

Exploring educators' agency in NGO education within the conflict-affected context of Kazakhstan



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Abstract

The role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the education sector is extensively discussed in academic literature. However, fewer articles focus on educators' role in conflict-affected areas and specifically on local NGOs' work within Kazakhstan's education sector. Adopting a 4 Rs conceptual framework (Novelli *et al.*, 2015), this paper explores educator agency in the education sector provided by NGOs in Kazakhstan. The discussion is based on semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders and focus groups with educators. The paper presents the findings and discusses two dimensions: (1) the educators as active agents of the NGOs' educational programmes focused on the social needs of the local communities and (2) the systemic challenges educators face while working towards peace-building.

Key Words

educators, NGO, agents of change, Kazakhstan

Introduction

Teachers are often seen as drivers for progressive transformations of individuals and innate leaders who influence changes at their institutions and communities. Teachers' roles are widely discussed in relation to their students' achievements (Anderson & Kumari, 2009; Ballard, 2012) and their active involvement in the process of change within educational institutions (Priestley *et al.*, 2013). Their role as active agents was examined within the post-conflict context in relation to the promotion of peacebuilding and social cohesion (Novelli & Sayed, 2016). Halai & Durrani (2018) investigated teachers' potential and the limits of teachers' agency to effect changes in Pakistan by examining the teachers' perspectives on the conflicts and their role in the process of peacebuilding and social cohesion. Furthermore, Novelli & Sayed (2016), employing a comparative approach, discussed teachers' potential and limits as peacebuilders in four country policy contexts: Myanmar, Pakistan, South Africa, and Uganda.

Nevertheless, the role of NGO educators in peacebuilding and social cohesion is not widely researched, although the role of civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the area of education is acknowledged worldwide (Bourn, 2022; Tarozzi, 2020). Focusing on three local NGOs that provide educational programmes that address educational and social issues in society, this paper explores educators' agency within the conflict-affected Kazakhstani context.

Context and background of education within Kazakhstan

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Kazakhstan moved from the Soviet to a market economy, triggered major conflicts and uncovered many social issues in the country (Pomfret, 2014). Politically and economically, Kazakhstan was seen as stable for almost 30 years of post-independence (Tabaeva *et al.*, 2021). However, the swiftly expanding economy and over-centralised governmental structures, characterised by corruption, insufficient transparency, and concentrated decision-making authority, exacerbated societal challenges (OECD, n.d.). Protests in January 2022 reflected tensions caused by widespread dissatisfaction with political and economic systems (Commander & Prieskienyte, 2022).

Following the economic and political changes formal education, designed to fit Soviet ideology, demanded substantial restructuring (Fimyar, 2014), and different forms of private education or additional (or further) education began to fill the gap (Silova, 2010). Informal and non-formal education was introduced at different levels by a rapidly growing civil society and NGOs, also known as non-commercial organisations (NCOs) (Abdusalyamova & Warren, 2007).

A recent UNESCO report stated that the contribution of non-formal educational programmes for young people and adults was not sufficiently recognised, making it difficult to measure (Carlsen, 2020). By focusing on the agency of educators within these organisations and beyond, this paper discusses their role in peacebuilding and its contribution to social cohesion and social justice in Kazakhstan.

Theoretical framework

Taken from the original understanding of human agency (Archer, 2000; Giddens, 1984), educators' agency is viewed as teachers' engagement in practices they believe are meaningful, underpinned by their ability to effect desired outcomes. This capacity for agency is deeply embedded within the structures and cultures of educational institutions, which include the rules, resources, and power dynamics that teachers may either perpetuate or transform over time. For example, it is seen through the lens of educators' ability to navigate and influence their practice towards achieving social

justice (Eteläpelto *et al.*, 2013), while the ecological perspective (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) emphasises the situated nature of agency. This view acknowledges the temporal and historical dimensions of agency, underscoring the need to understand teacher agency within the complexities of cultural and institutional contexts. Furthermore, teacher agency is not only about individual action but also about collective efforts within the educational system to challenge and redefine existing norms and practices toward more inclusive and equitable educational outcomes (Archer, 2000).

