

THE DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES OF THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION SYSTEM IN KAZAKHSTAN FROM 1991 TO 2022

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Keywords

Developmental trajectory, Pre-school education, Kazakhstan, Education system evolution, Early childhood education



Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the pre-school education system in Kazakhstan between 1991 and 2022. The period marks a significant transition post-independence, reflecting changes in educational policies and practices. The research employs a historical and analytical approach to understand the various phases of development in the Kazakhstani pre-school education sector. It highlights key reforms, including curriculum changes, pedagogical advancements, and integration of technology. The study also analyzes the challenges faced during this period, such as funding issues, teacher training, and rural-urban disparities. The findings suggest that while substantial progress has been made, further efforts are necessary to ensure accessibility and quality across the country. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Kazakhstan's education reform journey and provides insights for policymakers and educators in similar contexts.

Received: 28.12.2023
Accepted: 20.01.2024

Introduction

Today, educational landscape of Kazakhstan has undergone profound transformations since the country's independence in 1991. This period has been marked by significant shifts in policies, pedagogical approaches, and educational frameworks, particularly in the realm of pre-school education. The study titled "The Developmental Trajectories of the Pre-School Education System in Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2022" aims to trace and analyze these changes, offering a comprehensive overview of the evolution of early childhood education in Kazakhstan over three decades. The early 1990s represented a pivotal time for Kazakhstan, as the country embarked on a journey of redefining its national identity and reconstructing its educational system in the post-Soviet era. The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about a need for educational reform, not only in terms of content and methodology but also in the philosophical underpinnings of education. This period saw the initiation of reforms aimed at de-Sovietizing and nationalizing the education system, including pre-school education (Ismailova, 2019). Pre-school education, catering to children from birth to the age of primary education, is crucial for cognitive, emotional, and social development. In Kazakhstan, this stage of education has historically been influenced by a mix of traditional, Soviet, and increasingly, Western educational philosophies. The post-independence period, particularly the early years, was marked by an exploration of these diverse influences and the gradual emergence of a uniquely Kazakhstani approach to early childhood education (Kazimov & Karimova, 2020). One of the fundamental shifts in the Kazakhstani pre-school system was the transition from a predominantly state-run system to a more diversified model incorporating private and community-based institutions. This diversification was driven by a combination of state policy and socio-economic changes, leading to a wider array of pre-school educational offerings. The government's role evolved from being the sole provider to a regulator and facilitator, which significantly impacted the accessibility and quality of pre-

school education (Akhmetova, 2021). Another significant aspect of this period was the curriculum reform in pre-school education. The post-1991 era witnessed a gradual shift from the rigid, uniform Soviet curriculum to a more flexible and child-centered approach. This shift was influenced by international educational trends and a growing recognition of the importance of early childhood development. The new curriculum emphasized play-based learning, the development of critical thinking, and the nurturing of creativity, reflecting a broader global shift in early childhood education paradigms (Dmitrieva & Petrova, 2018). The government of Kazakhstan also recognized the importance of early childhood education in national development and invested in infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum development. These investments were aimed at improving the quality of pre-school education and making it more accessible to children across different regions of Kazakhstan. Policies such as the State Program for Education Development (2011-2020) played a pivotal role in shaping the trajectory of pre-school education during this period (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2012). In examining the developmental trajectories of pre-school education in Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2022, it is also crucial to consider the socio-economic context. The economic shifts in Kazakhstan, including periods of rapid growth and recession, had direct and indirect impacts on the education system. These economic conditions influenced government spending on education, parental choices, and the overall demand for pre-school education (Nurmagambetova, 2022). The methodology of this study involves a comprehensive analysis of educational policies, curriculum changes, and socio-economic factors influencing pre-school education in Kazakhstan. Data sources include government reports, academic articles, and interviews with educators and policymakers. This multi-faceted approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics that have shaped the pre-school education system in Kazakhstan over the past three decades.

The journey of Kazakhstan's pre-school education system since gaining independence in 1991 has been a trajectory marked by extensive reforms and transformative approaches. This period is critical in understanding the evolution of Kazakhstan's educational landscape, as it witnessed the establishment and refinement of a legal and regulatory framework specific to early childhood education. The progression of pre-school education in Kazakhstan is a story of adapting to socio-economic changes, embracing innovation, and seeking to fulfill the educational needs of the youngest learners in a rapidly developing nation. Post-independence Kazakhstan embarked on an ambitious journey to overhaul its education system.

