistan, where girls are disadvantaged (UNICEF, 2022). Therefore, while in Tajikistan, girls in higher education institutions make up 36.4% (Garibova, 2022), in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, girls in higher education comprise 45.7% (Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022a) and 54% (Information & Analytical Center, 2022), respectively. At the same time, like much of the world, the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields across the region is still recognised as an important question to address (Almukhambetova in this volume; Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2020; Kataeva, 2022; UNESCO, 2021a). Moreover, a particular challenge for education systems in the region is associated with the female teachers' overrepresentation in public schools (Agency on Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2022; Information & Analytical Center, 2022; Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022b) and, similar to much of the world, female under-representation in leadership positions of educational institutions (Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 2019; Kataeva & DeYoung, 2017; Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017; UNESCO, 2020b).

As for the recognition of gender equity, which is related to respect for and affirmation of inclusive gender identities in education content, the existing literature suggests that this question receives limited consideration in the region's curricular documents (UNESCO MGIEP, 2017). Recent studies point out that male characters, both in texts and in images, still dominate in school textbooks in Kazakhstan (Durrani et al., 2022; Bekzhanova in this volume; Fedoseev, 2022), portraying males in public and professional spheres, while women are primarily represented at home (Durrani et al., 2022; Palandjian et al., 2018). In this regard, commenting on research on post-social education transformations, Palandjian et al. (2018) argued that the gendered dimension of political, economic and social transformations in former Soviet Union countries has largely been omitted, and analysing these shifts in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia and Armenia, they suggest that school textbooks reinforced and at the same time challenged gendered norms, facilitating the formation of identities distinct from gendered mainstream rhetoric. In this way, complicating our understanding of post-socialist transformations, the authors argue that although socialist legacies mix with (western) neoliberal imaginaries,

perpetuating patriarchal gender norms of modernity, there are counternarratives that rely on premodern imaginaries, including indigenous traditions and nature-centred spiritualities, and provide more nuanced symbolic portrayals of women and men. At the same time, as further compounded by the uniqueness of the developments in Central Asian states, which include religious revival after the fall of the Soviet Union (Thibault, 2021), the official rhetoric of gender equality in the countries could be counterproductive in the context of the revival of conservative Islamic teachings (Zhussipbek et al., 2020). Overall, in line with global trends, post-Soviet gender research in Central Asia is currently increasing in the fields of sociology, demography and political economy (Kataeva et al., 2023). It is hoped that further research on gender equality in and through education in the unique context of a mixture of traditional, Soviet and Western values concerning gender role expectations (Almukhambetova & Kuzhabekova, 2021) will contribute to the equitable development of societies in the region.

Aiming to contribute to the abovementioned educational debates in Central Asia, this book brings together various perspectives on the reviewed and other challenges for education in the context of what Silova et al. (2021) call ‘multiple post-socialist education trajectories’, which is contrasted with the dominant understanding of post-socialist education transformations through the colonial power structure where the history is written in the only way with dichotomous frameworks such as East or West, socialism or capitalism and authoritarianism or democracy. To do so, all chapters in the book draw on empirical studies carried out by early career researchers within the framework of the collaborative initiative discussed below.

COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVE

Aiming to improve the quality of political economy analysis of education and to redress the North/South imbalances in the current knowledge production practices within this field, researchers from four universities, Ulster University (Northern Ireland), the University of Sussex (England), Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan) and the University of Cape Town (South Africa), initiated a collaborative project ‘Political Economy of Education Research Network’ (PEER Network). The PEER

Network (www.peernetworkgcrf.org) is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK), under the Global Challenges Research Fund and managed by UK Research and Innovation.

As well as providing free access to online tools and resources to inform and facilitate effective political economy analysis of education in countries affected by conflict or crisis, the PEER Network aims at developing regional hubs of expertise in Central Asia and Africa. To support the development of early career researchers in these regions, the PEER Network commissioned research studies as part of the Research and Practice Fellowships in the Political Economy of Education. Deriving from these small-scale empirical studies, undertaken by the Central Asia hub's fellows during 2022 and 2023, the chapters in this book are intended as an original contribution to the educational debates. Increasing local voices in Central Asian educational research, the chapters in this book promote a critical economy analysis as a helpful analytical tool to examine the challenges to education in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are not featured in the book since, at the time of recruitment, we did not receive any applications from Turkmenistan, and one selected participant from Kyrgyzstan dropped out along the way. Despite some regional limitations, the book could be a useful source of knowledge for policymakers, practitioners and scholars in Central Asia and beyond. The rest of this chapter will introduce each contribution of the book.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The reflections on the political economy of education in Central Asia in this volume begin with Diana Toimbek. Based on archival research, in Chapter 2, the author explores the main political and socio-economic initiatives implemented by the revolutionary Soviet administration in the 1920s. Toimbek reveals that Soviet authorities viewed education not only as a way to fight illiteracy but also as a way to enlighten the masses and shape Soviet citizenry within the colonised territories of Central Asia. Focusing on another legacy of the Soviet Union, in Chapter 3, Aigerim Mussabalinova explores the provision of education to children with special educational needs in the region where the Soviet Union had the primary testing site for nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Drawing on thirty interviews with teachers, medical professionals, social workers and civil activists, the author suggests that the lack of resources, commitment and

the Soviet educational legacy has hindered the development of inclusive education in the region since independence.