Novelli & Smith (2011) argue that the role of teachers in peacebuilding involves their engagement in thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that cultivate values and attitudes essential for transforming the nature of conflict. In this regard, peacebuilding is understood as 'positive peace,' going beyond the mere absence of violence, 'negative peace' (Galtung, 1976). The discourse of 4Rs: Redistribution, Representation, Recognition and Reconciliation (Novelli *et al.*, 2015, 2019) suggests that addressing the structural problems that lead to social injustice and discord within society will lead to a 'more sustainable peaceful society' (2015: p.10). Building on the work of Fraser (1995), it focuses on three forms of injustice: unfair redistribution of resources; misrecognition of marginalised groups; and political exclusion from the decision-making process, institutions and membership (Fraser, 2005). Placing the study of educators' agency within the socio-political context helps to understand the contribution of NGO educators to the peacebuilding process and the tension between redressing root causes and overcoming legacies of the past to bring people back together.

This study examines the educators' agency through the lens of interconnected dimensions of cultural recognition, political representation, and redistribution of resources and opportunities within the NGO education sector. For example, inadequate acknowledgement of cultural diversity within the sector might lead to misrepresentation of ethnic minorities and marginalised groups in the decision-making processes across all societal levels, while misrecognition of the NGO initiatives within the sector might lead to restricted access to financial benefits. The reconciliation process, which centres on addressing these challenges in a conflict-affected context from a holistic perspective, can potentially be

resolved through the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at mitigating financial inequality, cultural disparities, and political recognition.

Methodology

The study utilises a mixed research method (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Gaining a comprehensive understanding of different NGOs provides insights into the specific educational aspects within this sector, the individuals and groups engaged, and the initiatives designed to tackle crises and conflicts, such as inequality and injustice.

The research was carried out in July 2022 in Kazakhstan, after ethical permission was received from the University of Ulster. An analysis was conducted on the official government database and papers from the Ministry of Information (2022), to examine the characteristics of local NGOs, their activities, the areas they contribute to, and the sources of financial support for their projects. A total of 59 NGOs from various sectors of development completed a concise online survey; 38 provided a range of educational activities. The descriptive quantitative analysis provides an overview of existing trends, key stakeholders, and programmes implemented by NGOs to tackle issues arising from crises or conflicts, such as inequality, injustice, and poverty.

For qualitative analysis, the research selected three NGOs located in Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent, with different fields of expertise (socially oriented non-formal education, volunteerism, human rights). Each of the three NGOs has a history of working

in Kazakhstan from 10 to 30 years. They created and executed their own educational programmes, focusing specifically on various educational sectors (non-formal/informal) and fields of education (civil society, volunteering, English lessons).

A comprehensive view of the role of educators in providing various types of educational programmes and the obstacles within different NGOs was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with NGO leaders (N=4), independent experts (N=1), and three focus groups of educators (N=21). All participants are Kazakhstani and joined the research voluntarily. In addition, a comprehensive analysis of the educational programmes (including curricula, learning plans, and lessons) and the organisation's website, social media platforms, and other sources allowed for a deeper understanding of their goals, motivation, and mission. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

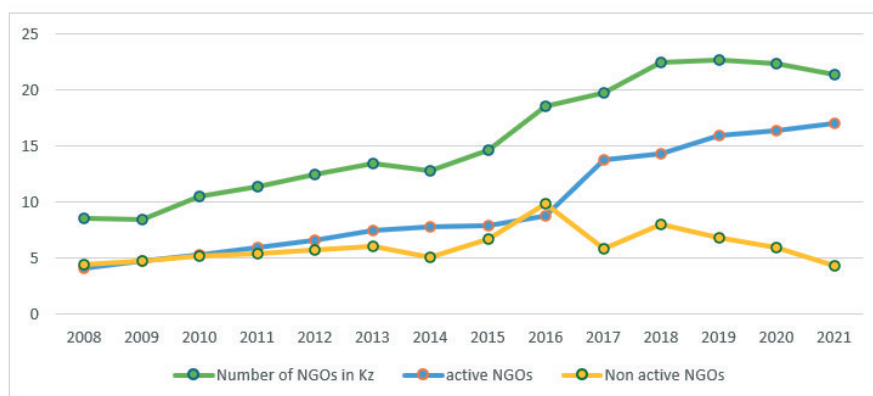
Findings and discussion

This section starts with the overall NGO landscape in the country. Then, it explores the NGO initiatives in addressing the social needs in the society and the role of the educators in addressing the challenges they encountered within their organisations and the broader national context.

NGO development trends in Kazakhstan

Official statistics (Ministry of Information and Public Development, 2022) show the growing number of NGOs working in Kazakhstan over the last thirteen years. The difference between registered and active organisations gradually decreases (see Graph 1).