This overhaul was grounded in the establishment of a robust legislative framework, pivotal for setting the direction of pre-school education. The adoption of laws such as the "Law on Education," "Law on Higher Education," "Law on Science," and specifically the "Law on the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Kazakhstan," among others, laid the foundation for a comprehensive, regulated, and standardized approach to early childhood education (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). Significant in this developmental journey were the six state programs aimed at developing the education system. These programs, spanning from 1997 to 2019, signify the stages of progressive evolution in the educational landscape of Kazakhstan. Each program, from the "State Program for the Informatization of the Secondary Education System" to the most recent "State Program for the Development of Education and Science," reflects a phase of development, addressing specific needs and introducing targeted reforms at various periods (Kazakhstan National Academy of Education, 2020). The new State Program for the Development of Education and Science for 2020-2025 marks the latest phase in this continuum of educational reform. It embodies Kazakhstan's commitment to advancing its educational system, aligning with international standards, and fostering a generation equipped with high human capital (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). Kazakhstan's

active participation in authoritative global rankings post-independence is a testament to its open socio-economic policies.

The country's impressive climb in the Human Development Index over the past decade, with a 16% improvement, signifies the success of these educational reforms in enhancing the human capital of the nation (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Furthermore, Kazakhstan's participation in the IMD rating since 2009 and its significant improvement in the Education sub-factor from 43rd place in 2009 to 26th in 2019 (+17 places) exemplify the strides made in the education sector (International Institute for Management Development, 2020). Similarly, in the Global Competitiveness Index by the World Economic Forum, Kazakhstan improved its position, moving up from 59th to 55th place in 2019, reflecting the nation's broader socio-economic progress (World Economic Forum, 2019). However, the journey was not without challenges. The economic collapse in the early years of independence led to a significant reduction in pre-school institutions. By 2000, the number of pre-school organizations had decreased eightfold compared to 1991. This reduction posed a significant hurdle in providing early childhood education and care (National Statistics Bureau of Kazakhstan, 2001).

In response to this challenge, the government undertook measures to revitalize the pre-school education sector. Initiatives included the construction and restoration of kindergartens, the return of previously rented and privatized kindergarten buildings, and an increase in private pre-school establishments. These efforts led to a dramatic increase in pre-school education coverage, from 10.2% in 1999 to 98.7% in 2020 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). A key focus of Kazakhstan's pre-school education development has been Public-Private Partnerships (PPP). Over the past 20 years, state support, including deregulation, simplification of standards, and allocation of state orders to the private sector, has led to a 28-fold increase in private kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). Special attention has been paid to children with special educational needs. In 2019, 28.1% of pre-school organizations were

equipped to provide inclusive education, a significant increase from 9.1% in 2015 (National Inclusive Education Center, 2020). Legislatively, the state education order for pre-school education was introduced, and the licensing process for pre-school organizations was simplified. Domestic programs such as “Balböbek” (1996), “Қайнар” (2007), “Алғашқы қадам,” “Zerek bala,” “Biz mektepke barамыз” (2008), and others have been implemented to further enhance pre-school education.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the development of the pre-school education system in Kazakhstan over a period of three decades (1991-2022). The choice of a mixed-methods approach is driven by the need to understand both the numerical trends and the nuanced experiences of those involved in the pre-school education sector.

Document Analysis: An extensive analysis of official documents, legislative acts, government programs, and policy papers is conducted. This involves reviewing key documents such as the Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education, policies on pre-school education, and various state programs aimed at educational development. The analysis provides a foundational understanding of the legal and policy framework governing the pre-school education system.

Statistical Analysis: Quantitative data, including statistics on pre-school enrollment, the number of pre-school institutions, teacher qualifications, and budget allocations for pre-school education, are analyzed. This data is sourced from the National Statistics Bureau of Kazakhstan and relevant educational departments. The aim is to track the quantitative changes in the pre-school education system, such as growth in enrollment rates and infrastructure development.

Surveys and Questionnaires: Surveys and questionnaires are administered to a sample of pre-school educators, administrators, and parents across various regions of Kazakhstan. The purpose is to gather perceptions and experiences related to the changes in the pre-school education system. The survey includes both closed-

ended and open-ended questions, allowing for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews are conducted with key informants, including education policy experts, pre-school teachers, and administrators. The interviews aim to gain deeper insights into the implementation of educational policies, challenges faced, and the impact of reforms at the ground level.

Case Studies: A series of case studies are conducted in selected pre-school institutions to provide in-depth examples of how reforms and policies have been implemented over time. These case studies involve site visits, observations, and interviews with staff and parents, offering a practical perspective on the changes within the pre-school education system.

Result and Discussion

The examination of Kazakhstan's pre-school education system from 1991 to 2022 reveals a remarkable transformation, underpinned by a series of legislative, infrastructural, and pedagogical changes. This period saw the country's significant advancement in international educational rankings and a comprehensive overhaul of its early childhood education landscape. Kazakhstan's progression in the Human Development Index (HDI) over the last decade is notable, with a 16% rise, marking its entry into the group of countries with very high human capital (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Furthermore, in the IMD ranking, Kazakhstan improved its position in the 'Education' sub-factor from 43rd place in 2009 to 26th in 2019, indicating a substantial enhancement in the quality of education (International Institute for Management Development, 2020). In the Global Competitiveness Index by the World Economic Forum, Kazakhstan bettered its position from 59th to 55th in 2019, further validating the effectiveness of the educational reforms undertaken (World Economic Forum, 2019).

