

SCHOOL LANGUAGE CHOICE IN ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN, AND EMERGING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

Elise S. Ahn

University of Wisconsin–Madison
ORCID 0000-0001-5982-4459

Juldyz Smagulova

KIMEP University
ORCID 0000-0002-2179-9152

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Abstract: *Since independence and particularly since the beginning of the 21st century, Kazakhstan has been undergoing rapid socio-demographic and geographic changes. This article explores how these socio-demographic and geographic changes have been contributing to emergent socio-economic stratification in urban contexts with a focus on the city of Almaty. Drawing on data from a survey conducted in 2014 among 29 public secondary schools involving 2,954 participants from grades nine to 11, the article examines the characteristics of the student bodies at these public schools according to medium of instruction (MOI) (primarily Russian or Kazakh). By looking at characteristics like ethnicity, reported language proficiency in Russian and/or Kazakh, factors like family migration, and various proxies for family socio-economic status (e.g., frequency of family vacations, family libraries, etc.), the study observed that there were patterns related to ethnic and socioeconomic stratification differentiating the Russian versus Kazakh MOI schools. While the dataset was a cross-sectional view into secondary school aged students during a single point in time (spring of 2014), the findings indicate that further research examining the ways recent education and other social policies may be reinforcing and/or reproducing historically structured inequalities, particularly in areas undergoing rapid urbanization like Almaty.*

Key words: *medium of instruction, language policy, education policy, school choice, Kazakh language, Russian language, socio-economic stratification, urbanization*

1. Introduction

Socio-spatial segregation between urban and rural areas has long contributed to the ways in which Kazakhstani society is structured. The nature of this segregation may be considered or characterized by the vestiges of social policies from the Soviet period. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition to a market economy, the physical segregation that previously existed has now become more diffuse due to increased mobility – internal emigration, regional immigration, return migration – suburbanization and urban expansion. Drawing on survey data collected among 2,954 students in Almaty comprehensive schools in 2014, this article aims to examine the differences between Kazakh and Russian medium of instruction (MOI) schools in terms of family migration, socio-economic status (SES), and academic aspirations to better understand the emergent nature of socio-economic stratification in contemporary Kazakhstan. We post that the urban-rural divide continues to be reproduced in contemporary Almaty due to or through the disparities in educational opportunities in rural areas, which may be connected also to the language of schooling, and proficiency in the Kazakh and Russian languages. In our study, we demonstrate that these disparities are persisting despite government attempts to elevate the status of Kazakh.

Urban areas like Almaty illustrate the complexity and uneven nature of how these different phenomena then coalesce in local settings. In urban areas, Russian language proficiency has historically been linked to both higher SES and income. This is in comparison to a lack of Russian proficiency, which was seen as a social detriment. Previous studies have demonstrated that speaking Kazakh continues to yield a negative wage premium even after it was made an official state language (Aldashev & Danzer 2014; Smagulova 2012). In contemporary Kazakhstan, Kazakhs and Kazakh language-speakers have gained more prestige and visibility; however, despite the government's language policy and planning efforts, the urban middle class (irrespective of ethnic background) has largely remained predominantly Russian-speaking in comparison to the rural areas, which have remained predominantly Kazakh-speaking.

Yet, despite the acknowledgement of different forms of social inequality, which have been further exacerbated by other processes like migration, there remains a dearth of empirical studies linking urbanization and city expansion (by incorporation of the neighboring rural villages) to school choice, family SES, and other attributes like student academic aspirations in the Kazakhstani context. This article is an attempt to contribute to this critical both scholarly and public discourse and is based on a study that was conducted during the spring of 2014 in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The study explored different facets of how education inequality and inequity were taking shape in the city due to rapid urbanization. The study utilized a survey instrument which was distributed in both Russian and Kazakh languages to secondary students attending public schools throughout the city. While the survey tool itself explored numerous variables that the research team posited might affect education access (as seen through students' stated education aspirations), this article focuses on how ethnic segregation is being reproduced through the schooling system reinforcing segregationist policies and structures

that existed during the Soviet Union. Our analysis builds on the work of scholars like Tollefson (2006) and Tsui and Tollefson (2004) who have connected language and education to a range of important sociopolitical issues such as nation-building, migration, elite competition, the distribution of resources and power, as well as sociologists like Sassen (2006) who have looked at such issues with a focus on urbanization and globalization.

