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Instructional Language, National Identity, and Higher Education in Rural Kyrgyzstan: The Debate at At-Bashy

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National identity and national language have been critical issues in the former Soviet Central Asian states both before and after independence, and negotiating these issues has been a primary undertaking of secondary education for almost a century. Another set of school-related issues in both Soviet and now post-Soviet societies involves social mobility, and in particular, the changing relationships between secondary education and university access. Struggles over instructional language and national identity, as well as how secondary education relates to higher education and social mobility, are particularly complex matters in the Kyrgyz Republic. My colleagues and I have undertaken fieldwork in eight rural secondary schools in different parts of Kyrgyzstan, where we have discovered important complexities and contradictions embedded within local understandings of language policy and practice, and where these matters also affect understandings about higher education and university entrance and success.¹

¹ The researchers, sponsored by a John J. and Nancy Lee Roberts Foundation Fellowship, which is administered by IREX, worked with the Kyrgyzstan Teacher Excellence Award program, administered by ACCELS, in 2004-2005. All interviews at At-Bashy and Choko were conducted in April 2005, in English, Kyrgyz, and Russian. All names have been changed.

Research Design and Methods

We have focused upon how schools and those whose work and study there interpret and negotiate school and community life on a daily basis, and have used case study research methods. These include document collection, oral histories and ethnographic interviews (Merriam 1998; Spradley 1979). In this work we have concentrated on how each school has maintained its coherence and focus and even become stronger (in some cases) over the past decades, as opposed to looking only for weaknesses and problems that international assessments of Kyrgyz education typically dwell upon.

Because this was a qualitative study, we had very few hypotheses to frame our work. For example, we did not set out to specifically investigate issues in the language of instruction or national language matters in our schools. Nor were we specifically interested in connections between the universities in Kyrgyzstan and secondary education. But each of these themes and concerns emerged in virtually every school we studied between 2004 and 2005. Our forthcoming book discusses at some length these matters, as well as a host of other important social and educational themes (DeYoung, Reeves and Valyayeva 2006). In this article we present just a few narratives concerning interpretations of national language issues and their perceived relevance to learning and university

access. We use the voices of several local actors as data points.

Language of Instruction and National Identity

Russian language and culture increasingly came to dominate public life in most urban centers of the USSR by the middle of the twentieth century, particularly among those populations with aspirations for upward social mobility (Olcott 1995; Gleason 1997). Non-Russian rural populations, meanwhile, more typically spoke and were fluent in national languages, not Russian, even though Russian was a required subject in all schools of all republics (Korth 2004). All Soviet citizens were proclaimed to have had equal educational opportunities and accomplishments in the USSR, although this was most probably not true. Among the stated goals for secondary education was that everyone was or would soon be fluent in Russian, as well as their local national language and another international one (typically German or English).

After nearly 15 years of independence, we expected to find in our work that the national language was in ascendance in more rural parts of Kyrgyzstan, and Russian was less in demand or practice. This turned out to be only partly true. Even in Naryn Province of Kyrgyzstan, which is far removed from Bishkek and proudly proclaimed by locals to be the center of pure Kyrgyz ethnicity, we found a healthy debate about what it meant to be Kyrgyz, about strengths and issues in teaching in the national language, and about the relationship between higher education, Russian and Kyrgyz.

The At-Bashy Raion has 24 secondary schools, four in the raion center of At-Bashy; and 20 others in smaller surrounding villages. National education policy is to allow parents and students to choose a primary language of instruction (Russian or Kyrgyz), even though pupils are also required to take second-language training in the other official language. One of the four At-Bashy schools is a "mixed" school, teaching a full curriculum in both Kyrgyz and Russian. Two schools in "the center" teach in Kyrgyz; but the largest and reputedly strongest school in the raion — the Kazybek School — teaches in Russian only. Virtually every At-Bashy household is ethnically Kyrgyz, and Kyrgyz is reputed to be the primary language of everyday use.

We were curious in our research as to how and why a school in At-Bashy — proclaimed center of

Kyrgyz ethnicity and traditional Kyrgyz values — still taught in Russian. In our interviews, the school director informed us that the school had initially been constructed in 1929 (as the Lenin School) and included a large percentage of Russian children from local military and collective farms and factories on the frontier. During the 1960s and 1970s, many of these families began leaving, yet local Kyrgyz and other nationalities in the area still wanted their children to learn the language of interethnic communication: Russian. Enrollments recently have been about 1,600 students, but in 1987 there were 2,500 students.

