

Students Tribulations from Rural Area

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Abstract

The recent emergence and rapid amplifications of modernization of Kazakhstan have led to a major interest in education that combines the best global practices and international research. In light of the latest developments in this sphere, educational attainments are becoming a vital component for the prosperity of the whole country. As Yakavets (2013) claims, especially teaching gifted children is considered a vehicle for improving the competitiveness of education, developing national human capital, and reforming society. Therefore, the Kazakhstani Government has paid a great deal of attention to discovering, teaching and maintaining giftedness. The education policy of our country ensures a wide range of opportunities for promoting gifted children, as “one of the objectives of the national education policy is to identify and provide guidance and support to gifted children to facilitate the development of well-educated, competitive, and creative personalities” (OECD 2014). These students are offered a variety of educational services, starting with the opportunity of participating in the international Olympiads. For example, 3966 schools, including primary and secondary schools, as well as other specialized schools, educated 814 177 students in 2012 (IAC 2014). The learning materials of these schools are more complex than in ordinary secondary schools and focus deeply on the subjects as physical sciences and mathematics, or chemistry and biology.

It has to be noted that these special educational organizations are located only in city centers, whilst rural areas with a great number of gifted students are still not the subject of concern, although the number of schools and students in these regions exceed those in urban ones. According to statistics, there are 5569 secondary schools (out of 7222) with 1 275 962 (out of 2615898) students located in remote areas (NCESA 2015). One of the revolutionary ideas of treating exceptional students was the opening of Nazarbayev Intellectual schools.

Key Words: Environment for Rural Dwellers, Competitiveness of Education, And Quantitative Reasoning.

Introduction

As Minister of Education Bakhytzhon Zhumagulov pointed out “they are destined to become engines of development throughout the whole secondary school network” (Bartlett 2012). There is a network of twenty-two associated schools, located in the city centers, as well as an international school and a specialist

mathematics school in Astana. These schools are making headways in teaching either mathematics and physics or chemistry and biology. The NIS programs are formed in direct cooperation with Cambridge University, where the modern teaching methods and global educational practices are applied to the Kazakhstani context. One of the significant aspects to point out is the NIS curriculum, which is simultaneously promoting Kazakh, Russian and English languages as well. This highly standardized system is supported by the Government with the preeminent classroom and human resources at a relatively maintained level. To be precise, the instructional resources for NIS are comparable to those in OECD countries, with new facilities and sizeable libraries (e.g. 181 books per enrolled student in the Astana NIS) and widespread availability of such technologies as mini-TV studios (eight NIS), “interactive floors” (six NIS), high-speed internet access in newly opened school buildings, interactive white boards, and equipped science laboratories. Moreover, teachers in NIS are rigorously selected and around 15 percent have a Masters’ degree or a PhD in science; and 17 percent are foreign teachers .

This reform requires an alliance between stakeholders in shops, churches, sports clubs, post offices, schools and pubs. It appears strange that these groups have a common cause and yet they have failed to combine their efforts. They need a convener. County councils must bring together the valuable community resources embodied in the villages. This virtuous circle would have wider benefits because the change can contribute to other sectors of the economy. Ireland’s village network is an invaluable resource for the tourism industry and it should be more vigorously supported by Faillte Ireland. Village businesses would greatly benefit from the development of the green ways and other tourism initiatives. Money spent by recreational visitors can make the difference between viability and failure for small out of the way businesses. Remember how successful riverside stops by cruisers are for businesses on the river Shannon and other waterways. Those who visit the Gaeltacht can also see how this works; they are surprised at the choice of shops and pubs where the local trade alone would not sustain it. The Minister for the Environment must issue a directive limiting the spread of random rural housing. This could be done by allowing not more than 10 per cent per annum outside the urban speed- limit zone. We could expect a positive outcome for villages. Lifting the pollution burden of septic tanks would also bring a cleaner environment for rural dwellers. There would be less rural isolation and the age profile would be more balanced. This reform should, however, be given a time limit. Those county councils that fail to reform, by acquiring plots/sites for village housing and implementing them within a decade, should be amalgamated with neighboring more progressive councils. Dr Diarmuid Ó Gráda is a planning consultant

The agricultural sector is well organized .

