

Dissertation Topic:
Teachers as reform changers: How senior teachers in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan impact education reforms

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Countries that face teacher shortages often look for innovative ways to attract new teachers to the profession. Policy makers within the education sector look for remedies to teacher shortages that are suitable for their country. However, policies for attracting new teachers into the profession are not always suitable for the context of the country, particularly when the ideas are based on “best practices” from other sectors or education systems in other countries (Steiner-Khamsi 2004). When policies are adopted based on models that do not fit local cultural norms, reforms can be met with resistance. My research seeks to examine how policies aimed to attract new teachers impact schools, (including implementation of reforms at the school level), intergenerational dynamics among new and experienced teachers, and how teachers who stand to lose from new reforms employ agency to modify or undo reforms.

My proposed research will take place in Bishkek, the capital city of the Kyrgyz Republic. In 2011, facing the challenge of teacher shortages across the country and most acutely in the capital, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic introduced a teacher salary reform aimed to attract new teachers to the profession. To appeal to recent Bachelor and Master’s degree graduates, the reform shifted teacher compensation from a long-standing practice of remuneration based on years of teaching experience to a model based on teachers’ level of education. The reform also allocated a portion of teacher salary funds to be disbursed as bonus pay, based on criteria set at the school level. The reform structure was heralded by local and international policy makers as an innovative approach to remedy the country’s persisting teacher shortages as well as the low quality of teaching (UNICEF Kyrgyzstan 2014). What was unanticipated, however, was the adverse affect this reform would have at the school level, particularly on senior teachers who experienced the reform as a threat to their social status and salary stability. Within six months, the reform began to be modified at the legislative level and by 2014 the reform had seen significant revisions, which resulted in an unwinding of the reform’s goals of bringing more young professionals to the workforce, increasing the education level of teachers, and introducing incentivized teachers via bonus pay (UNICEF Kyrgyzstan 2014). While it is known that the reform has now been largely undone, what is not clear is the process through which this was achieved. As such, this is the focus of my research. This topic is particularly relevant at this time since the issue of teacher remuneration and credentialing continues to be high on the agenda of the Ministry of Education and Science.

Focusing on teachers and schools as my units of analysis, I intend to examine how senior teachers (those with over 30 years of teaching experience) in the capital city of the

Kyrgyz Republic have coped with the teacher salary reform introduced in 2011 that has undermined their social status and financial stability by raising remuneration to benefit new entrants to the teaching profession with advanced academic preparation over teachers with tenure and extensive teaching experience. I will investigate the ways in which teachers who lost benefits as a result of the reforms have utilized their individual and collective agency and drawn on their social networks within and outside of schools to resist and change the reform. This includes modifying the reform to conform to the context of their school and to more closely reflect the social hierarchies within the larger context of Kyrgyz society, which has traditional values including age-hierarchies, deference to expertise, and collective decision-making (Niyozov and Shamatov, 2006; Shamatov, 2006).

Research questions include:

- How do senior teachers employ individual and collective agency and leverage social capital within and outside of school?
- Who are the main allies of senior teachers within school and outside of school?
- How do school administrators, policymakers, and communities respond to the efforts of senior teachers to modify reforms?

The data will be collected through interviews, focus groups, observation, policy document analysis, and collection of data on teacher salaries at the district and school levels. This study will include a selection of 10 schools in the city of Bishkek. Schools will be selected based on a purposive sampling technique by school type to ensure representation of the following school criteria: language of instruction (i.e. Kyrgyz, Russian, mixed language in schools); and special status of school (i.e. gymnasium, lyceum, special needs school, or other).

Approximately 124, including 20 school administrators (2 from each of the 10 schools); 60-80 teachers (6-8 from each of the 10 schools); and approximately 20 community members (on average 2 from each of the 10 schools, noting that some schools may have a larger number of community members willing to participate in a interview or focus group, while other schools may have no community members willing to be interviewed or participate in a focus group).

In 2010 and in 2014, I had the opportunity to contribute to two critical studies commissioned by UNICEF-Bishkek. The first study examines teacher salary structures of six countries in the Central and Eastern Europe and former USSR, including the Kyrgyz Republic. In 2014, I contributed to a follow up study commissioned by the Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Education and Science to examine the impact of a reform to the teacher salary structure, which is now at the center of my dissertation work.

I would be honored to join the Central Asian Studies Institute at the American University of Central Asia as a visiting fellow. Thank you for considering my application for being part of the AUCA community.

References:

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