

8.6 Five Conversations and Three Notes on the “Soviet,” or Finding a Place for Personal History in the Study of Teacher Education Policy in Kazakhstan

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Scoping the Scoping Study: An Introduction

The purpose of this part of the chapter is to introduce the study and the original paper that this chapter uses as a basis for reflection and analysis. This section discusses the multiple contexts of the study which influenced the authors’ decision to approach the analysis and interpretation of teachers’ professional beliefs somewhat unconventionally—i.e., by bringing the elements of autoethnography and memory research into the study of policy. These multiple contexts include the research and education policy contexts, the state of existing scholarship, and the intellectual biographies of the authors. Each of these elements represents a building block which enabled and at the same time set limits to the range of analytical and interpretative possibilities available to the authors.

The original paper “The “Soviet” in the memories and teachers’ professional beliefs in Kazakhstan” (Fimyar and Kurakbayev, [under review](#)) analyzed in this chapter is part of a 1-year scoping study, *Internationalisation and School Reform in Kazakhstan* (Bridges 2014). The data collection for the study was jointly conducted by an international and multilingual (English, Kazakh and Russian) team of researchers from August to September 2012 in Kazakhstani capital Astana. The primary objective of the study was to document the most recent educational initiatives in the country and to identify research areas in need of further investigation. The study was conducted in parallel with three other educational support initiatives jointly delivered by the Faculty of Education of the University of

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Cambridge (FoE) and Cambridge International Examinations (CIE) in Kazakhstan. These initiatives are:

1. Support for innovation in curriculum and assessment at Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS)
2. A research and capacity building program at Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NUGSE)
3. A “training of trainers” program at the NIS center of excellence (CoE)

One of the key objectives of the study was to map these multiple initiatives and understand their impact on the wider education system in Kazakhstan. The study was also interested in understanding a model of educational reform whereby national governments directly, or through the centers of national expertise, recruit international research and consultancy networks to address national policy problems. The study involved two field trips to the Kazakhstani capital Astana in August and September 2012. In the course of the study, six team members conducted 25 interviews with policy makers in the government as well as newly established NIS and NU.

Prior to interrogating the theoretical, methodological, and interpretative approaches used in the original paper, we briefly outline the educational policy context, without which it will be difficult to understand the significance and persistence of the “Soviet” in contemporary policy debate in Kazakhstan. The question about the role of interpretation in the study will be addressed directly in part three entitled *Three Notes on Methodology*, which explains how the context, theoretical perspectives, and intellectual biographies of the authors, the development of disciplines, and opportunities of working at the intersection of different disciplines together created an interpretative framework for the study.

Understanding Education Policy Context: Rapid Change Amidst Persisting Inequalities

The size of Western Europe, Kazakhstan as a country remains a large “terra incognita” in most of the academic literature. Apart from a handful of illuminating studies on the history and politics of Central Asia (e.g., Hiro 1995, 2009), the attempts to offer a sociological analysis of the complex and diverse region have been unsystematic. In education research the surge of interest in the question of how “traveling policies” are manifested in local settings (Seddon 2005; Silova 2005) was followed by a relatively small number of studies attending to the questions of education reform (Heyneman and DeYoung 2004; Silova and Steiner-Khamsi 2008), the impact of economic crisis on the teaching profession (see, e.g., DeYoung 2006, 2008; Niyozov and Shamatov 2010; Niyozov 2011; Silova 2009, 2011), and the analysis of teachers’ professional beliefs (e.g., Niyozov 2011, pp. 287–313; Burkhalter and Shegebayev 2010, 2012). A renewed interest in educational problems in the region is reflected in a number of reports by international organizations predicting and documenting acute educational

and social crises in Central Asian countries (e.g., International Crisis Group 2011; WHO/UNICEF 2013).

The factors contributing to the virtual absence of the region in social science literature are many. Some of the most prominent ones include the policies shaping the focus of the government-sponsored *Bolashak (Future)* study abroad program. The emphasis on technical, economic, and applied disciplines as priority areas for the country’s future development and the preference (up until recently) towards undergraduate and master’s degree courses set limits to the research and publication input of program alumni. Due to the language barriers and other structural divides, local scholars rarely publish in English-language journals. To reverse this tendency and firmly establish Kazakhstan’s presence in research literature are some of the key tasks delegated to the newly established Nazarbayev University (NU, established in 2010 in Astana) and the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP, established in 1992 in Almaty).

This lack of attention to Kazakhstan in academic literature, and consequent lack of reliable data on recent social and political developments in Kazakhstan, makes it difficult to discuss the country’s context without falling into the trap of the following dominant political discourses and ideology praising the country’s accelerated strides towards world-class standards. By recognizing the powers of dominant political rationalities in producing a particular view of social progress in the country, we, as the authors of the paper, made the first interpretative move towards problematizing the existing policy narratives in Kazakhstan. By distancing ourselves from existing political and policy narratives, we have created a space for early interpretations to enter the analysis. These early problematizations have allowed us to look critically and with caution on dominant political rationalities shaping education policy debate in Kazakhstan.