Problems

All the above-mentioned educational opportunities have raised a great interest in enrolling to these schools and resulting in strong competition among the applicants, when it comes to a school admission process. NIS entrance examinations test students’ knowledge of mathematics and science (quantitative reasoning and

spatial thinking). At the same time, their Kazakh, Russian, and English language skills are also assessed through multiple-choice tests. Applicants, who pass these exams successfully, will be awarded an “Orken” scholarship, which is established by the first President of the Republic of Kazakhstan to pay the tuition of talented children in the specialised educational organization “Nazarbayev Intellectual schools”. The number of grants is not specified, but per student it accounts for KZT 1,656,433 (EUR 4,148) without living in a dormitory, and if a dormitory is provided KZT 2,554,900 (EUR 6,397). According to a resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2015), the scholarship is granted to a student based on the high performance on the entrance test. In case of equal result scores, the priority is given to those who have higher scores in mathematics. The same opportunities are given to both rural and urban schoolchildren. However, while ensuring equal requirements for all children, it seems that we are neglecting the equity in offering these educational opportunities. In our case, remote and urban schoolchildren might be considered as two contrasting areas with incomparable educational roots, in other words, as Adams (1993) highlighted, learners may differ in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, aptitudes and abilities. Equity fundamentally implies that such differences are recognized and appropriate adaptations are made in educational practice. According to SPED (MIS 2011), with these sharp discrepancies both schools are causing some difficulties facing contemporary rural schools in our country that affect the whole learning process itself. Some of the pervasive problems can be classified as follows, which are ubiquitous for most of the rural schools:

- 1) Lack of specialists: teachers with the highest category are between two and three times lower in rural than in urban areas. By contrast, the proportion of teachers without category is noticeably higher in rural areas (OECD 2015).
- 2) Lack of internet access and ICT in teaching: Rural small-class schools claimed that the lack of internet access caused a deficiency of such newer technologies as “interactive white boards” in these schools; nearly all (93%) of urban schools but fewer than half (43%) of rural schools have “interactive classrooms” (IAC 2014).
- 3) Lack of adequate facilities: Such factors as temperature control, ventilation and safety are basic conditions of the educational process. Quality of the educational environment can affect progress of pupils up to 25 percent. It is also said that roughly 42.5 percent of rural small-class schools in Kazakhstan are located in the adapted buildings (Musina 2015). Consequently, the hurdles that our remote schools face show some negative repercussions. For example, in the Kazakhstan’s Unified National Test taken as a combined school-leaving and university entry test, students in rural schools had an average of 66.50 points, while students in urban schools scored 76.16. Additionally, the average urban – rural difference in the results was 8.74 points in 2013 in favour of urban areas (NCESE 2013b). As in PISA 2009, average reading performance was 376 score points for children in villages or rural areas, 383 for children in towns, 419 for children in large cities and 431 for children in the cities of Astana and Almaty (OECD 2015).

All the listed evidence indicates that children from the rural schools may not be able to compete with their peers from the city centres at the same level. Hence, passing NIS entrance exams and accounting for the same rates of both different school types seems problematic. According to the annual report of NIS for 2016, the

distribution of the NIS grants in seventh grades can be categorised as follows: 1,612 (12.1%) learners are from multiple-child and needy families, 2,097 (16.1%) learners are from single-parent families, 383 (1.6%) learners have elderly parents, 280 (2.1%) learners have one or more handicapped parents, 30 (0.2%) disabled learners, 28 (0.2%) children living with guardians, one learner from an orphanage, 2,667 (19.9%) learners are children from rural areas, villages and small towns. The last one indicates the number of children enrolled to NIS schools from the faraway regions of our country. However, these figures may show more than 20 percent, if we take into account that number of children attending these schools are roughly the half of all children (49.1%). Quantity has to show results in the quality also, if we want to use our human resources effectively.

Water Facilities

It's almost dusk and scenes of people from all ages walking/riding up to the village's Nandini Dairy for selling their daily yield of milk are commonplace. Image credit: Amoolya Rajappa Many elderly people clad in khaki shorts walk in and out of the small dairy shop emptying cans of milk mostly carried on bicycles and motorcycles. The village dairy buys milk from villagers at an approximate cost of 24 rupees though the selling price (post pasteurization and other treatments) is 34 rupees. A computerised system allows the dairy people to measure fat content and determine the price of milk in a fair manner. Sixty-year-old Shivanna sells about 3-4 litres of milk every day. When asked if the proceeds benefit him, he complains, It's hardly anything compared to the money I have to invest in cattle fodder, vaccination and maintenance of my two cows. Image credit: Amoolya Rajappa The newly opened RO water purification plant of about 20,000 litre capacity sells water to villagers at rupees two per litre, which most people carry on motorcycles again. I inquire if all villagers have motorcycles at home to which the villagers around calmly reply, "The ones who do not own one, borrow from others and instead get them water in return as a goodwill gesture."