2. Background: Kazakhstan's Urban / Rural Divide

To understand the impact of internal migration on urban Kazakhstani contexts, it is critical to understand the structural segregation that existed during the Soviet period. Yessenova (2005), who studies urban migration in modern Kazakhstan, argued that

The “city” was created in the Soviet past as a distinct cultural universe through a number of deliberate social and economic strategies, including residence permits, resource allocation, language, and education, which shaped a strong sense of entitlement among its citizens. (Yessenova 2005: 678)

In contrast to the material, economic, and political role that cities played within the Soviet political economy, rural areas with *kolkhozes* (“collective farms”) and *sovkhoses* (“Soviet farms”) were seen as critical mechanisms – not only to maintain the social contract through their agricultural contributions – but also to maintain social stability. As Wegren (2002) noted, this was evidenced by the amount of state capital investments that were made in and for rural areas (Wegren 2002: 4–8). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of the *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* were disbanded, rural workers lost their jobs, and the massive amounts of state investments and subsidies drastically declined as the newly independent countries transitioned to become market economies (Wegren 2002).

According to the Census (1989), the difference between average monthly payment in agricultural and industrial construction sectors in Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (Kazakh SSR) was about 40%. In the well-paid urban construction sector, the average monthly salary was 275.6 rubles and in the agricultural sector, it was 199.3 rubles. Since then, rural incomes have plummeted. For example, in 2004, 75% of the rural population was categorized as being *self-employed* (which meant people were technically unemployed) and the average salary in the agricultural sector was 40% below the overall average salary. It is then unsurprising that the greatest area of socio-economic inequality due to the drastic decline in state economic investment has been “the divergence of living conditions” between urban and rural areas (World Bank 2004). In rural areas of Kazakhstan, housing conditions are poor, education is inadequate, unemployment is high, access to reliable municipal water lines, sewage system, and district heating are limited (World Bank 2004).

Geography inherently underpins discussions about the urban/rural divide and in elucidating the distribution of growing socio-economic stratification. In the Kazakhstani context, this divide also has an ethnolinguistic component as well. Until independence, ethnic Kazakhs were a minority population in Kazakhstan. For example, in the late 1950s, less than a third of the population of the Kazakh SSR were ethnic Kazakhs and

in the late 1980s, this amounted to about 40.1% of the total population. Moreover, in 1970, only 20% of urban residents in the Kazakh SSR were Kazakhs. Thus, not only were ethnic Kazakhs a numerical minority, geographically, most were in rural areas. Consequently, many ethnic Kazakhs were geographically excluded from the benefits of the modernization process which started during the later decades of the Soviet Union and then accelerated during following independence.

This system of segregation was then sustained and reproduced through the education system, namely, through limiting access to higher education because of a school's MOI. To rephrase, the stratification of the labor force by ethnicity was sustained and reproduced by restricting the educational attainment and social power for non-Russian language speakers. Higher education and professional training opportunities for children graduating from Kazakh MOI (and other linguistic minority schools) were limited to the humanities, arts, and agriculture in contrast to those graduating from Russian MOI schools, who would also have access to science and engineering opportunities.

On the other hand, for ethnic Kazakhs living in urban areas, the lack of access to Kazakh MOI schools, combined with being a numerical minority, also contributed to ethnolinguistic social stratification. Among urban Kazakhs, this was seen in a language shift to Russian as the language of home and school. For urban Kazakhs, the motivation to learn Russian was often to become *monopoly mediators*, i.e., people standing between Russian rule at the center and Kazakh society in the periphery (or region) (De Swaan 1993). Those who learned Russian and developed other forms of cultural capital were given chances of material and symbolic profit in power fields unavailable to those who were fluent only in the Kazakh language. Consequently, Russian became the trademark of educated urban Kazakhs (or *metropolitan elites* to use De Swaan's (1993) terminology) and the Kazakh language became associated with backwardness, uneducated, and/or being rural.

It is within this broader context that state-level language planning efforts since Kazakhstan's independence (1991) have been taking place. Given the rural/urban and population distribution aspect, it becomes evident why the government has robustly focused on population management, i.e., increasing share of ethnic Kazakhs in the country by repatriating ethnic Kazakhs from other countries and resettling Kazakhs from the southwest Kazakhstan to Russian-dominant east and north of the country. Then, given the role of language in nation-state building work and narratives, establishing the Kazakh language as the official state language and the pre-dominant language of education and society also is understandably a critical enterprise.

Unsurprisingly, language policy and planning discourses and efforts then in Kazakhstan have been (re)framed within a nation-building discourse. For example, official language policy discourses focus on issues of reviving Kazakh, restoring it as a national language, and the role of the national language in promoting national integration. Compulsory teaching of Kazakh as a second language in Russian MOI schools has been the chief language planning strategy directed toward spread of the Kazakh language to increase the number of users or the uses of a language or language variety in the context of adults' resistance to learn the new state language. At the same time, reestablishing

Kazakh MOI schools, particularly in Russian-dominant urban areas, has been primarily viewed as a way of restoring linguistic rights of ethnic Kazakhs who were previously denied education in their native language. The aspiration of policymakers and other stakeholders is that learners will acquire high level of competence in Kazakh so that Kazakh can transform from the language symbolizing the Kazakh state to the dominant means of communication in the country.

