Language and Power in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: A Social Work Educational Experience

Terry L. Koenig – School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA
Richard Spano – School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, USA

Abstract

The authors examine their experiences with Kazakhstani social work education. Key elements discussed include the history of Kazakhstani culture, language and family life; the view that the classroom is a microcosm of the larger society; and the role of language dominance in the Kazakhstani classroom. Three concepts from Paulo Freire's critique of education, i.e., culture of silence, banking concept of education, and conscientização (critical consciousness) are explored as a means of supporting Kazakhstani social work students in their development of critical thinking, in finding their voice and acting on their beliefs. Finally, implications are discussed for international social work education.

1. The Yellow Steppe

The Yellow Steppe or *Сары Арқа* stretches like a vast, yellow sea across northern Kazakhstan. This beautiful yet harsh landscape mirrors complex relationships between formerly nomadic Kazakh people and remnants of the Soviet Union. Under Soviet rule, Kazakhs suffered mass starvation of one-third of their population due to Soviet practices that suppressed nomadic tribal life (Millar, 2004) and had little access to participation in leadership positions in the Soviet system. The largely Turkic and secular Islamic population was viewed by Soviets as culturally and religiously inferior in contrast to other Soviet-ruled countries such as the Ukraine or Estonia whose

language, religious and cultural practices were closely associated with Soviet practices (LeVine, 2007; McLean & McMillan, 2009). Since Kazakhstan's national independence in 1991, there has been resurgence in Kazakh language and culture in some areas of the country and within government institutions (Fierman, 2006; Pavlenko, 2008).

In this paper, the authors examine their Kazakh social work teaching experience. The use of Paulo Freire's ideas emerged from conversation between the two American educators and was refined in conjunction with the Kazakh educators. The first author was a Fulbright faculty scholar who taught a social policy course in the fall of 2011 at Eurasian National University in Astana, Kazakhstan; the second author joined the first author in teaching four daylong workshops on professional ethical decision-making to Kazakhstani faculty and students. Our language interpreters and the Social Work Department Director, who are ethnic Kazakh, also contributed as authors to this paper. Although the first author had studied the Russian language for two years and had discussed Kazakh life and their educational system with family and colleagues, she, along with the second author, were unprepared for the reality of two distinct groups of largely ethnic Kazakh students who rarely spoke to each other and were divided based on cultural customs and their spoken language as Kazakh-speaking students and Russian-speaking students.

2. History, Culture and Language in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's historical, cultural and language development, placed within the context of the Soviet Union as a colonizing power (Millar, 2004), provides a window into this classroom experience. Kazakhstan currently has a population of 16.6 million people, a marked increase in population from 2004, when the population was 14.9 million (Smagulova, 2008). Speakers of Turkic languages make up 60.5% of the total population (e.g., Kazakh, 63.1%; Uzbek, 2.9%; Uyghur, 1.4%; Tatar, 1.3%; Turkish, 0.6%; and Azeri, 0.5%); speakers of Indo-European (IE) Slavic languages make up 34.6% of the total

population (e.g., Russian, 23.7%; Ukrainian, 2.1%; and Polish, 0.2%); and speakers of other languages make up 4.9% of the population (e.g., German, 1.1%; and Korean, 0.6%) (Kazakhstan National Census, 2009). Kazakh is the national language of Kazakhstan; Russian is also an official language of Kazakhstan (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995; Smagulova).

As in many other colonial situations involving Western against non-Western or *other* societies, Soviet policy came to define indigenous Kazakh society as archaic, inferior, and incapable of self-governance (Yessenova, 2005). Through Russian state-sponsored migrations, Russians over time became a demographic majority and also a dominant group politically, economically, and culturally in Kazakhstan (Smagulova, 2008). Russian-speaking newcomers were employed in higher paying jobs as skilled workers, technicians and engineers, while Kazakhs worked the land as farmers. Further, Russian-speaking Kazakhs, in comparison with Kazakh-speaking Kazakhs, were also more likely to have university degrees or professional training and to be urban, cosmopolitan and more economically prosperous (Landau & Kellner-Heinkele, 2004).

