Minorities, Indigenous Groups and Identity Politics in Education and Policy: The Central Asia

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Abstract

This paper explores one of the emerging major problems with representation and treatment of minorities and indigenous groups in education in transitional economies of the Central Asian states. The issues examined include the dichotomy between the emancipatory logic of egalitarianism (the continuation of the Enlightenment project) and the rhetoric of ‘globalisation’ and its logic of neo-capitalism, and a growing social differentiation, inequitable access to education, gender inequality, discrimination, exploitation and poverty. The paper also examines the directions in educational research dealing with ethnicity and minorities in Central Asia, focusing on language policies, national identities and citizenship education

Introduction

One of the emerging major problems with representation and treatment of minorities and indigenous groups in education in transitional economies of the Central Asian states is the dichotomy between the emancipatory logic of egalitarianism (the continuation of the Enlightenment project) and the rhetoric of ‘globalisation’ and its logic of neo-capitalism. How does one build a democratic, empowering and culturally pluralistic post-Soviet society, which is already characterised by a growing social differentiation, income inequality, and inequitable access to education, greed, exploitation and poverty? This is the question that can be asked of any nation in Central Asia and in the Asia Pacific region as a whole.

The other issue deals with the construct of a nation-state and its implications for cultural pluralism, and ethnic languages. In a political sense, in a heterogeneous nation-state like Great
Britain or the United States, minority groups are encouraged to accept the dominant culture and its language as ‘normative’ (Prazauskas, 1998: 51).

In the case of the Central Asia we need to consider the historical role of cultural fragmentation and its implications for re-inventing national cultures. If we accept the ethno-political relevance of cultural fragmentation to the nation-building process, then we need to ask ourselves whether it is possible under such conditions to develop national cultures, based on normative consensus. For some their identity is defined and shaped by their local folk culture, which is ‘markedly different’ from officially defined national culture.

Ethnicity and Social Identity

The collapse of the USSR in December 1991 has resulted in the formation of five new independent states in the Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Central Asia continues to be a buffer zone between the Russian Federation and China. These new independent states, in view of their growing ethno-nationalism and their strategic location offer ‘challenging geopolitical and geo-economic reality’ (Zhang and Azizian, 1998: 1). The Central Asia sub-region of the former USSR consists of the following five nations—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. Fagerlind and Kanaev (2000) argue for the importance of citizenship education in the Central Asian Countries undergoing a traumatic social and economic transformation. They explain that the process of building a new independent nation requires ‘new approaches to the study of national history, culture, and national identity, which form the core of civic education’ (p. 95).

The heritage that the Central Asian nations have received from the former USSR includes patterns of standard institutions, such as political and educational structures. Furthermore, the Russian language continues to be used ‘extensively in all the countries of the region’. The multi-ethnic character of each country, their common USSR heritage, and the historical importance of Russian as the language of communication in the region made Russian the lingua franca of the region (Fagerlind and Kanaev, 2000, p. 102). Now, in all the Central Asia nations the fostering of their national identities is ‘considered as a priority in the social sciences’ (p. 108). One of the advantages of the common heritage legacy of the Central Asian countries is that it allows for the educational transformation ‘to be comparable across the region’ (p. 105). All five countries have highly comparable education systems (general education almost identical).

The Central Asian nations and the ethnic groups on which they are based is a post-colonial creation. As Edgar (2001) explains:

They are creation of the twentieth century. One hundred years ago, there was no Kyrgyzstan or Turkmenistan…Central Asia was long home to rich and complex mix of peoples, languages and cultures…Our notion that an ethnic group brings together language, territory, and descent in a single package did not apply in Central Asia (p. 1).

Both the linguistic and cultural boundaries applicable to traditional ethnic groups are difficult to apply to some nations in the Central Asia. For instance, the linguistic boundary between Uzbeks
and Tajiks, even though they do speak two different languages is not sufficient to define the two district ethnic groups. Edgar argues that some nations are more defined by their cultural heritage relating to ‘history, genealogy and way of life’. His example refers to some ex-Soviet citizens now in the new Central Asia sub-region:

Sometimes siblings within a single family would claim different ethnic identities. To this day, there are people living in Uzbekistan who declare themselves to be Uzbeks, yet speak Tajik as their first language (p. 3).