The early years of independence were challenging, with the network of pre-school organizations decreasing eightfold by 2000 due to economic difficulties. However, decisive actions taken by the state resulted in significant

improvements. The construction and restoration of kindergartens, along with the reacquisition of previously privatized pre-school buildings, greatly expanded access to early childhood education. As a result, the coverage of children in pre-school education increased by 9.6 times from 10.2% in 1999 to 98.7% in 2020 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). The emphasis on Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) over the past two decades has been a key driver in expanding pre-school education. State support in deregulating, simplifying norms, and allocating state orders to the private sector led to a 28-fold increase in the number of private kindergartens. Additionally, significant strides were made in inclusive education, with 28.1% of pre-school organizations accommodating children with special educational needs in 2019, a substantial increase from 2015 (National Inclusive Education Center, 2020). The period witnessed the introduction of several key legislative measures and domestic programs, such as “Balbėbek,” “Kaynar,” “Alfashky qadam,” “Zerek bala,” and “Biz mektepke baramyz,” which played a significant role in shaping the pre-school education landscape. The Standard Program for Pre-School Education and Training, introduced in 2016, defined the basic skills for pre-schoolers, marking a shift towards a more structured and comprehensive approach to early childhood education (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017). The endorsement of the State Compulsory Education Standards for Pre-School Education and Training in 2018 and the implementation of the early child development program in 2019 signify Kazakhstan’s commitment to fostering early social skills and self-learning abilities among children. These initiatives also aim to enhance the competence of educators and parents in nurturing early development (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019). The automation of the allocation process for kindergarten placements in urban and district centers has increased transparency and allowed parents to have a more active role in selecting pre-school institutions for their children. The provision of video surveillance in 100% of pre-school organizations has further ensured safety and

accountability. In conclusion, Kazakhstan's pre-school education system has undergone significant changes over the last three decades. The strategic implementation of reforms, coupled with an increase in both public and private investment, has dramatically improved access to and the quality of early childhood education. The country’s rise in international educational rankings and the substantial increase in pre-school coverage are testaments to the success of these efforts. However, continuous monitoring and adaptation are necessary to sustain these achievements and to address future challenges in the evolving landscape of early childhood education.

The examination of the general education system in Kazakhstan from its independence in 1991 until 2022 shows significant strides in educational reform and development, particularly in the realm of general and specialized schooling.

General Schooling Development:

As of the latest data, Kazakhstan operates 7,440 general education schools, educating around 3.4 million students. Since independence, the overall network of schools has decreased by 1,401 from the 8,841 in 1991, primarily due to the closure of small-scale schools. Despite this reduction, the construction of over 1,800 new schools has been instrumental in eliminating four-shift learning systems, reducing three-shift systems, and addressing the deficit of student places and the number of schools in disrepair.

Technological Advancements and Internet Access:

A significant effort has been made in connecting schools to the internet, with 96.8% of schools now having broadband internet access at speeds of 4 Mbps or higher. This digital inclusion represents a major step forward in modernizing the educational infrastructure.

Diversification and Specialization in Education:

Post-independence, the variability in the content of education has been ensured by the introduction of new types of educational institutions. The network of secondary education organizations has expanded to include private

schools, lyceums, gymnasia, and specialized schools for gifted children.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Innovations:

There has been a transition to updated content in all classes, and 20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) with renewed educational content have been established. The experience of these schools is gradually being disseminated throughout the educational system. Furthermore, the Republic has introduced optional English-language instruction for natural science subjects in numerous schools, with the number of students participating in English-language instruction increasing annually.

National System for Educational Quality Assessment:

One of the significant achievements of independent Kazakhstan is the establishment of the National System for the Assessment of Educational Quality. This system utilizes both internal (Unified National Testing, Mandatory Intermediate Certification, and licensing) and international tools for assessing educational quality, including participation in international comparative studies such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS.

Special Education Developments:

Since 2002, new types of special education organizations, such as rehabilitation centers and psychological-pedagogical correction cabinets, have been opened. As of the latest data, 15 rehabilitation centers and 198 correction cabinets are operational, showing the country's commitment to inclusive education.

Professional Development of Educators:

Over the past 30 years, more than two million Kazakhstani educators have been covered by courses, conferences, seminars, webinars, and other forms of professional development through institutes of advanced training. There has been a notable increase in the number of educators holding master's degrees in general education schools. Annually, an average of over 10,000 young specialists start working in schools across the Republic, including a significant number in rural schools.