Concurrently, as the government was navigating the transition from a command to a market economy and with the drastic decline in state support in rural areas, there has been a tremendous amount of migration taking place throughout the country into urban areas. How this has been translated in relation to school infrastructure is that new schools (which are often also Kazakh MOI) are primarily located in areas of new(er) urban growth and expansion. This is despite the continued interest and enrollment in Russian MOI schools. On the one hand, the increase in number of Kazakh MOI schools and growth in enrollment could be perceived as indicators of effective language planning. As previously mentioned, at the time of the study, many new Kazakh MOI schools were being established in the city outskirts or in new micro districts. Because these schools were in new(er) urban areas, the student population generally consisted of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds whose parents had recently migrated to Almaty from rural areas.

Thus, by situating processes of emigration, regional immigration, return migration, suburbanization and urban expansion to school expansion and language policy reform against a Soviet socio-linguistic backdrop, this paper attempts to explore the geographic, structural, and socio-economic dimensions of emergent social stratification in Kazakhstan today.

3. Urban Context: Almaty

Almaty is Kazakhstan's largest city and was the country's capital until 1994, when the capital was moved to Astana. Despite rapid growth in the capital, Almaty has remained largely the main educational, cultural, and financial center of the country. A quarter of the annual state budget taxes are contributed by the city of Almaty. A third of Kazakhstani students are educated in Almaty universities (e.g., 30% of all universities in Kazakhstan are in Almaty oblast).

In 2014, the official registered population of Almaty was 1.5 million; however, with unregistered and short-term residents, officials estimated that the actual population was probably closer to two million (*Official website of Almaty city* n.d.). The ethnic composition of the city shifted from 1991 until the 2010s with Kazakhs and Russians constituting 53% and 33% of city's population respectively in 2009. The rest of the population consisted of Uighurs (five percent); Tatars and Koreans (two percent each); and other ethnic groups (five percent) (*Census* 2009). The share of Kazakhs in Almaty grew quite rapidly from 10% in the 1970s to 15% in 1979 and to 22.5% in 1989 before the collapse of the Soviet Union (*All-Union Census* 1970, 1979, 1989). Concurrently, the percentage of ethnic Russians declined from 45.2% in 1992 to 25% in 2021.

The changes in the number and enrollment of Kazakh MOI schools are just as – if not more – dramatic than recent socio-demographic changes. In the 1970s, there was a single Kazakh MOI school in Almaty for urban residents. This was in addition to the four Kazakh MOI boarding schools which were for rural pupils. During the Soviet times, in many rural places with small population only primary (grades one through three) or secondary schools (grades one through eight) were available. Rural children had to live and study in boarding schools to receive their high school diplomas (grades nine and 10) in nearby bigger towns. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this system collapsed as well. Boarding schools and smaller schools were terminated and in many remote *auls* (“villages”) schooling became inaccessible. This may be one of the many reasons of mass urbanization of ethnic Kazakhs, i.e., parents had to move to the cities where Kazakh MOI schools were available.

The number of Kazakh MOI schools eventually did begin to grow in the late 1980s and then exponentially in the 1990s. By the 2008–09 academic year (AY), there were 48 schools teaching in Kazakh, 79 schools teaching in Russian and 47 mixed schools, which is when Kazakh, Russian or other MOI classes share the same building. In 2023, out of 216 schools, 79 schools were Kazakh MOI and 76 schools were mixed (*Bilim Almaty* 2023). After a dramatic increase in enrollment in Kazakh MOI schools in the early 2000s, the trend has stabilized. The share of children studying in Kazakh and Russian has not changed much since 2008 (Table 1).

Table 1. Almaty school enrollment by MOI (2008–2011)

Language of Education	2008	2008 (%)	2009	2009 (%)	2010	2010 (%)	2011	2011 (%)
Kazakh	64,999	41.0	68,157	42.6	64,144	43.7	70,954	44.5
Russian	91,112	57.6	89,532	55.9	86,709	54.8	85,827	53.9
Uighur	2,114	1.3	2,125	1.3	2,190	1.4	2,318	1.5
German	233	0.1	221	0.1	217	0.1	212	0.1
Total	158,458		160,035		158,260		159,311	

Source: *Almaty Municipality* (2014)

Many ethnic Kazakh parents continued to choose Russian as the MOI for their children's schooling (Altynbekova 2010). Similarly, in a study conducted by Sadvakasova et al. (2011), ethnic Kazakh respondents whose highest level of education attained was university or higher were likely to enroll their children in Russian or English MOI schools (or schools that provide instruction through a combination of three languages: Russian, English, and Kazakh). This is in comparison to her ethnic Kazakh respondents with secondary school diplomas or vocational education and training diplomas, who appeared to favor schools that provided instruction exclusively in Kazakh for their children.