The Soviet collapse of 1991 led to the termination of Soviet state subsidies, to inconsistency in agricultural economic reforms, and subsequently to the impoverishment of villagers, causing thousands of them to migrate to the cities (Yessenova, 2005). This has caused a bifurcation of Kazakh identity depending on whether one is a rural Kazakh (auldiktar) or an urban Kazakh. These two perspectives, urban and rural, shape two sets of identities manifesting unequal power relations within the nation. The legacy of this inequality allows the urban populace to exercise power over former villagers. Additionally, the number of Russians and other Slavs decreased after the Soviet collapse and as a result of mass emigration. The Kazakh share of the country's population, on the other hand, has increased due to higher birth rates among Kazakhs, and as a result of the state policy of repatriation of ethnic Kazakhs from other countries (Bonnenfant, 2012; Smagulova, 2008). More than 464 thousand returning ethnic Kazakhs, called *oralmandar* (Bonnenfant; Dubuisson & Genina, 2011), have migrated to

Kazakhstan from other countries, e.g., Afghanistan, Turkey, China, Iran, and Mongolia. These latest developments have caused uneasiness among the Russian-speaking population; there are signs that the Russian language has been challenged and that the Kazakh language is gaining in social prestige (Dubuisson & Genina; Smagulova).

3. Kazakh Family Life

The bifurcation between rural and urban ethnic Kazakh identity is also evident in family life. The traditional, typically rural Kazakh family stems from patrilineal and extended family units that are characteristic of the nomadic Kazakh clans (Geiger & Inkeles, 1954; Kuramyssova, 2013, personal communication). Traditionally, the wife marries the husband's family, whereas urban Kazakhstanis of Russian decent are more like those in Russia where the husband marries the wife's family, but is not as interdependent or dependent as are the ethnic Kazakh families.

The elder of the family, typically the oldest male, handles family problems. The goal of addressing the elder to solve family problems, such as spousal abuse, is to obtain his viewpoint and gain his approval for wanted decisions. For example, if there was a concerned family member willing to assist the wife in addressing spousal abuse with an elder who has power over the husband, it is the elder who decides whether or not to take action regarding the abuse. However, the wife always has the right to leave her husband and typically will return to her parents' home. Law enforcement would rarely be called to intervene because the ethnic Kazakh family has a structure already in place to deal with these situations. Also, the current legal system is not equipped to deal with reports from survivors of abuse (Kuramyssova, 2013, personal communication; Snajdr, 2005; Werner, 2009). Ethnic Kazakhs also do not trust law enforcement as historically the people who work for the government are often engaged in corrupt behaviors (Kuramyssova, 2013, personal communication). In contrast, Kazakhstanis, of Russian descent, are far more likely to be open to government intervention due to fewer family

connections and support (Kuramyssova, 2013, personal communication). They generally do not view such things as spousal abuse as purely a private matter. Ethnic Kazakhs, especially in the rural parts of the country, hold government intervention in spousal abuse scenarios as a last resort in favor of familial processes, are not as politically aware of women's rights as in Western societies, and have little recourse or protection from a legal system weak on punishing abusers (Werner, 2009).

4. The Kazakhstani Classroom: The Role of Language and Power in the Post Soviet Space

After the Soviet collapse, the Kazakhstani educational system became the forum for which language, Russian or Kazakh, would become the dominant language. Three main types of schools were prominent: schools that taught in Russian, Kazakh, and a mix of the two languages. While mixed schools have grown since independence, and Russian-medium schools maintained their prominence, Kazakh-medium schools were seen as a priority by the government (Fierman, 2006). According to Verschik (2010), Kazakh-medium schools did not have the success some wished due to several factors. Barriers to their growth included a lack of teaching materials in Kazakh due to poor funding and slow economic growth after the Soviet collapse. Urban ethnic Kazakhs, who viewed Russian as the language of social and financial upward mobility, were ambivalent to their native language, which was seen as less prestigious. Russian-medium schools had far greater financial resources and thus provided a better education. In addition, a greater proportion of Kazakh urbanites were fluent in Russian rather than Kazakh; and even urban Kazakhs themselves, according to a 1989 census, were very russified with about 68 percent claiming fluency in Russian and almost 90 percent literate (Laitin, 1998).

A final barrier the Kazakh language faced was the growth of mixed schools which typically had classes separately taught in either Russian or Kazakh. Schools that did not conform to Kazakh government legislation promoting

the use of Kazakh in the classroom rarely experienced sanctions. Even when Kazakh was taught in the classroom at a mixed school, because the urban population was largely fluent in Russian, the language spoken outside the classroom was Russian, meaning Kazakh had difficulty gaining ground. There is also evidence of an emerging dominant public ideology of multilingualism (Smagulova, 2008), involving the use of Kazakh, Russian and English languages, e.g., the opening of several experimental multilingual schools that teach subjects in Kazakh, Russian and English.