Faced with the problem of the lack of research data on Kazakhstan, we had to rely extensively on the reports, policy documents, and media coverage by national and international organizations. The understanding we gained from reading these reports differed from the official narratives in one important detail. While recognizing the progress made in educational and social spheres in the last two decades, an acknowledgment of the problem of poverty and other structural inequalities is what is sometimes missing in the official policy reports. Drawing on the reports of international organizations, we came to the conclusion that the most recent developments in education and society in Kazakhstan are best described as rapid changes amidst persisting inequalities. The economic collapse of the early 1990s set in motion processes which were beneficial for some, but which left the majority, especially in the rural areas, economically disaffected and marginalized (International Crisis Group 2011; WHO/UNICEF 2013). Recent accounts presented in the national media reported a 30-fold difference between the income of the rich and the poor in the country (Tengri News 2012).

In education we found only two policy documents that critically approach the question of rural/urban inequalities. These are the “State Program of Educational Development 2011–2020” (MOES 2010) and the most recent presentation by the new Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Aslan

Sarinzhipov (MOES 2013). In particular, the “State Program of Educational Development 2011–2020” admits that “37.4 % [of schools] don’t have access to drinking water,” “201 schools [out of 7576] are in poor condition,” “25.1 % of schools need an overhaul,” and that there are “70 three-shift schools and one four-shift school” (MOES 2010, p. 9). Further, it is stated that:

Every fifth school lacks either a dining room or canteen. Depreciation of equipment and inventory in school canteens is 80 %. 26.4 % of schools do not have gyms. (ibid.)

What is particularly disturbing is that the above disparities in educational provision and school infrastructure are disproportionately evident in rural areas, which are 4.5 times more likely to have schools without gyms, 4.5 times more likely to have schools working in three shifts, and 13.2 times more likely to have schools in shabby buildings as compared to the number of schools in the same conditions in urban areas (MOES 2013).

Against the background of schools lacking drinking water and basic hygiene facilities, a multimillion dollar investment in Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS), which serve directly less than 1 % of 1-year student cohort in the country, is criticized by some as a move that may further deepen inequalities (Bartlett 2012). NIS responded to these criticisms by launching a number of “translation” initiatives, including curriculum transfer and a teacher professional development program in the mainstream sector.

We conclude this contextualization, which follows our initial thoughts in making sense of a diverse and highly unequal landscape of Kazakhstani education, by proposing a metaphor of two Kazakhstans, which we encountered in the course of our research. One Kazakhstan, for which Astana’s glamorous architecture provides a powerful visual metaphor, is urban, modern, mobile, and rapidly changing. However, there is also another Kazakhstan—rural, remote, traditional, and crying out for investment in basic hygiene facilities and infrastructure. Significantly, the level of educational achievements and educational opportunities open to children in these two Kazakhstans differs sharply across these divides. Bridging these divides will remain a key national policy priority for the years to come.

Introducing the Original Paper or Why Focus on the “Soviet”: Now?

In this part of the chapter, we will closely follow some of the key arguments advanced in the original paper. The discussion is organized around *five conversations*, each focusing on a particular meaning of the “Soviet”: (1) starting the debate about the “Soviet,” (2) “Soviet” in the recollection of the last generation of Soviet children, (3) “Soviet” in the view of knowledge, (4) “Soviet” in the punitive function of assessment, and (5) “Soviet” in teaching methodology. By organizing the discussion around these five conversations, we aimed to achieve two tasks. First, we wanted to reflect the frequency of references to the “Soviet” in research

interviews in relation to each of the themes: losses and achievements, our recollections of school architecture, knowledge, assessment, and teaching methodology. Second, we wanted to keep enough space between those conversations to allow interpretations and recollections of the readers to come into place. Thus these conversations worked not only to communicate data but also to stimulate new conversations about the “Soviet” in our and our participants’ present.

Due to the country’s recent history, the references to the “Soviet” in research interviews were not entirely unexpected, but the number of those references was highly significant. The exploratory nature of the scoping study has allowed us to analyze the meaning behind those references in greater detail. At the outset of the study we were particularly interested in two questions: *What memories and practices of Soviet education are still dominant in the field of education in Kazakhstan? How do these beliefs continue to shape educational debate in the country?*

Yet, throughout the study for ourselves, for our critics, and reviewers, we had to rationalize again and again: *Why focus on the “Soviet” amidst fast-paced educational initiatives and why now?* As we argued in the paper, a proper engagement with the history of educational thought in the country is what is missing in the current education debate.¹ At a time when the official policy discourses are primarily concerned with raising the economic competitiveness of the country, many practitioners are still coming to terms with the breakup of the Soviet Union and hold true to the practices of teacher-centered education, which the current reform agenda frames as “outdated” and “resistant to change.” Understanding the centrality of practitioner beliefs in the process of educational change, the paper was written with the intention of bringing the concerns of the practitioners to the attention of policy makers and those involved in the reform agenda.