More generally, it was assumed that Russian MOI schools provide better quality education. Madiyeva (2010) found that parents often anecdotally commented on lack of teacher professionalism as the main reason for not sending their children to or withdrawing from Kazakh MOI schools. At one point, this was such a prevalent belief that the then Minister of Culture had to speak out to defend the quality of education in Kazakh schools. He spoke about his own experience as a parent. The minister claimed that all his four children had attended Kazakh MOI schools where they received an excellent education, allowing them to apply to the U.S. and U.K. universities (Zakon.kz 2010). Besides appealing to personal experiences, the other argument frequently used by government officials to defend Kazakh MOI schools was to show the differences in the number of Olympiad winners and *Altyn Belgi* recipients. Olympiads are discipline-specific academic competitions and the *Altyn Belgi* award is given to Kazakhstani students who show excellent academic performance during school years and then also get top scores in state secondary completion/university entrance exam (UNT). Yet, these statistics are by no means robust measures which demonstrate the qualitative differences of one MOI school over another.

Despite these debates and the Kazakhstani government's language policy and planning efforts, proficiency in the Russian language may continue to be a linguistic proxy for SES or social capital. In the Kazakhstani context, prior to the 2022 protests which were in part in response to the increasing socio-economic stratification being experienced throughout the country (Reed 2023), scholars like Sadvakasova and Rakisheva (2011) and Smagulova (2008) have observed growing social inequality along the ethnic and language lines. The caveat to this is the changing reality that while Russian remains a valuable linguistic resource linked to upward social mobility, access to standard prestige-bearing varieties of Russian have also become increasingly restricted particularly in rural areas (where access was already quite restricted). Subsequently, in the Kazakhstani context, the Russian language is becoming what Blommaert (2003) called a *bourgeois resource* because the access to it is more restricted than during the Soviet period. More recently, the place of the Russian language has become further complicated by Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine, which has subsequently undermined Russia as a desirable destination for work and education; it should be noted that the longer-term impacts of the war on shifting geopolitics and the changing status on the status of the Russian language in Kazakhstan remain to be seen.

Parent's school MOI choices for their children were (and remain) particularly striking when set against the backdrop of the Kazakhstani government's proactive and comprehensive language planning campaign to elevate the prestige of the Kazakh language, along with the particularities of how urbanization is taking place in the country.

4. Method

Since Almaty is the largest and most densely populated city in Kazakhstan and has experienced rapid urbanization in a relatively short period of time, this study was conducted in 29 Almaty schools. The research team designed a survey instrument, which examined a number of attributes, e.g., the primary language of education, perception of the socio-economic conditions around the school, school ethno-linguistic composition, and future educational plans, and was broadly intended to better understand the student characteristics of Almaty public schools through a cross-sectional lens.

The survey instrument was adopted from several sources. First, we looked at a survey that was conducted in 2005.¹ Several questions were also adopted from the PISA background information survey which has test participants answer questions regarding their homes, available and accessible resources, and their academic achievement. Since the PISA test is only taken by 15-year-olds (regardless of year in school), we thought it would be interesting to situate the data that we collected within the broader (theoretically representative) PISA data collected during the 2012 and 2009 cycles in Kazakhstan. Moreover, since students who are 15 years old are finishing secondary school, i.e., they are usually in 10th grade, we wanted to see what the education aspirations of ninth graders were. Ninth grade is the last compulsory form for students before they decide to go to college (vocational school) or look for other forms employment and is a major branching point in the Kazakhstani education system. Finally, questions from a survey conducted in six European cities by faculty members at Tilburg University were also adopted to compare the survey results in a more comparative way and over a broader age range. While the Multilingual Cities survey looked at students from grade four to 11, we initially decided to look at grades eight through 11.

The survey was conducted in nine schools in grades eight through 11. A total of 217 surveys were collected. The piloted survey was 58 questions and was distributed in both Russian and Kazakh to enable respondent choice. The pilot survey phase took place during late February and throughout March 2014. The collection period was extended by two weeks to make up for the fact that all schools were closed in late March due to various holidays and other vacation days. The finalized survey tool was a sample-based assessment, which produced data that was more flexible than what was available through the census-based statistical information provided by the Kazakhstani Institute of Statistics. It consisted of 52 questions which were divided into four sections

¹ The survey was conducted under the auspices of the international association for the promotion of cooperation with scientists from the independent states of the former Soviet Union (INTAS).

(education, language and culture, household data, and personal) and were reorganized to have personal information placed in the later part of the survey.

The main criteria used to select potential participant schools were (1) schools that had larger overall student bodies; (2) schools that had a proportionate number of students continuing from ninth to eleventh grade; and (3) language of education (Russian or Kazakh), i.e., a balanced number of overall Russian and Kazakh medium schools needed to be surveyed to have a more representative aggregated sample at the district level. The finalized survey was conducted in April–May 2014 in 158 classes in 29 comprehensive schools in all seven Almaty districts. The total number of viable surveys was 2,749. Table 2 provides an overview of the survey respondents by the school's MOI.