5. The Classroom as a Microcosm of the Larger Society

The aforementioned tensions experienced in Kazakh cultural identity (e.g., rural versus urban), family life, and language (e.g., Russian versus Kazakh languages) are mirrored in our experiences of the Kazakhstani classroom within Eurasian National University. This university has a strong national academic record, employs ethnic Kazakhs as faculty members, and students can also choose their language of instruction (i.e., Kazakh or Russian). In our specific social policy course, we discussed numerous social problems (e.g., child abuse, access to health care and education, substance abuse, domestic violence) and how they might be addressed in the development of Kazakhstani social policies and programs. Our classroom discussions revolved around comparing the goals, values, and shortcomings of American, European and Kazakh social policies and programs. Due to the structure of the Fulbright award, Kazakh-speaking students and Russian-speaking students were put together in this course. Our classroom language interpreters were instructed by faculty administration to speak in Russian only as it was believed that students would be most likely to know Russian. All social policy course handouts and syllabus were translated into Russian only. However, the instructor discovered that nearly half of the students spoke primarily Kazakh and had difficulties understanding Russian.

The professional ethical decision-making workshops consisted of four full days on such topics as tensions between personal and professional values,

and the role of diversity (e.g., gender and ethnicity) in ethical decision-making. All workshop handouts and language interpretation were made available in the Russian language only. As instructors, our philosophy involved engaging both Russian and Kazakh-speaking students in dialogue and critique of social policies and ethical decision-making. Great attention was paid to not put forth only American views of social policy or ethical decision-making, but to encourage students and faculty members to share their perspectives on these topics as shaped by their unique cultural context.

6. Classroom Reflections and Freire

In this section, we describe the structure (e.g., university administrative decisions affecting the course or workshop) and interpersonal dynamics (e.g., classroom interactions) of the Kazakh learning environment. Structural concerns emerged early when the University suggested that the Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking students be taught in two separate social policy courses. Interpersonal dynamics between the Russian-speaking and Kazakh-speaking students emerged early on in the course and continued during the last week when the subject matter shifted from social policy to a series of presentations focused on ethical decision-making in social work practice. The latter experience included most of the same students but also social work faculty and some external faculty from related departments.

Out of our reflections on these classroom observations, we identified two major themes:

1. The unique history of the relationship between the Soviet Union, more specifically Russia, and Kazakhstan which can be seen as a narrative focused on colonization of Kazakhstan by the Russians, and
2. What educational theories say about the role of education in the processes of liberation and/or subjugation of people.

This led us to examine the work of Paulo Freire as a way to organize our critique. In the upcoming section, we examine the Kazakh social work classroom and the role language played in demonstrating power differentials between Kazakh-speaking students and Russian-speaking students. We have chosen three of Freire's concepts (1970), i.e., culture of silence, banking concept of education, and critical consciousness (conscientização), that provided insight into our observations.

6.1 Culture of Silence

Freire (1970) describes a *culture of silence* as pervasive among oppressed groups. According to Freire, the dominant group's (e.g., educators and others in power) narrative that characterizes those in poverty as ignorant and lethargic derives from larger economic, political and social structures designed to oppress certain groups in society. As a result, poor people are told that they are in some way flawed rather than that their poverty is a result of social structures that oppress some groups and favor others. The consequences of this process are that students, faculty and poor people unconsciously adopt cultural myths, which blame the poor for their conditions and limit the likelihood they will challenge the dominant narrative regarding poverty (Freire).

In the Kazakhstani classroom this culture of silence can be seen in the following example. Although most students in the first author's social policy course were ethnic Kazakh, there was a language split in the classroom with over half of all students fluent in Russian and the remaining students fluent in Kazakh. Kazakh-speaking students were from the rural regions of the country and Russian speakers were from urban centers. As noted earlier, language interpreters for this course spoke in Russian only and all handouts and syllabus were translated only into Russian. Further, Russian-speaking students dominated class discussions. When Kazakh-speaking students attempted to speak or when the interpreters occasionally used the Kazakh language for their benefit, Russian-speaking students interrupted and were verbally hostile to the Kazakh-speaking students and interpreters. At one point, a Russian-speaking student remarked to our language interpreter who

was taking a moment to explain concepts in Kazakh and said, "You should not provide any interpretation in Kazakh. You speak only in Russian for us!"

Students and interpreters alike struggled to understand the meaning of oppression and discrimination. For example, when the first author asked students to identify groups of people who had experienced discrimination in Kazakhstani society, the language interpreter, a university faculty member asked, "What do you mean by discrimination?" In response, the first author provided examples of discrimination in American society and asked the interpreter and students if they knew of similar groups in their society. They stated that the "only people that we can think of who have experienced discrimination are the Oralman." The students reported, with some resentment, that the Oralman are Kazakh people who fled their country during Stalin's reign and were now returning, often obtaining more government aid than those people who never left their country. The students never viewed themselves, or prior generations, as an oppressed group even though under Soviet rule they were denied access to resources due to their cultural and religious heritage.