Graph 1. Number of NGOs in Kazakhstan for 2008-2021 numbers are in thousands)



According to the official website www.gov.kz, the proportion of NGOs focusing on education, science, information, sports, and physical activities has grown over the last six years from 8.98% to 22% (2016-2021). Additionally, our survey showed, the educational programmes provided by various NGOs have different focuses, such as human rights organisations, youth and children initiatives, preschool education and environmental protection. Seventeen out of 59 organisations claimed to reach out to up to 100 people, 5 NGOs – to under 300 people, and 5 NGOs – to over 300 people annually. However, the result directly depends on the funding supporting these educational programmes.

The role of NGO programmes and key issues in social cohesion

Analysis of educational programmes offered by all three NGOs reveals that the educational initiatives vary based on the expertise of the NGOs themselves. For example, NGO-A developed one educational programme in response to rising tension in the community after 149 children became infected with HIV/AIDS in a South Kazakhstani hospital in 2006. Through this programme, the organisation opened a space for different groups in society to learn more about HIV/AIDs, come together to discuss the issues and bring peace to society. Providing educational support for various organisations in their network hub, NGO-B aims to build social cohesion, and to mediate the dialogue between local council officials and local organisations to build socially promoted regional NGO initiatives. NGO-C contributes to the peace-making process in society by promoting human rights values and initiatives. This includes monitoring of human rights violations, work with the government (influence and dialogue), and juridical support.

Since the collapse of the USSR, the provision of alternative forms of education has been seen as part of optional studies primarily offered by formal institutions, such as music or art schools for children, and non-professional development training for adults. Education became a permitted activity for public association organisations in 1992 (Law on Public Associations, 1996). However, this form of educational study was only officially recognised as additional or further education in 2007 (Law on Education, 2007).

A trainer from NGO-B suggested that unlike the state, where each initiative takes years to proceed, NGOs have a certain level of flexibility.

This is our advantage as an NGO. We can move quickly. We see what is needed. We see the issues, touch [them], and suggest a resolution (Larisa, trainer, NGO-B).

It appears that none of the organisations had any issues when they worked directly with the different communities. However, some leaders and educators expressed frustration regarding the implications of bottom-up education initiatives within the highly structured top-to-bottom formal education sector, mentioning inflexible governmental structure, existing ineffective policies, and political tensions between NGOs and the state.

The leader of NGO-B shared an example of one of their initiatives: Having received state funding, they developed a mechanism for state-supported volunteerism in each region of Kazakhstan. However, the NGO faced challenges in implementing education projects due to a lack of funding and an existing structural framework. They said, 'We are going to get the document 'down', just 'down', and that's it. 'Documents down' is not going to work! You need to go to each region, sit with the Akim (head of the council), with the deputy, and local NGOs, and implement the project together (Zhanar, leader of NGO-B).

Furthermore, when they proposed to integrate volunteerism programmes into secondary education, they faced the same structural issue.

No, the Ministry of Education said they cannot do it... There is no system of how to do it. ... They say they need to uncover almost thirty acts and change two laws... From the state perspective, you are put in the box (Zhanar, leader of NGO-B).

Vlad, a trainer of NGO-C, further explained how government policies failed to be implemented:

From 2015 to 2019, ... all civil society and state officials discussed the concept of the next action plan in the field of human rights Unfortunately, nothing has happened. In 2011, when the United Nations adopted a declaration on human rights education, our state signed this declaration too. The main thing is that a signature does not require anything. ... nothing is done (Vlad, trainer, NGO-C).

Marat, leader of NGO-C, suggested that the political environment also impacts the work of civil society. He believes that in the Kazakhstani context, 'a small space was created for civil societies to bring initiatives to address human rights issues within the authoritarian environment. This limited space does not allow NGOs to contribute to systemic societal change.'

Nevertheless, the NGO-C trainers agreed that despite civil society's struggle against political hierarchies and the prevailing system, people began to understand and change their attitudes towards human rights. Furthermore, by educating other local NGOs across nearly every region of Kazakhstan, the NGO not only expanded human rights education but also increased public awareness and strengthened civil society's capacity to advocate for human rights. Partnerships with other NGOs and organisations allowed NGO-B to support various community groups and youth initiatives.