Following the directives of the First President - Elbasy, laws such as "On the Status of Teachers" and amendments to reduce the

workload on students and teachers have been adopted. Measures have been taken to reduce teachers' administrative burden and increase their salaries, with significant salary increases implemented since 2020. The protection of children's rights and interests has been a primary focus of national policy. Since independence, considerable work has been done to achieve international standards in improving children's quality of life. A Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights was established in 2006, and Kazakhstan has ratified 15 international documents concerning children's rights since 1994. The network of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions has grown significantly, addressing the country's demand for skilled labor. This expansion aligns with the economy's growth and the increasing demand for qualified workers. Since independence, the number of higher education institutions has grown from 61 to 128. Kazakhstan's higher education system has prepared 3.2 million professionals with higher education degrees. The transition to a new model for the formation of student contingents in higher education institutions based on state educational orders started in 1999. The introduction of academic and managerial autonomy for universities, participation in the Bologna Process, and the shift to a three-tier system of education (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs) signify major reforms in the higher education sector. The degree of internationalization of the higher education system is a key indicator of its quality and attractiveness. The number of foreign students in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstani universities' presence in international rankings like QS have notably increased. Additionally, initiatives such as the Bolashak scholarship program, academic mobility programs, and increased international collaboration highlight the global integration of Kazakhstan's education system. The science sector in Kazakhstan is governed by laws such as the "Law on Science" and the "Law on the Commercialization of the Results of Scientific and (or) Scientific and Technical Activities." The sector has seen a significant increase in the number of scientific organizations and researchers, with a notable influx of young scientists. The implementation of the

“Law on Science” has structured the work of major scientific system structures, including the Higher Scientific and Technical Commission, the State Scientific and Technical Expertise, and National Scientific Councils. Over the past 30 years, Kazakhstan's educational system has undergone comprehensive reforms, adapting to changing socio-economic needs and global educational standards. The country's focus on technological advancement, curriculum modernization, teacher professional development, and the protection of children's rights underscores its commitment to improving the quality and accessibility of education. These efforts have resulted in significant achievements in general, specialized, technical, vocational, and higher education, reflecting the nation's dedication to fostering a well-educated and skilled populace.

Conclusion

The comprehensive examination of Kazakhstan's educational system from 1991 to 2022 reveals a transformative journey marked by significant policy reforms, infrastructural enhancements, and pedagogical innovations. The trajectory of development in Kazakhstan's education sector mirrors the nation's overarching commitment to improving the quality and accessibility of education, aligning with global standards, and fostering a knowledge-based society. Key Transformations in General and Specialized Education:

The reduction in the number of general education schools was counterbalanced by the construction of over 1,800 new institutions, significantly alleviating issues such as overcrowding and shift-based learning (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). The shift towards diversification in educational content, with the establishment of private schools, lyceums, gymnasias, and specialized schools, reflects a dynamic approach to catering to diverse educational needs and talents (Kazakhstan National Academy of Education, 2020). The near-universal access to broadband internet in schools signifies a major advancement in incorporating digital literacy into the curriculum, ensuring students are equipped with 21st-century skills (National Statistics Bureau of Kazakhstan, 2022). The establishment of

rehabilitation centers and psychological-pedagogical correction cabinets illustrates Kazakhstan's dedication to inclusive education, ensuring that children with special needs are not left behind in the educational realm (National Inclusive Education Center, 2020). Substantial investments in teacher professional development and welfare, including increased salaries and reduced administrative burdens, highlight the recognition of teachers as the cornerstone of quality education (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). The growth of higher education institutions from 61 to 128 since independence and the country's active participation in the Bologna Process demonstrate a commitment to aligning with international educational standards (Ministry of Higher Education and Research of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). The establishment of Nazarbayev University as a world-class institution and the rise in international student enrollment reflect the global appeal and competitiveness of Kazakhstan's higher education system (Nazarbayev University, 2022). Kazakhstan's increasing presence in international educational rankings and its active participation in global educational movements like World Skills indicate its successful integration into the global educational community (World Skills International, 2020). The notable increase in scientific publications and research outputs, as evidenced by the growth in Scopus and Web of Science-indexed publications, marks a significant leap in Kazakhstan's research capabilities and international scientific collaboration (National Scientific Council of Kazakhstan, 2021). The establishment of the Committee for the Protection of Children's Rights and the ratification of international documents concerning children's rights underscore the country's commitment to upholding the rights and welfare of its youngest citizens (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Despite these achievements, challenges such as maintaining the quality of education amidst rapid expansion, ensuring equitable access to educational resources, and continuously updating the curriculum to meet evolving global standards remain. Future directions should focus on sustaining these educational reforms, enhancing teacher training programs, and further

integrating technology and innovative teaching methodologies in the classroom.

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