6.2   Banking Concept of Education

Freire also examines the nature of the relationship between teacher and students. He describes this interaction as one where the *subject*, the teacher, talks about reality as if it were "static, compartmentalized and predictable" (1970, p. 52). The students are *listening objects* that meekly accept the information deposited by the teacher. Freire characterizes this educational process as a *banking concept* of education. The consequences of this approach create barriers to actual learning because:

1. A power differential is developed between the teacher and the student, with the teacher being the contributor of "Truth" and the student the passive depository for that information. This power imbalance relegates students into accepting narratives developed by the dominant group.
2. It starts from the assumption that reality is static and best understood by focusing on content developed by dominant groups without

        acknowledgement of the cultural context in which these concepts and values emerged.

3. Students' primary responsibilities include being able to "patiently receive, memorize and repeat" the information provided by the teacher.

The following are examples of how the banking concept of education played out in the Kazakhstani classroom. At an interpersonal level, students expressed reluctance to work in groups focused on discussion of classroom materials. As one student stated in mid-semester feedback, "Listening to empty talk [from other students] that will not affect my future is worthless." In tandem with the idea that fellow students have little that others can learn from, students viewed the source of *Truth* as only coming from the teacher. One student remarked, "I would have preferred her [the teacher] to make us take lecture notes and ask graded questions during every lecture."

6.3 Critical Consciousness

The final concept of conscientização (critical consciousness) is described as a process of awakening which involves learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Freire, 1970). The process by which a person's level of consciousness is raised involves critical thinking. A critical thinker discerns "solidarity between the world and the people and admits no reality between them – thinking which perceives reality... as transformation rather than a static entity – thinking that does not separate itself from action" (Freire, p. 73). For our purposes, critical consciousness is the goal, and critical thinking is the means to achieve in-depth consciousness. People and their social contexts are accessible to change once they understand how their interactions with social contexts create oppression or liberation.

In our Kazakhstani classroom, the challenge we faced as educators was to establish a process whereby students might begin to raise their own questions about social policy and ethics without imposing perspectives embedded in a different cultural context (e.g., American). This was difficult given the students' perspectives that teachers had all the answers. For

example, few Kazakh and Russian-speaking students knew that domestic violence shelters existed in their major cities. The first author shared with the students a web-based review of Kazakhstani domestic violence shelters that included photos of Kazakh women who had experienced domestic violence and were receiving shelter services. Students responded to the existence of these shelters by expressing markedly different views (based on their language group membership). Russian-speaking students were comfortable with the government's efforts to create services to ameliorate domestic violence. However, Kazakh-speaking students, who usually hold to traditional views of family, expressed their dismay at the government's role in developing domestic violence shelters. They stated, "This is a private family matter. Our government should not be involved in addressing this problem." These same students also described a deep sense of moral conviction that men should never harm women. However, Kazakh-speaking students (unlike their fellow Russian-speaking students) would not concede that, in the face of serious harm or even death for some women, these shelters might be vital to the well-being of women and their children.

7. Discussion

The development of a critical consciousness can pave the way for the transformation of students, educational systems and society itself (Freire, 1970). Teachers can encourage students to use critical thinking about their own situations, thereby providing support in helping students find their voice and act on their beliefs. Freire makes suggestions for how teachers might do this without imposing their own perspectives on students. He describes teachers' use of examples, even photographs, rooted in students' cultural contexts to awaken consciousness. The following classroom dialogue returns to the earlier example of Kazakhstani domestic violence shelters and illustrates possible ways of awakening student consciousness.

In the social policy course, the instructor engaged in a discussion with students about the goals, objectives, and services provided by domestic

violence shelters in their major cities. Erke, an ethnic Kazakh and Russian speaker, thought the goal of shelter services should be to improve the well being of women and their children. Beksultan (a Kazakh-speaking student) responded by denouncing the need for these shelters. He stated, "We should not interfere in family life." And, the interpreter, Kali, added, "This is part of our Islamic beliefs." The instructor responded, "So, if you don't believe this is a social problem, then indeed you would not want to develop a program to improve the problem." The instructor further stated that there are clearly differences between the United States and Kazakhstan. Cultural and religious beliefs are part of those differences and help shape whether or not we view something as a problem. "Obviously, some people in your country do think domestic violence is a problem or they would not have developed a policy and shelters for women who are experiencing domestic violence".