The paper was also written with the hope that it can challenge an established approach in international and comparative education and move the debate forward. This is because at a time when mainstream research is preoccupied with comparisons between the global “east” and “west,” and “north” and “south,” very few attempts are being made to learn from the countries’ histories or, to put it differently, to examine how the “east as it is now” is different from the “east as it was 20 years ago” and, crucially, to learn from this comparison. Although calls to learn from the countries’ own histories rather than uncritically adopting best international practices are becoming more pronounced in the field (Steiner-Khamsi 2013), in our paper we have actually attempted to deliver such analysis.

¹There are a number of studies by local scholars on the history of pedagogy and education in Kazakhstan. However, the majority of those studies tend to focus on the issues of ethno-pedagogy and national identity, rather than approaching the question of Soviet education, its legacies, and ways of socialization from a sociological perspective.

Five Conversations About the “Soviet”

Conversation One: Starting the Debate About the “Soviet”

‘We had Sputnik, . . . but we lost our [Kazakh] language.’
(Interviewee A, early-career professional, NIS)²

Our research participants expressed rather ambivalent attitudes towards the Soviet past. They would start their recollections with a statement acknowledging the achievements of Soviet education. Among these, just to name a few, were universal literacy, free access to all levels of education, provision of preschool and extracurricular education, and the rate of participation in higher education. This statement would be followed by a more revealing account about the inadequacies and failings of the Soviet system. This ambivalence towards the past was very well captured in the account of one interviewee who acknowledged that, on the one hand, “we had Sputnik, Soviet education was successful” yet, on the other hand, “we lost our [Kazakh] language” (Interviewee A, early-career professional, NIS). Indeed, during the Soviet times titular languages of the nations other than Russia suffered great losses and neglect (Shturman 1988, pp. 211–12; Fierman 1998).

The interviewees reported that the use of languages of instruction in secondary schools was also severely imbalanced:

In especially difficult situation are now schools with the Kazakh as the medium of instruction, because they were severely affected during the Soviet time. There was a very small number of Kazakh-language schools left in the Soviet time. As an example, in Almaty [with approx. 250 000 inhabitants of ethnic Kazakh origin] there was only one school with the Kazakh language of instruction. All others switched to Russian, because if you didn’t know Russian then you will not have your career at that time. (Interviewee B, mid-career professional, International organisation)

The lasting legacies of the neglect of the Kazakh language in Soviet times continue to affect the quality of teaching and the provision of textbooks in the Kazakh-medium schools. Some interviewees were self-critical enough to admit that they themselves, and their lack of knowledge of Kazakh, are the lasting legacies of Soviet education:

Unfortunately, I am not reading or writing in Kazakh . . . so you can see me as the ‘outcome’ of the Soviet education system. (Interviewee C, mid-career professional, International organisation A representative)

²All interviewees are assigned letters A–K according to the order they appear in the article. These letters do not correspond to their initials and are used here to indicate the number of respondents quoted in the paper. The respondents’ career stage (early, mid, late) is also indicated because the involvement of early-career professionals is a significant feature of the new initiatives. The gender of the respondents is not indicated as it could compromise the anonymity of the interviewees. However, it is important to mention that our sample was overwhelmingly female. Out of the 11 respondents cited in the paper, 8 are female and only 3 are male.

And this interviewee is not alone: Fierman (1998, p. 174) uses the 1989 census to illustrate how severely imbalanced the use of languages in Kazakhstan was at the time. According to census data, over 80 % of Kazakhstan’s population reported either native or close to native fluency in Russian. Yet, this did not mean they were bilingual, because while over 60 % of ethnic Kazakhs claimed fluency in Russian, only less than 1 % of Russians claimed fluency in Kazakh. Other numbers from the census were even more disturbing, with only 40 % of ethnic Kazakhs claiming fluency in their native language.

In the second conversation on the “Soviet” we have combined our authorial voice and our children’s voice to explore our memories of Soviet schooling. We saw this exercise as highly beneficial for understanding the prevalence of the “Soviet” in the accounts of our interviewees.