Is it the case of blurring boundaries and multiple levels of identity within and between minorities and indigenous groups? It can be argued that the current transitional period in the ex-Soviet Central Asia republics is a Hegelian dialectic in reverse—the rejection of the multifaceted Homo Sovieticus as an ideological synthesis and the re-claiming of the lost traditional heritage of the past. Sarfazoz Niyozov (2001) calls it a ‘dialectical negation’, where beneath the rhetoric of social transformation and modernization we find the seeds of feudalism and traditionalism:

…at the surface things appear to have progressively changed, but in essence these countries have reverted to where they were before Russia’s annexation of Central Asia at the end of the 19th century (p. 2).

Indigenous Groups

‘Indigenous peoples’ (korennye narody) is a relatively new idea in the Russian discourse concerning minorities and indigenous groups. Sokolovski (2002) believes the usage of the term was prompted by the influence of international legislation, especially ILO Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. The term refers to small minorities in various parts of the former USSR, including the Far East and Central Asia. Prior to 1993 the concept korennye narody (indigenous people) appeared only twice in official documents (Sokolovski: 11). The sixty-year long taboo for using the term ‘indigenous people’ and its replacement with the term ‘small-numbered’ nationalities was deliberate. The official Soviet line was that the term ‘indigenous people’ was only valid in a colonial context. Since the USSR had no colonies it had no ‘indigenous people’.

Historically, Russia’s Far East and Central Asia regions were places of exile and mass deportations (eg. deportation of the Poles to the Kazakhstan etc). There is no ‘official list’ of Russia’s indigenous ethnic groups. Prior to 1993, the State defined 26 ethnic groups as minorities. In 1999, for the first time, in the last decade, the State, in support of the indigenous population in Siberia allocated 1.5 billion roubles ($52.6 million) to help some 30 ethnic minorities, totalling 200,000 people (Blagov, 2002, p.1).

Minorities, Indigenous Groups and Inequality

The new economic transformation from the state to private enterprise has produced a new inequality, unemployment, and violence. This is confirmed by Niyozov(2001) who believes that the new socio-economic transition has ‘provided access to unimaginable wealth for the few’ and poverty for the majority, resulting in a serious ‘inequitable access to schooling’ (p. 3). The dominant approaches to the education reform ‘remained mainly top-down, bureaucratic and largely rhetorical’ and lacked in research and empirical data (pp. 3-4).
Extreme poverty is one of the key factors in the rising educational inequality in Central Asia. As Eshanova (2002) observes, education has become the privilege of the rich: Parents and children in Uzbekistan used to look forward to the start of the school year…Today…the start of the new year is bringing little joy to parents and children in Uzbekistan, or elsewhere in Central Asia. Although primary and secondary education remains free, preparing children for the start of school places a heavy burden on the majority of families…

Today, elite schools with modern computer facilities exist in the capitals of Central Asia. But these schools are only for the children of government officials and wealthy businessman…(p. 1).

Similar signs of educational inequality can be seen in Tajikistan, where eighty per cent of the population lives in rural areas. In addition to urban and rural inequality, we now have the divided schools syndrome—school for the rich and school for the poor. Parents are forced to open fee-paying schools and classes (Niyozov, 2001, p.4).

There are serious equity and equality problems in Tajikistan, which are relevant to the Central Asia region as a whole. The economic collapse in Central Asia, partly triggered by the collapse of the USSR and its trading partners within the Soviet block, resulted in unforeseen social, political and economic problems—poverty for the majority of ethnic groups in the Central Asia region, inter-ethnic conflict, civil wars, unemployment, and isolation. For many ethnic and indigenous groups in the region the unfavourable economic and political climate brought for them extreme poverty and degradation. Confronted with these monumental economic and social problems how does one build a democratic and post-Soviet multi-ethnic Tajik society? Tajikistan, like other nations in the Central Asia, has inherited a socio-political and economic infrastructure that is unsustainable, ineffective and riddled with continuing tensions’ (p. 3).