Table 2. Overview of the survey sample by MOI

	9th Grade		10th Grade		11th Grade	
	# of students	# of classes	# of students	# of classes	# of students	# of classes
Russian	673	31	300	17	244	17
Kazakh	484	27	333	19	241	18
Mixed	186	12	157	10	121	7
Total	1,343	70	790	46	606	42

5. Findings

5.1. MOI and student profiles: ethnicity and migration

Table 1 provides an overview of official statistics on Kazakh and Russian MOI school enrollments from the Almaty City Department of Education. What gets lost in aggregated data is that the behavior or defining characteristics of smaller populations becomes subsumed. For this reason, we took a closer look at different populations within the schools to see what patterns emerged in our survey sample.

School ethnic composition

In our sample, there was a clear difference in the ethnic composition of the schools. As shown in Table 3, the Kazakh MOI schools we surveyed were primarily mono-ethnic enterprises, i.e., less than one percent of the pupils in these schools were from other ethnic backgrounds. On the other hand, Russian MOI schools were observably more multi-ethnic and diverse. These results were similar to the findings of

the 2006–2007 INTAS survey (Smagulova 2008), which concluded that ethnic minorities consistently opted for Russian MOI schools. This similarity would suggest that this trend from 2006 was maintained or continued through 2014.

Table 3. Ethnic composition of the schools surveyed by respondents

Nationality (self-identified)	Kazakh MOI	Russian MOI	Mixed	Total
Kazakh	969	400	495	1,864
Russian	0	226	133	359
Uighur	1	72	114	187
Korean	0	32	13	45
Dungan	0	8	34	42
Tatar	1	23	14	38
Bi-cultural	3	25	9	37
German	0	10	7	17
Turk	2	10	4	16
Azeri	0	9	4	13
Others	3	48	29	80
Not available	84	85	85	254
Total	1,063	948	941	2,952

Birthplace and internal migration

Since Almaty has been undergoing rapid urbanization, it was also critical to understand how many of the respondents were also new(er) to the Almaty area. Our data indicates that most children in Russian MOI schools were at least second-generation urban dwellers. Also, when we cross-tabulated the choice of the MOI by students' birthplace, we found that slightly less than half of children in Kazakh MOI schools were born in Almaty (Table 4). Almost twenty percent of the Kazakh MOI student population in the survey sample had indicated that they were born outside of Almaty

in the predominantly Kazakh-speaking rural Almaty oblast and southern regions of Kazakhstan. This contrasted with the observation that more than 60% of students in the sample that attended in Russian MOI schools were born in Almaty with only 8.3% originating from predominantly Kazakh-speaking areas.

Table 4. School MOI choice by students' birthplace (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Almaty	Almaty Oblast	South. KZ	North, Central, East	West	Central Asia (Other)	Outside KZ (Other)	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	525 (49.4%)	81 (7.6%)	125 (11.8%)	35 (3.3%)	18 (1.7%)	2 (0.2%)	9 (0.9%)	218 (20.5%)	1,063 (100%)
Russian	582 (61.4%)	35 (3.7%)	30 (3.2%)	38 (4.0%)	13 (1.4%)	17 (1.8)	21 (2.2%)	163 (17.2%)	948 (100%)
Mixed	517 (54.9%)	67 (7.1%)	62 (6.6)	33 (3.5%)	4 (0.4%)	16 (1.7%)	11 (1.2%)	199 (21.1%)	941 (100%)
Total	1,624	183	217	106	35	35	41	580	2,952

At the time the survey was conducted, we observed that the newly added city districts tended to have a higher share of Kazakh MOI schools in comparison to the older city districts. For example, in Almaty district, founded in 1957, there were 10 Kazakh MOI, 13 Russian MOI, and six mixed schools while in Alatau district, created in 2008 (and made of several former villages), there were 16 Kazakh MOI, 10 mixed schools, and three Russian MOI schools. Interestingly, among the participants, students born outside of Kazakhstan (48.6% vs. 5.7% of children from Central Asia and 51.2% vs. 22% of children were born in further abroad) tended to choose or were placed into Russian MOI schools or were in Russian MOI classes in mixed schools.

5.2. MOI and SES of participants' families

Since it was challenging to try to determine family socio-economic status from the survey instrument, we used various proxies. In term of parents' employment, we found that parents of children in Russian MOI schools were more likely to occupy white collar jobs (23% vs. 14.9%). The data on type of residence further supported the presumption that Kazakh MOI schools have largely catered to rural migrants or residents of former rural administrative units. Almost 71% of students from Kazakh MOI schools reported that they lived in their own houses and only 14.1% said they lived in apartments. The situation was the opposite for children in Russian MOI schools with less than third of Russian school students reporting they resided in private houses, but almost 60% lived in apartments (Table 5).