Like virtually every other school in our study, Kazybek was proclaimed to be a good school, even though they were experiencing several resource problems. Kazybek teachers reported initial enthusiasm for study in Kyrgyz among Kyrgyz parents and teachers in other At-Bashy schools, but by the late 1990s this push waned, and more and more parents sent their children to Russian language schools. The lack of Kyrgyz language texts and other print materials was one reported problem, as was the realization that the universities they wanted their children to attend usually taught in Russian.

All the staff and all the teachers we interviewed at Kazybek claimed that their school was the best in the district, and that Russian as the instructional language was a primary reason for their success. And almost every school in our study, including Kazybek, gauged school success in terms of how many graduates went on to the universities in Bishkek or Naryn. One high-achieving student in our interviews made the case for his school's importance; and he seemed unconcerned that Russian was a threat to national identity, as some did. He had more utilitarian explanations:

We will know Kyrgyz anyway, [since] we live in this environment, [but] we also need Russian to add to our native language. ... For example, all our subjects — like geography — are taught in Russian. We only study Kyrgyz language in our Kyrgyz language class. In other schools, all the lessons are conducted in Kyrgyz. Even worse, [other schools] have Russian only once a week, and it is conducted [poorly]. [Those schools also] often lack materials (At-Bashy, April 2005).

Meanwhile, a young English teacher at Kazybek who had grown up in At-Bashy herself — but who wanted to move to Bishkek as soon as possible —

had a more complex and even painful view of the national language dilemma. Gulshat was upset to think that residents of Bishkek looked down upon people from the village, and considered the matter of language competence and preference as part of the issue:

Our Kyrgyz mentality suggests that if you live in the village, you are not modern enough; you are old fashioned. After being at the university, I do not believe that. "Naryn is all mountains everywhere; and herds of cows are everywhere; and we are wandering between and among them." Bishkek inhabitants, all of them, think about us that way. Some even do not know where At-Bashy is. ... In city schools, a lot of students — even Kyrgyz — speak only in Russian. This is a big problem, because Kyrgyz language is our native language, although Russian is also an official language. ... And no one seems to take responsibility to answer why in the younger generation of Bishkek, almost everybody speaks Russian, even in [ethnically] Kyrgyz schools. This is becoming a problem (Gulshat, At-Bashy, April 2005).

On the other hand, Gulshat had aspirations to move to Bishkek one day; and school teaching was not her long-term career goal. She firmly believed that more than Kyrgyz fluency is required to be successful in the city:

I think I am quite modern, because I know English really well. Just Kyrgyz is not enough for me. ... To be considered to be modern, in our culture, you have to know no fewer than three languages, to be intellectually developed, and to understand the situation in the country (Gulshat, At-Bashy, April 2005).

City Values versus Village Values

Gulshat had an interesting grasp of the cultural implications and contradictions of schooling in Kyrgyzstan, many of them located at the nexus of language, rurality, tradition, and social mobility. On the one hand, she was from At-Bashy and was not ashamed of it. On the other hand, she was very worried that she herself might be kidnapped as a bride — as her older sister had been — and absorbed into a traditional local family before she would be able to flee to the city. She opined about both the opportunities and the perils of students in the city versus those in the village, also suggesting that city students were more active learners than rural

learners. Language of instruction and cultural issues, she believed, were partly involved:

There is a big difference between the kids who study in a rural school and kids in Bishkek. In urban schools, the students are freer: they do what they want; they do not ask anybody about anything. In rural schools we are completely dependant on parents, and there are a lot of things we do not know about. Maybe it is for the better? In city schools, the kids grow up quickly. They understand everything quickly, and ... maybe it is harmful for them, because they grow up [more] quickly. [But] in rural schools they comprehend everything slowly, and are not in a hurry.

In city schools there are teachers who state their goals and they achieve these goals; but in rural schools the kids may not set the goals for themselves: no goals to where [they] are going. ... Just last night I returned from a rural school in Akmuz. There the students obey and are afraid [of authorities]. ... No yelling and screaming in the hall. And here, at our place, there is freedom: everything in such a Russian way. Everybody does what they want. [This] is good, because kids are developing themselves: they can set goals; they develop themselves. ... They are becoming of well-rounded individuals (Gulshat, At-Bashy, April 2005).