In evaluating the goals and objectives of a program to improve women's well-being, we discussed the concept of fairness. The instructor provided examples. "If you set up a program for women and children, will you include women who do not have children in your shelter? If you set up a program for women and children, will it only be for women who speak Russian? Will Kazakh speakers be able to come to the shelter? Will you provide services to all women?" One student, Tokhtar, spoke up:

> I read in a book by John Grisham where he described women who have money and a good job, yet are beaten over and over again by their husbands. They shouldn't be able to get help for domestic violence from a shelter.

The instructor responded, "Domestic violence is complicated. It can be more than just about having money to leave a husband who beats you. There can be emotional issues and other reasons for staying in the relationship." The instructor further stated that domestic violence occurs across all classes of people both poor and rich. She asked, "So, will you only set up your shelter to serve poor people and not those who are wealthy?" She explored other diversity characteristics (e.g., gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, and class) and asked: "What happens if two lesbians are in a domestic violence situation? Can the lesbian woman get services at your shelter or not?"

Tokhtar responded, "I think they should not. There should be two shelters, one for the lesbians and one for everyone else." The instructor responded, "Are you going to provide the same resources for both shelters?"

In this example, the teacher asked students questions about a Kazakhstani social program by using photos and written materials that described domestic violence shelters for Kazakhstani women. It is this kind of example, grounded in what may be viewed as tensions in Kazakhstani cultural norms and values, which may best provoke students to not only awaken to oppression in their own society, but also to participate in changing that society. And, it is here that the Kazakhstani classroom is palpably applicable to the American social work classroom where students are often unaware of larger societal values that contribute to discrimination in their own communities, e.g., frequent sexual harassment in the workplace; police profiling of Latino citizens in our border states; pay inequity based on gender or immigrant status; or sex trafficking in our urban centers. In any classroom, our role as instructors, according to Freire (1970), is to facilitate critical awareness or consciousness among our students.

Annotation

This contribution has been written in collaboration with David Kaufman of the University of Kansas' Department of Anthropology, Matthew R. Leiste of the Midland Care Program in Lawrence, KS, and Ane A. Tynyshbayeva (Programme of Psychology & Social Work), Gani Madyarbekov (Department of Sociology) and Assem Karataevna Makhadiyeva (Department of Psychology & Social Work) of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Astana (Kazakhstan).

References

Bonnenfant, I. K. (2012). Constructing the homeland: Kazakhstan's discourse and policies surrounding its ethnic return-migration policy. *Central Asian Survey, 31*, p. 31–44.

Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (1995). Section 1: General Provisions. Accessed on 01.08.2013 via www.constcouncil.kz/rus/ norpb/constrk/.

Dubuisson, E & Genina, A. (2011). Claiming an ancestral homeland: Kazakh pilgrimage and migration in inner Asia. *Central Asian Survey*, *30,* p. 469–485.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing.

Fierman, W. (2006). Language and education in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Kazakh-medium instruction in urban schools. *The Russian Review, 65*, p. 98–116.

Geiger, K. & Inkeles, A. (1954). The family in the U.S.S.R. *Marriage and Family Living, 16,* p. 397–404.

Golden, P. (2011). *Central Asia in world history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kazakhstan National Census (2009). *Statistical Yearbook of Kazakhstan*. Almaty.

Kuramyssova, K. (2013). Personal communication.

Landau, J. & Kellner-Heinkele, B. (2004). *Politics of language in the ex-Soviet Muslim states: Azerbayjan, Uzbekistan.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Laitin, D. D. (1998). *Identity in formation: The Russian-speaking populations in the near abroad.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

LeVine, S. (2007). *The oil and the glory: The pursuit of empire and fortune on the Caspian Sea*. NY: Random House.

McLean, I. & McMillan, A, (Eds.) (2009). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (3rd ed). New York: Oxford University Press.

Millar, J. R. (2004). *Gale Encyclopedia of Russian History*. New York: Macmillan.

Pavlenko, A. (2008). Russian in post-soviet countries. *Russian Linguistics, 32,* p. 59–80.

Smagulova, J. (2008). Language policies of Kazakhization and their influence on language attitudes and use. *The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 11*, p. 440–470.

Snajdr, E. (2005). Gender, power, and the performance of justice: Muslim women's responses to domestic violence in Kazakhstan. *American Ethnologist, 32*(2), p. 294–311.

Verschik, A. (2010). Contacts of Russian in the post-Soviet space. *Applied Linguistics Review, 1*, p. 85–128.

Werner, C. (2009). Bride abduction in post-Soviet Central Asia: Marking a shift towards patriarchy through local discourses of shame and tradition. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 15*, p. 314–331.

Yessenova, S. (2005). Routes and roots of Kazakh identity: Urban migration in postsocialist Kazakhstan. *The Russian Review, 64*, p. 661–679.