Values education: ambivalent legacies and new challenges

Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province (MBAP) of Tajikistan, which is located in the high Pamir Mountain Range, and culturally is a homeland of six small ethnic groups, represents a very useful case study of the influence of schooling on such a culturally diverse region. Apart from the six ethnic groups, there are Turkic Kyrgyz and Iranian Tajiks, who had lived for centuries. It is the only place in the world where Ismaili Shi’ite followers constitute a majority of the population. The post-Soviet transitional period (1992-2002) has resulted in the revival of the Badakhshani multi-ethnic community—cultural and linguistic identities, nationalism, and globalism. The current situation of post-Soviet Badakhshan, Tajikistan, and Central Asia is one of ethnic transformation and dislocation. One way of preventing the process of ethnic fragmentation, which brings conflict, violence and ethnocentrism is to teach the values of equality, tolerance and peace in the classroom.

Values education and the continuity of ethical authority of the teacher play a significant part in the teaching/learning process. The values of the ‘good society’, found in the writings of
progressivist and humanistic thinkers—equality, justice, peace, tolerance, cooperation, and friendship seem to provide a global bridge between modernity and tradition, where the values of Allah, prophet Mohammad, and the Imam intersect with the values and the promise of modernity. A history teacher in the region explains the similarity between the emancipatory spirit of Islam and the egalitarian logic of communism:

I was a bit disturbed by the excess of talk about Islam, but then I realised that the major principles of the “code of the constructor of communism” are similar to those of “javonmard” (chivalry) in Islam. The problem is how to apply them in practice (p. 13)

Values education, particularly teaching peace, and tolerance is referred to by a school principal in the Kursk region, who, believes, that the most crucial role of the school is to teach various ethnic groups to live in peace:

The new reality and the new school’s task is to teach tolerance to the Russians, Armenians, Tajiks, Tatars, Moldavians and others (Uchitleskaia Gazeta, 3 September 2002: 6)

The Muslim elite’s representation of Islam during its reconstruction process used the idea that religion was an essential core of ethnic and national identity. In the process of the construction of ethnic identity among the former Soviet Muslim population, one needs to focus on the transformation of the social consciousness.

In the former USSR the process of education of ethnic minorities and indigenous groups was facilitated by the imposition of ‘standardised institutional structures’ on local traditions (including the various Islamic traditions) and cultures.

Mark Saroyan (1997) argued that the Uzbek Muslim elite, which became the driving force for the homogenization of Islam in the USSR, was forced by the Soviet authorities to impose a unitary definition of Islam, based on a ‘uniform interpretation of ‘religious ritual and ideology’ (p. 18). Russian, as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union, had a special role as the language of ethnic and indigenous groups homogenization in education. As Saroyan explains:

…just as Russian has a “special” role as the language of internationality, communication and “friendship” among Soviet peoples, Uzbek—the language of “science and culture”—may play a similar role (p. 19).

Ethnicity and the Language policy

Language as the medium of instruction: constitutional and legal position

One of the key problems for the multi-ethnic State engaged in promoting and practicing pluralist democracy is reconciling the notion of genuine cultural diversity (and linguistic diversity) and political unity. Consequently, one of the central policy issues in some multi-ethnic nations in the Central Asia is the status and position of the official state language(s) in relation to the languages of the minorities in the school curriculum and society.

There is no greater problem about the legal and political status of minorities than the medium of instruction in the school. It is at the school level that the genuine linguistic diversity is put to test. In Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kirgistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
(former Soviet republics) the language of choice is the mother tongue for the dominant groups. However, some small groups in Central Asia use Tajik, some use Turkmen, and others use Kazakh as their regional lingua franca.

The Central Asian languages have another aetiological problem. Some groups had no written language prior to the 1917 Revolution. They had to adopt the Latin or the Cyrillic alphabet as a basis for mass literacy. During the 1970s in Kazakhstan, the preference for Russian was growing, even among the Kazakhs, who used it as a vehicle for upward social mobility. Educated Kazakhs became bilinguals, and Kazakhs, after the Tatars had the highest proportion of fluent Russian speakers (59.5 per cent in urban areas) of the entire Turkic people (Grant, 1981, pp. 76-80).

When comparing ethnicity, indigenous culture and academic achievement among the major Central Asian nationalities in 1980, it became evident that Bashkirs, Chuvash, Tajiks, Kazakhs and Kirgiz had more individual completing higher education (all had ratios of above 120 as a percentage of increase over a five-year period) then the Russian, with their figure of 107.