Conversation Two: “Soviet” in the Recollections of the Last Generation of Soviet Children

We could closely relate to the description of Soviet schooling provided by one research interviewee:

I was born in 1981 and our generation was the last to study under the Soviet education system. In the Soviet system, we had the ‘upbringing’ [Rus. *Vospitaniye*] component and I even was an *Oktyabrienok* [a first level of socialisation into communist ideology followed by Pioneer, Komsomol and Communist Party membership]. I was also a Pioneer but did not achieve the Komsomol level [Soviet Union collapsed]. (Interviewee D, early-career professional, NIS)

Yet the formal structures of Soviet schooling and membership of *Oktyabrist* and Pioneer organizations are not the only things that came to mind when we thought about Soviet education. The presence of the Soviet ideology everywhere in school was another strong memory. Everyone who went through Soviet schooling can recall how powerful and omnipresent Soviet ideology was in school. It manifested itself on paper and in stone. Everything from the school curriculum to the school architecture and classroom organization was subordinated to Soviet ideology. We could all remember how methodologically and purposefully we were socialized into the values of the Soviet regime. Every school subject from literature to mathematics and science was imbued with the communist ethos and an unshakable belief in the supremacy of the communist world view and societal organization over the capitalist ones. It was not only through the subject knowledge that we were continuously molded in the image of and in line with the communist ideals; indeed, the arrangement of the classroom, the iconography on the walls, and the whole architecture of the Soviet school served the same purpose. Outside the classroom, we were continuously reminded of the values, principles, and founders of the regime through countless slogans, statuettes, portraits, and posters in every Soviet school. Grant (1964) refers to some of the famous slogans of the time (which we can also remember) including “Forward to the building of communism,” “We must study and work as Lenin taught,” “Glory to the Soviet people – the people of heroes” (Grant 1964, p. 24).

Another vivid memory of Soviet schooling is the classroom set-up with its strict rows of desks which were hard to move and which were often nailed to the floor. The classroom set-up was a material embodiment of the Soviet ideology, and, apart from its most obvious function, worked to promote and reinforce the values of structure, order and control. A similar role of reinforcing uniformity, standardization and control was played by the school uniform, which was hugely disliked by the students for its lack of functionality, unattractive design and gloomy color palette among which the most memorable were various shades of gray, brown and dark blue.

Perhaps these recollections will not strike the reader as anything intrinsically “Soviet,” rather they are features of any traditional system of education which relies on teacher-centered pedagogy, strict subordination, order and control. We will not argue against this interpretation, but we insist on the use of the “Soviet,” because for us it represents the time that we lived in, the country we all inhabited: this is our history, this is our lived experience, this is our “Soviet” childhood.

Conversation Three: “Soviet” in the View of Knowledge and the Preoccupation with the Systemic Approach

In further exploring the references to the “Soviet,” we came close to the question of knowledge and the preoccupation with the system approach in Soviet education. Partly drawing on our own memories of Soviet schooling, partly on our teaching experiences in newly independent Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and partly on the studies of Soviet education, what can be said with a great degree of certainty is that Soviet education prided itself on its use of theoretical knowledge in all areas, from curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy to the organization of extracurricular activities and school timetables. Everything was considered to be a part of a greater system, an endpoint of which was the holistic, all-round development of Soviet citizens. All school lessons and planning objectives were prefixed with the “systemic approach,” “system of procedures aimed at,” and similar phrases postulating the primacy of systemic, i.e., the scientific foundations of education.

In the organization of school subjects and selection of subject knowledge, preference was given to material which was systematic and organized in blocks susceptible to explanation through rules or exceptions to these rules. Knowledge itself was viewed as solid and fixed in time. Teaching preference was given to classical texts, formulae, and algorithms. The overall purpose of education was viewed as an orderly, systematic, well-organized process of acquiring and consolidating knowledge through formal instruction in fairly large classrooms (Muckle 1988, p. 188).

This is how one of our research interviewees described the prevalence of the knowledge-based approach in teaching at the outset of Kazakhstan’s independence:

Twenty years ago we were deeply convinced that the priority should be given to the content of each subject, and we believed that if we provided students with systematic, fundamental knowledge in every subject, then our educational objectives would be achieved. (Interviewee E, late career professional, NIS)

In the literature on education reform in CIS countries and the wider region, several attempts have been made to grasp conceptually the shift from the traditional, Soviet, teacher-centered view of education to the more innovative, liberal/Western, and student-centered approaches. Fimyar (2010), for example, put forward the term “changing rationalities” of postcommunist education reform. Drawing on a different country context, Cheng (2008, pp. 14–15) proposed the term “paradigm shift toward the third wave,” by which he means the movement towards world-class standards in education.

Our preferred term is “paradigm”³ because it encompasses the changes not only at the level of conceptualization but also at the level of practice, teaching methodology, curriculum, and assessment. Useful in this respect is Borytko’s (2005, pp. 38–39) conceptualization of educational change as the move from a *sciento-technocratic* to a *humanistic*⁴ paradigm. Drawing on Kolesnikova’s (1991) earlier work, Borytko (2005) identified the following differences between the two paradigms (Table 1).