Another ethnic Kyrgyz teacher who taught Russian at Kazybek previously taught in two different Kyrgyz language schools. Like Gulshat, Gulzhan linked language of instruction, inquisitiveness and parent involvement together:

In Kyrgyz national schools, it is easier [for me] to teach Russian, but comprehension of the language by my students is more difficult. If you tell something to a kid, he will obey without delay; and kids will not express their opinions or defend their opinions, just do what you told them, and that's it. [But] in Russian language schools, kids defend their points of view; they can even add something better, or even change the direction of an assignment. ... In sum, they are more or less — how to say — maybe more democratic? ... I would say [this] is partly to do with the community where they live. You know, when we teach Russian, and start teaching Russian literature and Russian lyrics of freedom, it has its

impact in child development. [Meanwhile], Kyrgyz [stories] also have the same freedom lyrics and also the same democrats and fighters [akyns and writers], but [it is not the same] (Gulzhan, At-Bashy, April 2005).

Higher Education and Language of Instruction

Narratives discussed so far suggest two competing notions about instructional language matters in At-Bashy. One is that Kyrgyz language is or ought to be the language of the Kyrgyz Republic, equating identity needs of the state with the culture of the titular nationality. Meanwhile, teachers and students in Russian language schools argue that Russian is the language of the city and of (greater) intellectual possibilities, which ought to be the focus of education. The debate about whether the goal of education ought to be to socialize local children into local communities, or to expand general knowledge and to equip children to leave the school as adults, is an old one. We have such philosophical disagreements in the West all the time (e.g., Kliebard 1986). But in Kyrgyzstan, the social and historical context pushes this argument also into another realm: that of higher education. Specifically, is university access some long-deferred right of citizenship, or ought it be restricted to those who demonstrate some sort of intellectual or academic talent?

Access to the university for the masses was an implicit promise of the USSR from the 1930s. As world socialism was achieved, more and more secondary school students would be enabled to attend university or other institutions of higher learning (Holmes, Read, and Voskresenskaya 1995). In the meantime, Soviet higher education became highly sought after as one strategy to avoid drudgery and difficult work in factories and fields (Dobson 1977). Glasnost and Perestroika reforms of the 1980s also promised better secondary and higher education opportunities (Eklof and Dneprov 1993).

Increased access to higher education was one of President Akaev's key promises, following Kyrgyzstan's independence (Akaev 2003). The number of higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan mushroomed from essentially two universities in 1990 to more than 50 by 2005. Secondary school directors around the country could now promise graduates and their parents that they might be able to attend universities in modern Kyrgyzstan.

Virtually all of the schools in our study focused much of their energy on facilitating high grades for students and propelling them to universities. But of course, secondary school quality has been declining for want of resources since the mid-1990s. Shortages of teachers and materials in math and science were the norm in our schools, and seasoned professionals in both schools and universities have left the education system in pursuit of higher paying jobs in the private sector.

In and around At-Bashy, the issue of education quality as it related to university entrance emerged as an interesting topic, and instructional language was a sub-theme. Boris was a vocational teacher at Kazybek School, but had previously been a driver with work experience in many of the rural villages surrounding At-Bashy. He had little appreciation for the intellectual quality of these smaller schools, and not much either for recent college graduates. He echoed some of the themes voiced earlier:

I think in Kyrgyz language schools there are fewer hours for learning Russian than in our school. What is happening is that those kids do not really comprehend [*ne usvaivaut*] Russian. ... Also, with Russian as the language of instruction, our kids feel themselves less restrained [*raskovanno*] compared to the students studying in Kyrgyz schools. They have a different mentality. ... In a Kyrgyz language school in the kolkhoz, this will never ever happen. There, kids will never raise an issue against the teacher. ... In general, they are under the supervision of their parents around the clock, and under supervision of their teachers. They are as if under a hat [*pod kalpakom*] (Boris, At-Bashy, April 2005).

Kazybek School was proud to talk about its *Olympiad* (academic contest) winners and the number of its 11th graders who had finished and left for universities in Bishkek and Naryn. According to the school's assistant director for academics, 98 students would graduate from Kazybek School in 2005, over 80 percent of whom would be taking the national scholarship test entrance exam. She claimed that a strong Russian language program — among other things — was responsible for her school's success. In 2004, she said, 104 students graduated, and about 65 of them went on to the university.

We also spoke with the director of the Kyrgyz-language Choko village school, which

enrolled about 100 students. Fatima confided that her school's primary problem centered on staffing shortages, but she still insisted that her school was good; her teachers well prepared, and the learning accomplishments of her students were high. She also claimed that higher education was still a goal for most students even here in the village:

Last year, 15 students graduated from our school. Nine of them were admitted to universities; half in budget [government scholarship] places, the other half in contract [private] departments. [Most of] our graduates want further study very much — to enter universities or other post-secondary specialized institutions. ... [But] not everybody can go to the university. Parents cannot help them with money, so they work. But everybody wants to continue to study (Fatima, Choko, April 2005).