In contrast, some twenty years later, modern Kazakh society is characterised by an inter-ethnic conflict, and by ‘deep ethnic contradictions’, arising from an increased competition between the Kazakhs and the ethnic Russians for power, privilege, high status and well-paid jobs, as well as the language problem (Kurganskaia, 2000: 3). Increasingly, the non-indigenous groups, especially the Russians, who know feel like the ‘second-class citizens’ in the land they were born, and grew up. In Kazakhstan, for instance, where there is a large Russian minority group, and where Russian was the lingua franca of the region, there are moves to down-grade the strategic and political importance of Russian, much to the annoyance of the Russians residing in Kazakhstan (who had enjoyed the dominant status for decades) and enforce universal and compulsory literacy for all Kazakh citizens.

The Language Law now defines and reaffirms the political and cultural significance of the state language. Article 4 of the Law states: ‘It is the duty of every citizen of the Republic of Kazakhstan to master the state language’. The dominance of the state language was reinforced by the 1998 government decree On the Use of the State Language in State Institutions.

The problem is that some Kazakhs themselves prefer to communicate in Russian and 14 per cent of them have a ‘problem performing their official duties’ due to a poor command of the state language. Recently, a republic-wide opinion poll showed that 71.1 per cent of the respondents, including 54.1 per cent of Kazakhs, supported the idea of introducing the second state language (Kurganskaia, 2000, p.7).

Gender and Education in Central Asia

Gender inequality in access to education is increasing in the Central Asian region. Within the Central Asia the availability of educational opportunities for women is ‘exceedingly limited’ (Ismagilova, 2002: 1). In a recent survey dealing with the violation of women’s rights the
majority of the respondents indicated that they could not study as they were not ‘allowed to leave home’, they ‘had no money for education’ or and they ‘had no time’. The least educated females had also the highest rates of physical abuse:

..the least educated women have the highest percentage of the various forms of violence in their community: 96% of women with no high or primary education experienced physical violence (Ismagilova, 2002, p.2).

Conclusion
One of the unresolved issues in comparative education on race and ethnicity in Central Asia is a growing ethnic polarisation, differentiation, discrimination and inequality. The role of the State—in confronting and addressing social and psychological origins of prejudice and discrimination, has been one of adopting effective and multicultural in nature educational policies that focus on finding solutions to ethnic discrimination, and attempted regulation of transnational and multinational identities in Central Asia. Comparative education research on race and ethnicity in Central Asia deals with the constructivist nature of culture-making and nation-building. It focuses more on conceptual aspects of ethnicity and national identity, the borders issues, inter-ethnic conflict, cultural stereotypes, discrimination and inequality. In its attempts to solve the political, cultural and moral dilemmas of ethnic/national identity and citizenship it represents the ambivalence between the desire to re-discover and construct ‘authentic’ nations, using, among other things, consensus-building cultural, political and religious slogans and texts in Central Asia (that would satisfy both local and political agendas) and address the imperatives of globalization and modernity, particularly the continuation of the Enlightenment Project of the triumph of reason, science and progress, and the construction of a Western paradigm of the civil society.

Very little of educational research on race and ethnicity deals with the Western-driven models of globalisation, marketisation and information technology. The Internet, which is ‘both global and local in its reach’, can be a powerful tool of empowerment of marginalised and disadvantaged minorities (Ciolek, 2002, p. 1). In contrast, Mitter (1993) finds that in many countries the notion of ‘democracy’ has eroded, leading to ‘nationalism, ethnocentrism and racism’ (pp. 464-465). There is a need for a radical policy shift to address ethnic/racial conflict—a growing global problem. In evaluating ethnicity and indigenous cultures the focus of education research has been on language policies, citizenship inter-ethnic inequality and discrimination. Problems in inter-ethnic conflict, and ethnic identity in Central Asia have been attributed to political (the contesting nature of the inter-state boundaries), economic (the problem of transitional economies), and social (temporary decline in welfare and other provisions).

The western canon of science, technology, and progress is very much at odds with the competing ideologies at the local level, where the Western paradigm of globalization and development has been conveniently misinterpreted as ‘Americanization’, and some people will go to any length to oppose it. At the local arena we are confronted with a serious challenge from the new and self-made ‘over lords’ of the ‘feudal’ kind, who use religion, nationalism, ethnicity, race, and politics, (as it was done for thousands of years before), as a powerful tool of conflict—manipulating and playing on people’s emotions and feelings, and breading discontent, animosity and hatred towards other people, and other nations.
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