The role of NGO educators in social cohesion and peacebuilding

The analysis showed that educators were the key drivers of the education projects that created, developed, and delivered NGO education programmes. Programmes, training, or courses have been developed from scratch, addressing various political and social issues, many of which are focused on marginalised and deprived groups in society. Each organisation responded to the problems from different perspectives and expertise, embracing different sectors of people's needs, such as human rights, social issues, and volunteerism. Such educational programmes were delivered for free or, in the case of English language courses, were offered at lower prices or scholarships.

Working for many years in the development sector, each organisation engaged teachers in the process of curriculum creation, granting them a degree of autonomy but also overseeing the quality of the courses and their alignment with contemporary needs. For example, educators of NGO-A shared:

Leaders often turn to us to get our opinion. It means they are not just sitting there and making decisions. They are consulting with all of us. We make decisions together, and teamwork always comes first (Lara, teacher, NGO-A).

It was emphasised that the educators were responsible for delivering these activities to the students, and should therefore possess comprehensive knowledge of all programming elements. This would allow them to identify a gap in the existing programme and propose a new programme that would better fit the needs of different groups of society. For example, the educators of NGO-A developed additional courses to help the students to focus on literacy skills.

At NGO-B and NGO-C, trainers are also actively involved in the programmes' development. Since the organisation found its own specific space of work in society, it has often received requests to develop programmes. For them, it is beneficial to have the same trainers and coordinators (NGO-B) or human rights lawyers (NGO-C) working on a project throughout. For example, Katya explained:

We are not only engaged in these projects ... we collect statistics and know what happens in the regions... We are tracking the dynamics, and we understand the issues that appeared in the past. We respectively initiated projects that address these issues (Katya, trainer, NGO-B).

Despite the NGOs' extensive work that contributes to the peace-building process of social cohesion in Kazakhstani society, the work of educators is not widely recognised by the government. The latest changes within the Law on Education (Amendments to Law on Education, 2023) do not extensively discuss the rights, obligations, responsibilities and the system of payment as is done for all the teaching staff of higher education and postgraduate studies (see articles 37-1 and 37-2 of the Law).

Zhana (NGO-A) shared that because NGOs are 'not under the control of any Ministry of Education department,' the NGOs' educators' future careers might be affected. For example, if applying for another job, their prior work experience in an NGO will not be considered. Furthermore, a minimum number of years working within a formal educational institution is necessary to obtain a certain level of qualification. She explained:

Consequently, our teachers are prohibited from seeking professional certifications. Regardless of the instructor's place of employment, whether it be an English centre, a company, or an NGO, the teacher is not eligible to apply for state professional credentials (Zhana, NGO-A).

For educators, this may entail being on a lower pay scale and other financial disadvantages. As NGOs are considered social entrepreneurs, it is up to them to decide on salaries, which in our cases was half of the salaries at the formal institutions (Igor, NGO-A).

Nevertheless, NGOs' work is recognised in some settings. For instance, the work of NGO-A in organising annual teacher development conferences is acknowledged, where schoolteachers are granted permission to be absent from work, indicating that school principals endorse the professional growth opportunities provided to their teachers.

Educators' languages and cultural inequities

Language and cultural inclusion are crucially important when considering the recognition and diversity of educators. Post-independence Kazakhstanian society remains profoundly impacted by Russification. Despite changing the language of instruction from Russian to Kazakh, Russian continues to be the predominant language (Mehisto, 2015). Marginalisation and forced assimilation undermined the prominence of Kazakh, and more than seven decades of language-related challenges have affected the whole ethnic group.

Since 1997, I have been working in International Human Rights and Legality. But from that moment, I knew perfectly well that most of those who remained... knew Russian well. Even Kazakhs in Almaty do not know the Kazakh language. ... At the university, I saw ... a lot of talented guys who did not have a high level of command in Russian ... many of them left because they had been bullied by [others]... It was open discrimination (Galina, trainer, NGO-C).

The leader of NGO-B shared that there are 'no Kazakh-language trainers. It is just some kind of a scourge – we can't find them... Those who have taught for a long time do not know the language. Those who have joined us recently do not have the right skills' (Zhanar, Leader of NGO-B). Galina, who also provides legal support for Kazakh-speaking citizens who do not speak good Russian, said:

I wish we had more Kazakh-speaking trainers. I have been working on the issues of torture since last January [2022]. I fully understand that many Kazakh-speaking people remain excluded... Very few advocates can speak Kazakh (Galina, trainer, NGO-C).