We imagined that one problem for her students wishing to go to the city and enter the university was their competence in Russian. Fatima was concerned that Russian was important at almost every major university, but her teacher of Russian was a local person and not fluent in Russian herself. She had no one else to speak to in Choko. Fatima, though, was pleased with the quality of her school and with parent support in the community. She was glad that she did not work in a bigger school in At-Bashy, where she thought there were many problems related to discipline.

Fatima and Boris (who had brought us to Choko) disagreed about the importance of independent thought, academic competence, and fluency in Russian, as prerequisites to university entrance and success. Boris had argued that when the community held its children too close and did not allow them to be independent or inquisitive, that limited education. To be "under the kalpak" was a bad thing. Fatima, on the other hand, believed that good students were those who obeyed their parents and their teachers. She claimed that maintaining order and discipline were primary goals of teaching, while other skills and learning strategies came second. Well behaved students were the ones who could be trusted and allowed to go off to a university in the city. And this was more easily accomplished in the Kyrgyz village where Kyrgyz was the language of instruction. With regard to poor language preparation for university, Fatima opined that lack of Russian fluency was only a minor

obstacle that could be compensated for over time by good character and a hard work ethic. She argued:

From my perspective, rural students are academically strong students and interested. In the city, of course, there is "civilization," and [city] students have better speech development than rural kids. But all in all, academic development and motivation is better among rural children. When our students enter Bishkek and Naryn [universities], the rule is if you studied better [and were better behaved] at [secondary] school, you study better at the university as well. The students that [sometimes] come here from Bishkek are weak students. That's what I think (Fatima, Choko, April 2005).

Conclusion

Space does not allow much discussion here related to the above themes. Our work tends to suggest, though, that the politics of language is not only a national theme, but also involves and affects school and community discourse at the local level, and clearly relates to issues in university entrance and success. Such themes are implicitly discussed in the debate over national scholarship testing in Kyrgyzstan (Drummond and DeYoung 2004), and are also topics we pursue in our forthcoming book.

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Central Asia's Restrictive Media System¹

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Central Asian non-state media is trapped in a system of problematic and unfairly enforced laws. This paper argues that this increasingly paralyzing media situation is the fault of both the Central Asian governments and the non-state media outlets. On one hand, media controls have been engineered for the personal benefit of each country's political leadership — specifically, for the president and his family but extending to other members of the elite. In order to stay in power, the elites silenced opponents, and this silencing is the defining feature of the media environment, which in places resembles a "party press" environment, especially in Kazakhstan (Allison 2004). Currently, in all Central Asian countries, state-controlled media have a virtual monopoly on broadcast media and huge segments of print media. Because of governmental meddling in commercial enterprises, fewer businesses remain free of governmental manipulation each year, prompting ever-fewer

businesses to advertise in non-state-affiliated media outlets. At the same time, most media outlets, state-controlled and independent alike, regularly disobey the existing laws because of legal illiteracy and negligence, as well as because of the highly corrupt Central Asian business/political environment, which often necessitates illegal practices. This business and media takeover and regulation is a systematic approach to media control, facilitated by journalists' illegal actions.

This paper is the result of a year-long study of press freedom in Central Asia for a post-undergraduate fellowship from Rice University. During this time, work was conducted in four post-Soviet Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — including meetings with several hundred newspaper editors, TV and radio station producers, journalists, nongovernmental organizations, governmental bodies and press-freedom and human-rights groups. I conducted interviews usually in Russian, and occasionally in English, depending on the interviewee. In each country, I interviewed many of the journalists who experienced press-freedom violations as cited in monitoring conducted by groups like Adil Soz (Kazakhstan), Public Association Journalists (Kyrgyzstan) and Internews (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan). I also interviewed journalists from state-owned and state-affiliated media outlets to get a diversity of opinion. Like Peter Krug and Monroe Price's "Enabling Environment" paper (2000) and Ivan Sigal's (2005)

¹ This paper was produced during the author's term as Zeff Fellow, Rice University, 2003-2004. For a fuller evaluation of this topic, see the full-length version of the paper, available from the author. The paper explains recent draft media laws and important court cases and gives a full thematic evaluation of media legislation. Local NGOs deserve special acknowledgement: the Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan offices of Internews Network, and the Kyrgyzstan NGO Public Association "Journalists." The author also thanks the journalist trainers Jack Ronald and George Krinsky of the International Center for Journalists.