Table 1 Changing Educational Paradigms: from a sciento-technocratic to a humanistic model

Paradigm name	Sciento-technocratic	Humanistic
Motto	“Knowledge is power”	“Learning is power”
Core value	Cognitive experience	Mode of knowledge acquisition
View of knowledge	Fixed, fundamental, theoretical	Fluid, multiple, constructed
Teaching and pedagogy	Rote learning, memorization, teacher centered	Activity-based experience, student-centered
Assessment	Identifies “gaps” in knowledge, lack of knowledge equals to inadequacy, incompetence, weakness	Assessment for learning, focus on what students already know, not the “gaps” in their knowledge
Outcomes	Well-informed students with encyclopedic knowledge	Students able to argue, interpret, synthesize

Adapted from Borytko (2005, p. 38)

³The calls to change educational paradigms are heard all around the world. This is not something specific to the CIS countries. For an informative and thought-provoking example, see Ken Robinson’s TED videos on “Changing Educational Paradigms” (2010a) and “Bring on the Learning Revolution” (2010b).

⁴In the original paper, Borytko (2005) uses the term “humanitarian,” but we think that “humanistic” is a more appropriate term.

Conversation Four: “Soviet” in the Punitive Function of Assessment

In our review of literature on Soviet schooling, we found that the role of assessment in Soviet education received very little attention. This is rather surprising, because in any education system assessment, apart from measuring academic progress, performs a very important social function. It works to discipline an individual and submit him/her to the standards, behaviors, and ethos of schooling. In an attempt to provide a sociological, Foucault-inspired, reading of the functions of assessment in Soviet schooling, we turned to an inspiring and thought-provoking study *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: The Study of Practices* by Kharkhordin (1999). Through a rich and compelling analysis, Kharkhordin demonstrates how deeply “the rituals of revealing one’s weaknesses in the presence of the relevant community” penetrated the logic and organizational structure of Soviet society.

Assessment as a particular form of “hierarchical surveillance,” to use Kharkhordin’s words, was often conducted in the public gaze, when an individual exposed his or her guilt to the judgment of the collective, be it classroom, university, teacher, or factory meetings. Public criticism was considered an effective tool for ensuring the improvement of individual behavior and, by extension, academic progress. This conviction was in line with the belief that the child could be molded in the image of the heroic “Soviet man” through intense reflection, admittance of one’s guilt, and self-criticism—rituals which, according to Kharkhordin, had their antecedents in the Orthodox Christian practices of doing penance in the public gaze (Kharkhordin 1999).

From the conversations with our parents, we can recall that the organization of parents’ meetings followed a similar logic. The teacher would publicly read out the grades each student had received, starting by praising the best-performing students and criticizing the worst performing. For similar disciplining and revelational purposes, each classroom had a register of students’ achievements on public display.

Our interviewees criticized the assessment practices of Soviet schooling not so much for their repressive nature but for the exclusive focus on recall of knowledge as the primary goal of assessment:

The system of assessment and learning in the USSR limited the competencies of students by getting them just to reproduce knowledge. That is why many knowledgeable pupils were not successful, they could not adjust to the realities of life. (Interviewee F, early-career professional, NIS)

The link between the assessment of high-performing students and their success in life is an interesting one. Another interviewee followed a similar line of argument, stating that Soviet schooling failed to provide students with the tools for using knowledge in their everyday life:

[In Soviet times] throughout many years, we have been noticing that the best high performing students, the so called ‘*otlichniki*’, who finished the school with the gold medal, were not becoming ‘*otlichniki*’ in their lives after finishing the school. . . . Due to some circumstances, they were getting lost in life, and they were failing their lives. . . . Why? Because, at school, they were not taught how to make use of the knowledge they learn, how to be successful in life – that is why. (Interviewee G, early-career professional, NIS)

However, as well as criticizing the knowledge-based assessment practices in Soviet schools, these interviewees equally pointed towards another underlying critique, which is a lack of entrepreneurial spirit in those who were successful in Soviet schooling. This is because soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, for many “success in life” was redefined primarily in material terms and income had become the single measure of “success.”

Conversation Five: “Soviet” in Teaching Methodology

The teacher tries to fill students with all this knowledge, practically, by chewing it for them. (Interviewee H, early-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training)

Soviet education was notorious for producing conceptual binaries which many of its prominent thinkers and theorists were aiming to overcome. Two such binaries which continue to structure educational debate in Kazakhstan and other CIS countries are *theory and practice* and *education and upbringing* (Rus. *vospitanie*). In the interview process, there were frequent references made to the disjuncture between theory and practice. On the one hand, the Soviet curriculum was often criticized for being overloaded with factual knowledge. On the other hand, this theoretical density was something that many of the respondents took pride in as one of the greatest achievements of Soviet education. One of the respondents explained how successfully theory and practice were integrated in the Soviet schools and universities:

The material and technical base of schools at the Soviet times were very well supported. Our curriculum always had practical assignments side by side with learning the theory. The same was true about the funding and support for universities. For example, I studied mineral and raw materials, the stage between the mining and smelting metallurgy. Our department had all the necessary devices, mechanisms and units, which would be found at any factory. We had the same machineries, maybe of a smaller size. We used the same chemical reagents and obtained the same process but in its smaller size. Approximately until the year of 1996 we had this base. But then everything collapsed, everything was lost. Buildings were sold and bought, and the base which supported the theory was lost. (Interviewee I, mid-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training)