Banking

Its late noon when I enter the Kaveri Grameen Bank located in Kora. Even as the manager greets me, I observe how a few villagers are busy conversing with the women employees at the bank. Established in accordance with the 1975 Regional Rural Bank guidelines, the Kaveri Grameena Bank was set up in Kora thirty years ago, to primarily aid in better implementation of government schemes. Gradually having opened to financing, the bank today holds four to five thousand accounts of people from surrounding villages. According to the manager of the bank, "Wide publicity for schemes like Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana and Direct Benefit transfer (DBT) for LPG and MG-NREGA-related transactions has led to an increasing number of rural population opting to open bank accounts". A high reaching wall on both sides of the road hinders better connectivity for the villagers of Kora. Image credit:. As the manager explains, Though we charge an interest rate of 7 percent, the number of farmers who have defaulted on agriculture loans has increased due to repeated droughts in the region. Even the ones capable of repaying sometimes default owing to successive governments that promise on farm loan waivers. Apart from agriculture loans, the bank also lends for educational purposes, housing and to Self Help Groups (SHG) in need. However, despite immediate banking

facilities, a few villagers opt for deceitful microfinance groups, unreliable pawnbrokers, and local moneylenders who charge high interest rates from villagers who borrow money to meet personal and medical emergencies.

Alternatives

The explained challenges of rural children struggling through the admission process of Nazarbayev Intellectual schools should be resolved as soon as possible. Moreover, close attention has to be paid to the effectiveness of this policy decision explaining the main contributing reasons for this dimension. Yet, an effective way will serve all the interests of applicants. As Adams (1993) notes, if the distribution, opportunities and consequences are seen unfair, “efficient” policies of education may need to be supplemented by other policies in order to achieve an adequate level of equity. It is therefore that the administrative and political feasibilities are also considered to be crucial measuring points, as the proposals can be implemented only after the government and public permissions. Furthermore, the efficiency of this alternative must be analyzed, as our concern is directly connected with budgets and state funding. These tightly coupled criteria may attain great results when contributing factors of all sides are taken into account. Hence, the alternatives recommended for solving the disparities related to the matter of our concern will be analyzed for benefits and drawbacks as well.

The first alternative is to distribute 30 percent of grants for schoolchildren from rural areas from “Orken” scholarship. This bestowing of scholarships for students from remote schools is not a new idea for our country. As we already know, it is already working in sharing state grants for entrance to higher educational organisations. The rural quota does not add points to the results of the United National Testing UNT. According to the Rules for the award of educational grants in the Republic of Kazakhstan (2008), if seventy percent of grants from the total number are allocated to the general competition, remaining thirty percent of grants are held only for citizens from the village youth. Thus, in the presence of a rural quota, the chances of obtaining a grant are increased, by reducing the number of applicants for a grant in the specialty.

What might happen if we implement the same policy for NIS? From table 1 below we can predict some pros and cons in the following criteria:

Policy

First and foremost, distributing additional scholarship for rural schoolchildren solves the problem of equity for rural youth. Moreover, it will increase their willingness and motivation, as it lowers the strong competition among all children. When they understand the governmental support, they will feel more secure,

which reduces stress and pressure connected with these examinations. On the contrary, by giving special advantage for rural children, we omit to consider any support for the urban schoolchildren. Secondly, by legislation of the grant numbers for village children we will ensure their enrolment. Previously mentioned statistics about the twenty percent acceptance of rural schoolchildren to NIS will not be a guarantee that the approximate number of children will be enrolled for the next years, as these data were taken only after enrolment process and not before. One of the drawbacks shown here is the discrepancy in performance of students. Certainly, schoolchildren from rural schools might have some difficulties in some subjects.

In most cases, there might be language barriers (English, Kazakh, Russian, Geography as taught in Kazakh, World History – taught in Russian, etc.). Thus, one suggestion here is to organise extra language lessons during their first year of education. Especially, teachers' positive attitude and supportive environment will be crucial factors for newcomers. As a result, the adaptation process will go smoothly and the following year they will have the same achievement results as others.

In terms of efficiency, this alternative will require additional financial support, which also forces the government to make some expenditure on it. However, if we just divide the whole budget into two groups, as in the UNT system, we will not need any padding expenses. The second alternative is to ensure financial support for rural schoolchildren. Of course, opening schools in rural regions will not be an effective option here.

Financial Help

A huge advantage with this option is the solution for the problems connected with the supplementary expenses, since a large part of the financially vulnerable population of the country are living in rural areas. Precisely, transportation costs would require a considerable sum of money from parents of children applied for the test. The main concern for children from rural areas is a long distance from NIS schools, as the existing twenty schools are in the city centres. For example, for one student living in village of Telman located 200 kilometres from Karaganda, it will cost approximately KZT 5000 (EUR 12.50), if they have their own car. The situation changes when they have no vehicles: hiring a taxi will cost KZT 15000 (EUR 37.56). Going by bus is not a good option, as they are often late, as usually the test starts at 10 a.m. In addition, one of the requirements is paying KZT 3000 (EUR 7.51) for online registration. The test is usually taken four times a month before the main exam, that three-fold increase in expenditures for a student. All in all, costs per student vary from KZT 32 000 (EUR 80.13): $(3000 \times 4 + 5000 \times 4)$ to 72000 $(3000 \times 4 + 15000 \times 4)$. It is unaffordable for village dwellers whose monthly income is even less than the mentioned amount of money.