Historically, high rise apartment buildings were the preferred (or more frequent) choice for those living in the central, more urban parts of Almaty. Houses were

more typical for peripheral parts of the older parts of Almaty as well as in newly established districts (because of city's expansion to and subsumption of previously rural places). Because the price of land was cheaper in newer districts, it was more affordable to build there than to buy a flat in the central part of Almaty.

Table 5. Housing types (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Own House	Rented House	Own Flat	Rented Flat	Relatives' Home	1 Room/Dorm	Other	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	753 (70.8%)	37 (3.5%)	150 (14.1%)	24 (2.3%)	25 (2.4%)	0	0	74 (7.0%)	1,063
Russian	291 (30.7%)	11 (1.2%)	547 (57.7%)	47 (5.0%)	11 (1.2%)	0	1 (0.1%)	40 (4.2%)	948
Mixed	558 (59.3%)	21 (2.2%)	243 (25.8%)	31 (3.3%)	15 (1.6%)	1 (0.1%)	2 (0.2%)	68 (7.2%)	941
Total	1,602	69	940	102	51	3	3	182	2,952

It is important to note that in these new districts, the infrastructure was less developed and there were fewer opportunities for students' educational and extracurricular activities.

Another difference between students attending Kazakh and Russian MOI schools was how they spent their vacations. Table 6 shows how students from Russian MOI schools reported travelling in and out of Kazakhstan (almost 60%) with less than third saying they spend vacations visiting relatives. This contrasted with students from Kazakh MOI schools (59%), who spent their breaks visiting relatives in *auls* or spending time with their grandparents or other extended family members. Less than third (29.1%) of Kazakh MOI school students reported traveling around Kazakhstan or abroad.

Table 6. Vacation location (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Visiting relatives	In Kazakhstan	In Central Asia	Outside of KZ and CA	Other (Unknown)	Not Available	Total
Kazakh	627 (59.0)	56 (5.3)	86 (8.1)	144 (13.5)	23 (2.2)	127 (11.9)	1,063
Russian	287 (30.3)	66 (7.0)	171 (18.0)	296 (31.2)	29 (3.1)	99 (10.4)	948
Mixed	514 (54.6)	74 (7.9)	126 (13.4)	109 (11.6)	22 (2.3)	96 (10.2)	941
Total	1,428	196	383	549	74	322	2,952

These differences between students at Kazakh versus Russian MOI schools may be interpreted in several ways. The most obvious explanation is economic, i.e., it seems that parents of students in Russian MOI schools had higher disposable incomes allowing them to go on vacations abroad. It may also have been that the relatives of most of the participants from Russian schools lived in Almaty (and most likely speak Russian). This contrasted with survey participants from Kazakh MOI schools, where the opposite seems to have been true, with their close relatives living in other regions of Kazakhstan.

Academic achievement

While these socio-demographic factors provide empirical insight into the student populations at different schools, they also have important implications for educational equity. Findings from PISA 2012 revealed a wide gap in academic achievement between students of Russian and Kazakh MOI schools (OECD 2014). Both language groups performed below the OECD average, but students from the Kazakh schools had significantly lower results in all subject areas, and the difference was highest for functional literacy results. The authors of the report noted that these results might be explained by differences in access to pre-school education as well as socio-economic and cultural differences between Russian and Kazakh speaking populations (OECD 2014).

With these results in mind, we also sought to compare college plans and supplementary educational opportunities of students of Kazakh and Russian MOI schools (Table 7). First, the respondents were asked whether they plan to take the Unified National Test (UNT) – a high-stakes, content-oriented exam used as both a high school exit and university entrance test. The results show that more students in Kazakh MOI schools indicated intent to take the test: 63.2% of students from the Kazakh MOI schools intend to take UNT in comparison to 55.6% of students from the Russian MOI schools.

Table 7. UNT plans (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Yes	No	IDK	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	672 (63.2%)	157 (14.8%)	180 (16.9%)	54 (5.1%)	1,063
Russian	527 (55.6%)	185 (19.5%)	183 (19.3%)	53 (5.6%)	948
Mixed	544 (57.8%)	199 (21.1%)	139 (14.8%)	59 (6.3%)	941
Total	1,743	541	502	166	2,952

The survey results suggest that Russian MOI school students may have had more available choices in terms of higher education options and that they were less dependent on state grants to help fund their university schooling; that is, Russian MOI school students may perhaps opt out of taking the UNT because they have options to continue education which do not require the UNT results. For example, no UNT results are needed to study in Malaysia, and to study in the Russian Federation, one can take

an oral exam at school instead of UNT.

This hypothesis was further supported by other survey results. For example, when students were asked about their college plans, it became apparent that more Kazakh MOI school students hoped to receive a state grant which would then allow them to study at university for free. Slightly more than half of the respondents indicated that they plan to apply for the state grant (Table 8).