However, another respondent views this legacy of the theoretical overload of the curriculum as counterproductive:

In our system of education we learn a lot of theory, and then what happens is that a teacher tries to fill students with all this knowledge, practically by chewing it for them. And then students go to university and they cannot apply any of that knowledge there. They do not know how to work independently; they do not know how to find useful information in textbooks and other sources. After this they graduate and go into profession. And there they do not know how to deal with any arising question or task. (Interviewee H, early-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training)

The discussion of teaching methods and the scope for innovation in Kazakhstani schools brought attention to another deep-seated tension, which is a tension between the statuses of senior and newly qualified teachers. This is how one of the research interviewees described this tension:

Experienced teachers often do not even allow young teachers to do something. They say, they are more experienced, and young teachers have to do exactly what they are told to do. (Interviewee J, early-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training)

Another interviewee anticipated resistance to the new initiatives on the part of senior colleagues and articulated the need to shift the status quo for the successful unfolding of the reform:

The young teacher comes to the mentor and says that he/she has got this and that idea, and the mentor says: ‘What is that? This is absurd! It will not work!’ as he/she knows better because of his/her experience. Our task will be to change this mentality. And many teachers will not want to do it. (Interviewee K, early-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training)

Therefore, in the Kazakhstani context, careful consideration should be given to the tensions and relationship between senior and newly qualified teachers. Without an intergenerational dialogue, mutual respect, and collaboration, sustaining the momentum of reform will be problematic if not impossible.

Five Conversations Revisited: A Call for a New Debate

We concluded our paper by appealing to key actors in the educational policy field with the hope of starting a new debate. In formulating our initial propositions for this new debate, we were inspired by conversations with our colleagues, particularly David Bridges. We gained important insights into seeing the value and centrality of individual experiences in understanding complex societal transformations from watching Robin Hessman’s “My Perestroika” documentary (2011). The tone and style of our appeal was shaped by the key messages from Ken Robinson’s TED videos on “Changing Educational Paradigms” (2010a) and “Bring on the Learning Revolution!” (2010b). These are some of the important conversations and reference points which shaped our approaches to interpretation, writing, and analysis.

We suggested that the key message policy makers could take from our discussion is the need for an informed and engaging discussion with practitioners and society at large about why reforms are necessary and what new set of values and practices they entail. For the reform to gather its full momentum, reform objectives need to be communicated to the practitioners in the same dialogic ways as we would like practitioners to communicate and engage with students. Policy makers should be able to unite practitioners around the idea that the new policies are implemented not because they are “best international practices” from somewhere else but because they can enhance learning here and now in each individual classroom in Kazakhstan.

In appealing to international consultants, we stressed the importance of understanding the country’s history, including the histories which shaped professional practices and meanings operating in the field. This task requires the ability to find the points of divergence between the old and new practices and the skill to start an engaging intercultural dialogue exploring these differences. Our second proposition for international consultants was to reconnect with their own experiences of the “Soviet,” by which we meant traditional ways of teaching which surely all of us

(perhaps to varying degrees) experienced in our lives and bring these experiences into their training and conversations.

Practitioners—particularly those who had experience of Soviet schooling—could find beneficial the idea that, for new experiences and understanding to emerge, it is important first to embrace the previous, i.e., the Soviet, traditional, and conservative experience. This reflection would allow space for observation and analysis of how far the new practices depart from the traditional ones. Our key proposition to the practitioners was that professional judgments about the appropriateness of particular methods should always be guided by the question: *Would I enjoy this as a student?*

For those researching the field of international and comparative education, our intention was to show the value of autoethnography for the study of policy. We did not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of the foundational ideas of Soviet education—these were presented in broad strokes and in relation to the issues addressed by current reform initiatives or to illuminate the point of rupture or continuity between previous and current understandings of education.

For us as the authors of this paper, the pleasure of writing the paper was mixed with the opportunity to continuously reassess, question, and critique our own experiences of Soviet schooling, those of our respondents, and those presented in the literature. Secondly, we gained an appreciation of the vital importance of the past, which for us, and the majority of our interviewees, is still “Soviet,” and of how it can be mobilized to construct new meanings and practices. What came as something of a surprise for us is that for many of our respondents, regardless of their gender and career stage, “Soviet” was not a distant past; it was here and now, despite its historical closure twenty years ago. And most importantly, that whatever there is that is “Soviet” in the field or in us and in our teaching practices and beliefs, it is keen to engage in conversation with the “Western” and “global” and, to quote one of our respondents, to “have a critical look” at it and at ourselves.

Three Notes on Methodology

In this part of the chapter, we will reflect on methodological choices and considerations that guided our analysis. The discussion is organized in three sections each attending to a particular methodological question. The overarching goal of the discussion is to retrace methodological choices and explain the role of interpretation in the study.