Despite the attempt to involve Kazakh-speaking educators in their education programmes, a shortage of proficient Kazakh-speaking trainers might hinder access to educational services provided by the NGOs. This implies that those who communicate in languages other than the dominant one may risk being excluded from opportunities to engage in political activities (such as human rights campaigns), participate in social reform, and maintain societal unity.

Cultural diversity is another issue discussed by the head of the education department in NGO-A. Zhana shared that the state labour policy does not allow them to implement some of the inclusion principles they have in the organisation, like hiring teachers who wear hijabs.

Unfortunately, according to the law, we cannot take such a person. I recently had such a girl. ... According to our values, it is OK; we would gladly accept them. However, the standards within the labour law prohibit it, and they are higher than the organisational policies. So, we cannot (Zhana, NGO-A).

It echoes the explanation given by the official government website egov.kz, which stressed that 'the state system of education upbringing in Kazakhstan set apart the religious associations and has secular nature.' (Egov.kz, 2023).

Conclusion

The paper presents and discusses educators' agency within the NGO education sector. A small number of NGO surveys and interviews demonstrate that the work of three NGOs in the education sector is important for social cohesion and peace-building in society. Educators play a significant role in initiating, developing and delivering NGO education programmes to marginalised and deprived communities. The programmes support the interests of their NGOs and address the social issues within the society. However, the various types of injustice within the education sector and beyond influenced the work of educators, encompassing the political structure, recognition of the work of NGOs and educators, and language and cultural inclusion of educators. The findings were multilayered and complex and showed how organisational and national policies underpin and shape educators'

agency within their organisations and in society as a whole.

The unclear position of non-formal and in-formal education within the Kazakhstani education sector creates separation, confusion, and, consequently, unfair and untrusted attitudes toward the NGO educational programmes in society and the work of educators within organisations. Discrepancies between policies and practices indicate that non-formal and informal education is not always taken seriously. On the one hand, it provides a space for educators to have the freedom to create, develop, and implement their educational ideas, due to the strong NGO support, which provided professional development and an environment for active participation in the NGOs' missions and purposes for education. However, the issues related to language and cultural exclusion highlighted the ongoing injustice within the education sector. They raised questions about the overarching national policies that create an environment that excludes educators from marginalised communities. The inflexible top-down structures stop NGOs from promoting social cohesion and force NGOs to seek alternative ways to implement and deliver their programmes within the education sector.

The implementation of study findings is linked to how non-formal education and its educators are acknowledged. While educators' agency is recognised within organisations, context-specific variables like cultural diversity, distinct languages, ethnic groups, and representation of diverse segments of society in decision-making processes are not considered. Therefore, reconciliation necessitates a broader discussion involving national governmental actors, as well as active representatives from NGOs and community-based education sectors. Understanding and addressing issues of injustice should extend beyond organisational levels to encompass histories of division and conflict at the national level. New policies should reflect both formal and non-formal education's contributions through equal representation within the education sector, fostering an equitable and conducive environment for non-formal education development. This approach ensures educators' voices are valued and heard within and beyond organisations. Ongoing and historical forms of injustice, such as the impact of Russification, must be addressed (Mehisto *et al.*,

2014). Dialogue is required to bring communities together. When there is an opportunity to provide education for all within the Kazakhstani community, particular attention should be given to the marginalised groups and their representatives within the non-formal education sector.

The paper utilised the 4Rs framework that combines various forms of injustice to examine educators' agency within the NGOs' education in conflict-affected settings. As an analytical tool, the framework lens benefited the understanding of socio-economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political representation of NGO educators. Looking beyond the strict separate representation of four injustices in the framework, this study recognised contributions and challenges in micro and macro educational contexts. Furthermore, the interconnectedness of the framework domains highlighted the complexity and intersecting nature of the injustice issues within the country context. It unpacks a holistic understanding of the challenges in Kazakhstani society, leading to the awareness that the reconciliation process is not an easy or straightforward concept of addressing the roots of the injustice issues (Novelli *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, a comprehensive research study is further required to examine Kazakhstan's non-formal and in-formal education sector and the role of NGOs and their educators in it. This research study is only a snapshot of the NGO education work within a conflict-affected context. More research is needed including investigating other education programmes and curricula within various NGOs, pedagogies of non-formal and informal NGO education, funding-related NGO education, and local/international NGOs and their role in Kazakhstani society.

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