Table 8. University choices (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Kazakh University (grant)	Kazakh University (pay)	International Branch Campus	Study Abroad	Don't Know	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	541 (50.9%)	26 (2.4%)	6 (0.6%)	138 (13.0%)	227 (21.4%)	125	1,063
Russian	168 (17.7%)	46 (4.9%)	8 (0.8%)	332 (35.0%)	246 (25.9%)	148	948
Mixed	380 (40.4%)	40 (4.3%)	5 (0.5%)	163 (17.3%)	244 (25.9%)	109	941
Total	1,089	112	19	633	717	382	2,952

In comparison to the respondents from Kazakh MOI schools, students from the Russian MOI schools indicated that they were less dependent on state support to continue education as over a third had plans to study abroad (35%) or intended to pay tuition (4.9%). Another inference we can make from these data is that children from Russian MOI schools had higher proficiency in Russian language that would then allow them to apply to universities in the Russian Federation (this was before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022).

Differences in college plans might also explain the difference in the levels of participation in extra-curricular activities. Twice as many students from the Russian MOI schools stated that they attended extracurricular tutoring (additional classes to help with school subjects). We also found that among the survey respondents, many Russian MOI school students started additional tutoring in secondary school and their parents spent more money on extra-curricular activities. Kazakh MOI students tended to start extra-curricular activities later in high school and, as seen in Table 9, nearly 20% of respondents reported attend UNT preparation courses, which focus on teaching to the test.

Table 9. Extracurricular activity participation (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Tutoring	UNT Preparation	IELTS/ TOEFL	Other Languages	Other Courses	Sports	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	193 (18.2%)	194 (18.3%)	73 (6.9%)	7 (0.7%)	80 (7.5%)	2 (0.2%)	514 (48.4%)	1,063
Russian	318 (33.5%)	96 (10.1%)	46 (4.9%)	23 (2.5%)	50 (5.3%)	2 (0.2%)	413 (43.6%)	948
Mixed	209 (22.2%)	161 (17%)	18 (1.9%)	56 (6%)	16 (1.7%)	5 (0.5%)	476 (50.6%)	941
Total	720	451	137	186	46	9	1,403	2,952

Differences in educational strategies between parents of Kazakh and Russian MOI school students were also noted in an OECD report (2014); it was observed that Kazakh-speaking families had more material wealth but invested less in symbolic wealth such as home libraries. During the Soviet period, many urban families had big home libraries, and to be considered literate one had to be well read. In this respect, the size of a home library and children's reading habits could further highlight differences between two populations. In Tables 10 and 11, students in Russian MOI schools reported that they had bigger home libraries and read more books for pleasure than students in Kazakh MOI schools.

Table 10. Size of home library (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	0–50	51–100	101–200	201–300	301–400	401–500	500+	Not avail	Total
Kazakh	358 (33.8%)	237 (22.3%)	153 (14.4%)	80 (7.5%)	46 (4.3%)	131 (12.3%)	4 (0.4%)	54 (5.0%)	1,063
Russian	207 (21.8%)	187 (21.8%)	140 (14.8%)	107 (11.3%)	79 (8.3%)	142 (15%)	55 (5.8%)	29 (3.0%)	948
Mixed	365 (18.8%)	203 (21.6%)	96 (10.2%)	67 (7.1%)	34 (0.4%)	114 (12.0%)	1 (0.1%)	61 (6.5%)	941
Total	930	627	389	254	159	387	60	144	2,952

Table 11. Reading for pleasure seen in books per year (by frequency and proportion)

MOI School	1–4	11–15	16+	Don't read	Not Avail	Total
Kazakh	370 (34.8%)	88 (8.3%)	94 (8.8%)	459 (43.0%)	52 (4.9%)	1,063
Russian	275 (29.0%)	111 (11.6%)	142 (15.0%)	395 (41.7%)	25 (2.6%)	948
Mixed	313 (33.3%)	78 (8.3%)	125 (13.3%)	374 (39.7%)	51 (5.4%)	941
Total	958	277	361	1,228	128	2,952

It is possible that many Russian-speaking families inherited their libraries and literacy practices. This snapshot may also mean that parents of students at Russian MOI schools bought more books—not because they valued books and/or had higher incomes – but because more titles were available in Russian than in Kazakh. Relatedly, the lack of books in Kazakh may also explain why Kazakh-speaking children reported reading less for pleasure. Wider accessibility of books in Russian also may suggest that Russian MOI schools had more choices of textbooks. Table 12 shows that more students in Russian MOI schools reported that their schools had not provided them with all textbooks.