Note one: writing between criticism and nostalgia:

‘– Do you have any questions?’

[we asked the participants of an ‘Action Research’ workshop
in one of the Kazakhstani secondary schools]

‘– Yes, why do you think the Soviet Union collapsed? . . .?’

By writing our paper we contributed to the studies which explore the “Soviet,” its legacies, paradoxes, and inherent tensions in educational and social settings in the countries of the former USSR and its satellite states (see Aydarova 2013; Griffiths and Millei 2013; Koshmanova and Ravchyna 2008; Silova 2010; Yurchak 2005). Unlike those studies, however, researching the “Soviet” was not a part of our initial task, and only the exploratory nature of the scoping study has allowed us to pursue this area of research.

In writing the paper, we engaged with the “Soviet” concept twice. First it entered the analysis from the accounts of research interviews. The second time it entered the analysis was from our own memories of Soviet schooling. Instead of dismissing our narratives as unimportant, we approached them as useful resources for illuminating some of the most contentious issues in contemporary education debate. As a result of this double engagement, our authorial voice emerged as a dialogue which we initiated at different levels with actors in the educational debate. We were in the conversation with our interviewees, with each other, and with our own memories of Soviet schooling. The *double-voiced discourse* which permeates the analysis (cf. Bakhtin 1981; White and Peters 2011) is also a result of our complex “situatedness” (Haraway 1991 cited in Yurchak 2005, p. 6) as both insiders and outsiders in relation to our interviewees and the object of analysis.

Note two: who are the authors?

Our intellectual biographies as the authors of the original paper and scholars who made forays in academic publishing (Fimyar 2008a, b, 2010, 2011, 2014a, b; Kurakbayev together with Bridges and Kambatyrova 2014a, b) worked as sources of inspiration and interpretation in the paper. Our theoretical perspectives and research interests in the issues of education reform, academic migration, governmentality studies, and discourse analysis (Olena Fimyar) and the question of how teachers make meaning and respond to educational reforms taking place in Kazakhstan (Kairat Kurakbayev) map out the horizons of our analytical endeavor and place at our disposal interpretative frameworks offered by these disciplines. By engaging with the disciplines and the arguments advanced in our previous publications, we were developing our “expert voice.”

By embracing the possibility of revisiting memories of our Soviet childhoods, we were encouraging our “children’s voice” to fully participate in writing, interpretation, and analysis. Born and raised in the two republics of the former Soviet Union, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and later educated to degree level in UK universities, we as the authors of the paper have acquired what Pavlenko calls “the joys” and we also add *the burdens* “of double vision” (2003, p. 182). Being able to see close and far, we encouraged both our “expert” voice and “children’s” voice to equally participate in the study. In encouraging our “children’s voice” we were inspired by autoethnographic writing by Charon-Cardona (2013), Pavlenko (2003), and also Miller (2008) and Richardson (2000, 2001).

We were convinced that the “children’s” voice has a lot to say to the participants of the education debate about the future directions of policy. This is because student’s voice is still silent in the definition of education policy objectives. In

eliciting our children’s voices, the process of writing played a critical role. Writing in such a mode was at once restricting and liberating. It was restricting because it made us feel very strongly that our understanding depends on discourses available to us at a particular point of time, space, and positioning within the field; but it was also liberating because it freed us from the need to produce “a single text in which everything is said at once for everyone, a text where the “complete” life [and story] is told” (Richardson 2001, p. 36). The challenge of the task was, following Yurchak’s observation, “to avoid a priori negative accounts of socialism without falling in[to] the opposite extreme of romanticising it” (Yurchak 2005, p. 9). Taking this observation on board, writing worked for us as a balancing act between criticism and nostalgia.

Note three: the functions of the “Soviet” in research interviews:

You as a Soviet person, you should remember this . . .
(Interviewee E, late career professional, NIS)

Continuing the discussion of the methodology used in the original paper, it is important to stress that out of all 25 research interviews and two focus group discussions conducted in the course of the study, the research participants who made the most references to the Soviet past were the six teachers from the center of excellence (CoE) training. This is not surprising because these teachers anticipated that in delivering their own training, they would be at the front line between the new approaches and conceptualizations of education and those which are deeply rooted and still dominant in their schools. The way these teachers described themselves also deserves attention. They view themselves as professionals “with the classical Soviet secondary and higher education who [through participating in the CoE training] have a unique opportunity to look with a critical eye at the Western system of education, which is being introduced in our country” (Interviewee I, mid-career professional, Teachers’ focus group, CoE training).

Yet it was not only these six research participants who felt the need to explain and reflect on the points in the reform agenda that might be most difficult to implement or might encounter the most resistance. The majority of research interviewees felt the need to refer back to Soviet practices at least once during the interview and explain these practices to the UK-based researchers who were leading the interviews. The UK-based research team included two Russian-speaking researchers of Ukrainian and Belarusian origins whom research participants would address during such recollections: “You as a Soviet person, you should remember this . . .” And, of course, we did, and by writing this paper, we paid a symbolic tribute to all who went through the Soviet system of education and who are now, with professionalism and passion, attempting to understand this critical period in their lives and in the lives of millions affected by it.