Focusing on the challenge of education systems to address the religious revival that took place after the fall of the Soviet Union, in Chapter 4, Zilola Khalilova explores the evolution of education policies concerning the teaching of religion over the last 30 years in Uzbekistan. Based on archival research and textbook analysis, the author reveals that the teaching of religion is approached from an academic perspective, with an emphasis on promoting moderate teachings of Islam and instilling ideological immunity against religious fundamentalism. Continuing the discussion of the relationship between religion and education, in Chapter 5, Rahimjon Abdugafurov explores the views of four prominent religious figures in Uzbekistan about women's participation in higher education and the choice of profession. The author argues that their male-centred approach to women's participation in higher education contributes to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and might have a negative impact on female enrolment in atypical fields and confine women to professions associated with care, such as teachers and nurses.

Ainur Almukhambetova further deliberates on the theme of gender equality in Chapter 6. Drawing on the analysis of twenty-two interviews with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) educators from five teacher-training universities in Kazakhstan, the author presents insights into gender awareness and understanding of gender-responsive pedagogies and suggests mitigating strategies to eliminate gendered practices in STEM teaching. In Chapter 7, Zhazira Bekzhanova has continued reflecting on gender equality in and through education in Kazakhstan. Exploring the manifestation of gender in the school curriculum, the author analyses school textbooks for the History of Kazakhstan, a compulsory subject across grades 7 to 11. Observing variations between grades, the author argues that the reviewed textbooks discriminate against women and ethnic minorities. Finally, contributing to the discussion of gender equality, in Chapter 8, based on a mixed-methods study, which included a survey and interviews with higher education students in the capital of Kazakhstan, Alexandra Nam explores the relationship between the language of instruction and students' conceptualisation of national identity and their attitudes towards gender roles. Finding a strong association between the language of instruction and students' attitudes expressed towards national identity and gender roles, Nam argues that students from Kazakh-medium groups reported higher

knowledge of the Kazakh language, a stronger sense of national identity, and more traditional attitudes towards gender roles than students from the Russian language groups.

Continuing the reflections on the language used in education, in Chapter 9, Fariza Tolesh provides some insights into the experiences of Uzbek Kazakhstanis. Drawing on twenty interviews, the author explored the educational and employment opportunities for ethnic minorities in the light of the prominence given to Kazakh language since independence. Tolesh found that Uzbeks do not face significant challenges in terms of employment and access to education but that the use of Uzbek language tends to decline within communities. The challenge for education in Central Asia regarding the language of instruction is further highlighted in Chapter 10 by Vasila Bozichaeva, who examines the perspectives of students and teachers regarding equity-minded assessment in three higher education institutions in Tajikistan and finds that students with special educational needs and those whose mother tongue is a minority language lack proper services due to inadequate assessment tools and educators' recognition of the needs of linguistic minorities and students with disabilities.

The last two chapters shift our attention to actors operating beyond the national education systems. In Chapter 11, Sherzod Khaydarov attempts to disentangle the factors associated with the increase of Russian international branch campuses in Uzbekistan based on policy document analysis and interviews with university administrators and faculty. Khaydarov's findings reveal that Uzbekistan's main objectives were to fulfil the shortage of university places and train professionals, whereas Russia's were to boost its soft power and train professionals for its own labour market. Finally, in Chapter 12, Natalya Hanley analyses the sustainability of education programmes provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Kazakhstan. Drawing on a mixed-method study, the author discusses the historical development of NGOs in the country and the funding challenges of these organisations. Hanley's findings showed how different funding sources underpin and shape the NGOs' vision for providing education programmes.

Overall, the chapters in this book attempt to highlight the ways education in Central Asia affects and is affected by the relationship between political, economic and social-cultural contexts at the local, national and global levels. While some authors used the Political Economy Analysis

of Education to highlight the existing challenges, imbalances and asymmetries, others also suggest potential ways to partially address systemic issues in and through education to promote equal development of the societies. Although the contributions do not provide a full list of political and economic forces shaping education in Central Asia, the volume may offer insights into salient challenges and opportunities for improving the education systems and, in this way, contribute to the educational debates in Central Asian countries.

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