Table 12. Possession of required textbooks (by frequency and proportion)

School MOI	Yes	No	Not available	Total
Kazakh	784 (73.8%)	234 (22.0%)	45 (4.2%)	1,063
Russian	639 (67.4%)	283 (30.0%)	26 (2.7%)	948
Mixed	708 (75.2%)	184 (20.0%)	49 (5.2%)	941
Total	2,131 (72.2%)	701 (23.7%)	120 (4.0%)	2,952

Given the smaller population of students in Russian MOI schools overall and school budget allocations, it is unlikely that these students were being discriminated against. Anecdotally, parents of students at Russian MOI schools are frequently asked to buy additional or alternative textbooks to complement or replace the ones recommended by the Republic of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education and Science (2018). Most of these textbooks are published in the Russian Federation.

Finally, the data seem to suggest that students' language proficiency could be one more potential source of inequality in education. The results on self-reported proficiency show that more students attending Russian MOI schools reported fluency in the MOI of the school they attended (speaking: 95.7%; reading: 92.8%; writing: 89.1%)

versus students at Kazakh MOI schools (speaking: 86.4%; reading: 86.4%; writing: 84.6%). This suggests that many ethnic Kazakhs may have chosen to educate their children in their mother tongue because they are not able to transmit the language at home (Smagulova 2019). Kazakh MOI schools may then be a last resort for parents to raise Kazakh language users. Another category of students who may have low proficiency in academic Kazakh are *qandas*, i.e., Kazakhs who have been repatriated from other countries. They speak different varieties of Kazakh or sometimes other languages (e.g., Karakalpak or Chinese) and often have limited or no proficiency in Russian to compensate for a lack of proficiency in academic Kazakh. Socio-economically, many ethnic Kazakh returnees to Kazakhstan come from a socio-economically disadvantaged background as well (Kuşçu 2013; Sancak 2007). Comparing socio-demographic characteristics of students enrolled in Russian and Kazakh MOI schools in the sample that we collected revealed that populations of these schools are different in many ways. In addition to the observation that students in Kazakh MOI schools were almost exclusively ethnic Kazakhs, they were more likely to be from families who recently relocated (or were incorporated) to the city and who maintain close ties with their relatives back home; to come from less affluent families and live further from the school. This contrasted with students in Russian MOI schools who were more likely to be fluent in the medium of instruction of their school, had more opportunities to study outside of school, read more and had more books, and were less dependent on state grants to continue education after graduating from upper secondary school.

This survey captured a cross-section of data at a specific point in time. However, it does seem that emergent socio-economic stratification as reflected in the changing nature of education (in)equality in urban Kazakhstan (with Almaty as an exemplar) is informed by the *ruralization* of urban areas. While this article does focus on providing a descriptive analysis of the socio-economic constitution of Almaty schools and is therefore limited in its analytic power, the intention of this study was to establish a baseline to better understand emerging SES in Kazakhstan to establish more robust causal roots by administering the survey over time.

6. Conclusion

This article draws on survey data collected among 2,954 students in Almaty comprehensive schools in 2014. By comparing Kazakh and Russian MOI schools in terms of family migration, SES, and academic aspirations, the paper aims to have a better understanding of the emergent nature of socio-economic stratification in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Our results suggest that expanding Kazakh MOI school infrastructure in Almaty has provided ethnic Kazakhs of various backgrounds the opportunity to study in the Kazakh language; nevertheless, the macro-language planning goal remains still out of reach, because many students in Kazakh MOI schools seem to be new urban settlers who already speak Kazakh at home. Many Russian-speaking urban residents, especially those from other ethnic minority background, continue to resist Kazakh MOI education.

Problematizing how education policy has been viewed, Asanova (2007) posited that in Kazakhstan “education policy makers tend to view the reasons of the achievement gaps as residing with schools, rather than occurring due to structural inequalities, including inequalities in learning opportunities for privileged and disadvantaged students” (Asanova 2007: 82). To move discussions beyond ongoing public debates regarding education access and language proficiency and identities, more empirical research focusing on issues of ethnic identity, socio-economic disparities, along with rural/urban divides related to the quality of education between Kazakh and Russian MOI schools is needed. Consequently, in this paper, we tried to attend to multiple dimensions of MOI choice – socioeconomic and ethnic background of students, residential characteristics, and the adequacy of home and community resources – to better understand the nature of socio-economic stratification in Kazakhstan today. Our findings from 29 urban Almaty schools indicated that there are systemic socio-economic inequalities between students of Kazakh and Russian MOI schools.

This study was an initial attempt to critically evaluate the changing education market in the context of rapid urbanization. It is evident that more such interdisciplinary studies are needed. What is the impact of private education and shadow education on educational equity? What is the relationship between home language and literacy practices and academic achievement and social mobility? What is the impact of the current language-in-education policy on social cohesion? As the events of January 2022 demonstrated, understanding, and addressing the root causes of socio-economic stratification in the Kazakhstani context remains critical to understanding what may contribute to socio-political (in)stability and so, continues to warrant closer examination.

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