As was mentioned earlier in the chapter, the concluding part of the original paper, in its appeal to various actors in the field of policy, was reminiscent of the style of a manifesto (cf. Fimyar 2011). We would like to conclude the overall discussion in a similar manner, this time appealing for policy analysts to view auto-ethnography as a useful interpretative lens in the analysis of policy.

Instead of Conclusions: Finding a Place for Autoethnography in the Study of Policy

Autoethnography and policy analysis represent distinct analytical traditions, which rarely cross each other's intellectual trajectories. Despite offering a more direct and productive way of *getting to the culture through the self* (Pelias 2003, p. 372), autoethnography as a method of inquiry is not used by policy makers and educational practitioners as a tool for zooming into educational practices and understanding the forces that inform professional beliefs and guide professional behaviors. A widespread belief that sets these two traditions even further apart maintains that "objective" data required by policy makers is incompatible with the personal and evocative writing which characterizes most of the works on autoethnography.

The irony of the situation is that by maintaining the established separations between disciplines, both intellectual camps deny the possibility of producing more nuanced and engaging analyses. The article which this chapter uses as a basis for reflection and analysis has attempted to break with this tradition and use the authors' memories of Soviet schooling as resources for understanding present-day teacher professional beliefs in Kazakhstan. However, to bridge two analytical traditions in a meaningful and engaging manner is not an easy task. For the authors of the original paper, two related tasks turned out to be particularly challenging. These were (1) redefining the role of writing in a research study and (2) addressing the questions of the authority of the author.

Writing as it is practiced in the works on autoethnography (e.g., Alvesson 2003, pp. 174–91; Anderson 2006; Coffey 2002, pp. 313–31; Doloriert and Sambrook 2009, pp. 28–30; Ellis 1997, 2004; Holt 2003; Humphreys 2005, pp. 841–43; Learmonth and Humphreys 2012, pp. 103–5; Miller 2008, pp. 348–50) is an all-encompassing activity. It is never diminished to a "mopping-up" task one does in the aftermath of a research project (Richardson 2000, p. 923). Writing is always "a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis" (ibid.). Through practicing autoethnographic writing, one masters the art of "heightened self-reflexivity" (Anderson 2006, p. 373). Through interrogating a particular aspect of our being, consistently and reflectively we learned "new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (Richardson 2000, 923) and by doing so reached a deeper stratum of "knowing" (Miller 2008, p. 349). It takes courage and time to produce writing whereby "form and content are [truly] inseparable" (Richardson 2000, p. 923).

The second issue we needed to attend to was the question of the authority of the author. Continuously reflecting on the question "Do I have enough authority through *my* story to reveal a particular aspect of the *social*?" (cf. Ellis 2004, p. xviii – authors' emphasis) allowed us to write from a more authentic place, the place of truth from within. In searching for answers to the above question, we found Richardson's and Foucault's observations about the fault lines of reasoning about subjective/objective and personal/theoretical divides particularly illuminating. We tend to agree with Richardson that in social sciences, humanity suppressed under the guise of "objective science" "thankfully keeps erupting in [the] choice of

metaphors, topics and discourses” (Richardson 2001, p. 34). This is precisely because “the old idea of a strict bifurcation between “objective” and “subjective” – between the “head” and the “heart” – does not map onto the actual practices [of] production of knowledge” (ibid.).

Foucault’s observation about how his lived experiences provided a fertile ground for theoretical reflection echoes our own stories of entering the world of research:

Every time I have tried to do a piece of theoretical work it has been on the basis of elements of my own experience: always in connection with processes I saw unfolding around me. It was always because I thought I identified cracks, silent tremors, and dysfunctions in things I saw, institutions I was dealing with, or my relations with others, that I set out to do a piece of work, and each time was partly a fragment of autobiography. (Foucault 2000, p. 458)

The above observation has also strengthened our belief that we, as children of the last Soviet generation, have not only authority but also a moral duty through our memories to bring to the attention of the participants of the current educational debates in Kazakhstan the lines of argument which are neither visible nor audible otherwise.

To conclude, our lived experiences and intellectual trajectories and, most importantly, the desire to start a new debate on post-Soviet education served as most productive sources of interpretation in our paper. Such tasks imposed on us, to use Denzin’s observation, “an obligation to develop a personal style that brings meaning and morality into discourse” (1997, p. 40). It made us search for a style of writing which would balance our need to attend to criticism and nostalgia, to bring “children’s voices” and “expert voices” into the conversations about the values and purpose of education. It made us recall and embrace our childhood memories with the hope that such reflection will contribute towards making the educational experiences of today’s children meaningful and memorable.

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