However, placement tests can be taken separately, and tests do not need to be taken in four consecutive weeks. For instance, the first placement test can be taken in September, the second in November, the third in

January, and the last one right before the exams, in March. Doing so, financial expenses can be solved in advance. Moreover, as there will be enough time in between tests, students will have enough time to work on their weaknesses and strengths. By contrast, it is not cost-effective approach of tackling the problem for the budget of the country. For instance, it will demand special cars and buses, which cannot be found in every village school. Moreover, infrastructural problems also add some complications here, as the road conditions are the most common reason causing car crashes and breakdowns.

Here weather conditions should be mentioned also. Winter period, when the tests are taken, is the coldest season of the year for all Kazakhstan regions (except for the southern part of the country). This situation also makes it difficult for the students to reach their destinations, because the roads might be closed. Meanwhile, in case of hiring cars or busses for these children, we will need special car-drivers, who will be responsible for these students' lives. Hence, unemployed residents may find new job opportunities. The last alternative is to improve the system of existing virtual schools for preparing rural schoolchildren for the test. In general, the system of distance learning has not developed enough in our country. The mid-1990's saw the breakthrough of completely virtual schools. Nowadays, the emergence of virtual schools has revolutionized education by providing readily accessible learning opportunities all over the world. In our country, virtual schools were created for students of grades 5–6 on the basis of Nazarbayev Intellectual schools. The main goal of the Virtual School is the preparation of pupils of secondary schools for the competitive selection in the autonomous educational organization "Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools" (NIS 2011). It has been in place since 2011, but there is no information about the rural schoolchildren attending these lessons. By lessons, we only mean downloading materials to study and sending them to NIS teacher.

If they are well-organised, virtual schools can make great contributions in our educational field, especially for rural schoolchildren. The first demand is access to digital technologies and Internet connection. Secondly, an effective curriculum, specially designed for online learners. Next, qualified teachers, who can instruct students clearly and assess properly. Thus, table 3 demonstrates what possible consequences we may have if the mentioned measures are implemented. By increasing the number of online sessions and tasks we may change learners' attitude on these distance lessons. If it becomes a part of their everyday homework, they will practice and learn frequently. Additionally, fixed deadlines for each task will improve their sense of responsibility and time-management skills. However, if these intensifications happen, it may result in adding extra working hours for the teachers. Rigorously fixed deadlines also require on-time feedback from teachers, who are already busy planning and conducting their lessons. Thus, we can teach and employ online-teachers, which will reduce the workload of other teachers. This job has become very popular in recent years, especially on YouTube channels of private educational courses, which are promoting unlimited video-tutorials recorded by experienced teachers. So, why not use them for the state schools. Improving the quality of distance learning has many advantages in terms of effectiveness of this policy. There will not be financial problems if all the

course materials can be downloaded for free and are accessible for all learners. One will only need a personal computer and internet connection. If the family is not able to afford the needed equipment, students may conduct lessons in equipped classrooms in their own schools. In addition, while offering learning access to everyone, we solve the problem of inequity in education.

Conclusion

It is vital to address the challenges of children from faraway locations while enrolling to Nazarbayev Intellectual schools in order to ensure the equality and equity in educational opportunities. The paper started by highlighting the importance of promoting giftedness in our country. Especially, the uniqueness of NIS study programs, their technical and human resources were explained. The core problem of this paper is the hurdles students from rural school backgrounds, who are wanting to study in NIS, face. Some possible grounds for the incompetence with the children from the city schools were revealed. The paper recommended three alternatives and analyzed some probable consequences of implementing one certain policy change according to evaluation criteria. They were discussed from different sides, as effectiveness, political and administrative feasibility, efficiency, equity. The first alternative was that the inducements might be given particularly for children from rural regions. The second alternative covered the financial side of the issue, suggesting support as providing transportation or its covering costs. The third alternative proposed the idea of spreading online-communication technologies and refining the system of virtual schools.

All in all, there is no perfect way of solving this problem. Every solution has its pros and cons. However, some peculiarities and general trends should be noted. Firstly, the most effective one will be alternative 1, as it will meet the needs of most stakeholders. Secondly, the idea of equity in education is the main aim for all. Thirdly, all the alternatives are politically and administratively feasible. suggest using alternative 1, because the same rule of distributing scholarships is successfully in place in the country and suits almost all the criteria.

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