

14 Neoliberalism liberally applied

Educational policy borrowing in Central Asia

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Introduction

The study of educational policy borrowing occupies a prominent place in comparative education research. From early comparative studies when ‘gentlemen traveled extensively and wrote about differences between nations’ (Kelly 1992: 14), to recent comparative research on globalisation, the fascination with reforms that have been transplanted from one cultural context to another has remained constant. To some extent, educational borrowing implies isolating education from its political, economic and cultural contexts. Therefore, numerous warnings have been articulated about policy borrowing, whether wholesale, selective or eclectic. This chapter deals with a policy that went global and with a considerable delay landed in Central Asia. The programme under scrutiny is neoliberalism, particularly the policy of outcomes-based education (OBE) and its emphasis on data-driven, evidence-based accountability in the education systems in the three countries under review – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia.

Research on policy borrowing and lending

We purposefully avoid using the term ‘travelling policies’ for its lack of agency. It tends to direct us towards obsolete research questions, many of which have already been answered in the diffusion of innovation studies of the 1950s and 1960s (Rogers 1992). Typically, their pre-occupation lay with the ‘adoption rate’, the ‘degree of adoption’ and ‘receptiveness’ towards innovations of reforms. The question of which policies travel internationally, which do not, and why, were beyond their scope of research interest. In the past decade, however, diffusion of innovation research experienced a re-incarnation of a superior kind with social network analysts and Small World researchers revitalising earlier concepts, and filling them with a notion of agency. One such useful concept, on which we will draw later in this section, is the notion of ‘late adopters’. Unless research on travelling policies directs its attention to the individuals, networks and institutions that make policies travel, or as we would say, are engaged in the business of policy lending, there is little to be gained from introducing the new term, ‘travelling policies’.

We prefer to stay with the more commonly used terminology of educational transfer, in particular with the conceptual twins ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy lending’, for an additional reason. Only in the past decade or so have comparative researchers started to tackle a series of understudied areas such as the reasons for policy attraction (Phillips

2004), the politics of borrowing and lending (Steiner-Khamsi 2004a), or the processes of local adaptation and re-contextualisation of borrowed reforms (Anderson-Levitt 2003). Illuminating these dark corners of an old research terrain of comparative education yields new insights. The authors of this chapter, for example, interpret borrowing as a policy strategy that is used to resolve protracted domestic policy conflict (Steiner-Khamsi 2004b), and view borrowing as a result of a re-orientation in a transnational educational space (Silova 2005). This new terrain is not fully explored, it appears premature to dismiss an entire body of literature on policy borrowing and lending and replace it with a term that is more elusive.

Arguably, comparative research on policy borrowing and lending has undergone several major discursive shifts. An initial shift was the move from normative to analytical studies; the first being concerned with what *could* and *should* be borrowed and the latter interested in understanding *why* and *how* references were made to experiences from elsewhere. Jürgen Schriewer (1990) needs to be credited for criticising normative and meliorist approaches to the study of policy borrowing. At a time when many scholars were still pondering which lessons could be drawn from reforms in other countries, and ideally be imported, he turned the very act of lesson drawing into an object of study. Why are references made to experiences from elsewhere, or in what local policy context is emulation likely to occur? Why have the most common types of references, that is, references to own experiences (tradition), values or scientific rationality (Luhmann and Schorr 1979) been suspended giving way to external references? Embedded in the theoretical framework of system theory (Luhmann 1990), Schriewer proposed to study local contexts in order to understand the ‘socio-logic’ (Schriewer and Martinez 2004: 33) of externalisation. According to this theory, references to other educational systems are used as a leverage to carry out reforms that otherwise would be contested. Schriewer *et al.* (2004) also find it indicative of the ‘socio-logic’ of a system that only specific educational systems are used as external sources of authority. Which systems are used as ‘reference societies’¹ (Schriewer and Martinez 2004: 42) and which are not, tells us something about the interrelations of actors within various world-systems. Pursuing an analytical rather than a normative approach to the study of educational borrowing, we reach the conclusion that is quite the contrary of what borrowing advocates might have us believe: borrowing does not occur because the reforms from elsewhere are better, but because the very act of borrowing has a salutary effect on domestic policy conflict.

In line with Schriewer’s conceptual framework, we applied the concept of externalisation to comparative policy studies and found that it is precisely at moments of heightened policy contestation that references to other systems are made. Thus, borrowing, discursive or actual, has a certification effect on domestic policy talk (Steiner-Khamsi 2004b). Against this backdrop of system theory, three common phenomenon that at first appear to be nonsensical, make perfect sense:

- 1 very often the language of the reform is borrowed, but not the actual reform (Steiner-Khamsi 2005);
- 2 borrowing occurs even when there is no apparent need, that is, even when similar reforms already exist in the local context (Steiner-Khamsi and Quist 2000); and
- 3 if the actual reform is borrowed, it is always selectively borrowed and sometimes locally re-contextualised to the extent that there is little similarity left between the copy and the original.

Global borrowing and lending: rationales, impacts and trajectories

This shift from normative to analytical studies in policy borrowing research, however, has only triggered a revolution among certain comparative education researchers. While the orphans of normative borrowing studies continue to compete over which ‘best practices’ to disseminate around the globe, the analytically oriented borrowing researchers have turned their attention to the interplay between borrowing and globalisation. They notice that policy makers increasingly generate reform pressure by making references to globalisation. Panic-stricken, no educational system wants to be ‘left behind’. Whether globalisation in education is real or imagined, it is uncontested that the ‘semantics of globalisation’ (Schriewer 2000: 330) is increasingly tied to accelerate educational reform.

Given the epidemiological model of global reforms, timing matters a great deal (see Luschei 2004). In social network analysis, we distinguish between three phases of reform epidemic, including the slow growth, explosive and burnout phases of reform dissemination (Watts 2003: 172). In this chapter, we propose to examine adoption of global reforms at their burnout stage. In particular, we propose to study the ‘late adopters’ of a reform that had already reached its peak of global dissemination and in some cases faced a decline in its popularity. By the time global reforms land in ‘late adopter’ countries, they are at the same time everybody’s and nobody’s reforms. They are generally de-territorialised or global reforms characterised by a ‘referential web’ (Vavrus 2004) rather than by clear references to one or two educational systems that served as exemplars for emulation. The very fact that we examine the adoption of a global reform movement during its burnout phase means that we investigate not only different local responses to a global reform, but also the global reform movement itself. By implication, the investigation of the late adopters becomes the study of global reforms.

In light of globalisation studies in education, this chapter addresses three unresolved issues in global policy borrowing and lending research pertaining to the rationales, impacts and trajectories of global policy borrowing. First, scholars examining the rationale for borrowing have relied on studies of transnational borrowing and have averted attention from other types of borrowing, notably *cross-sectoral* and *intra-sectoral* borrowing. Given the amount written on the impact of neo-liberal thought in current school reforms, there is no need to reiterate the evidence that the education sector is soaked in language and concepts borrowed from the economic sector (e.g. supply/demand, accountability, cost-effectiveness, etc.; see Henig 1994). We also learn from Tyack and Cuban (1995) that the penetration of the education sector with principles typically applied to markets and the economic sector has been a recurring theme, emerging cyclically every couple of years. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of cross-sectoral borrowing is striking from a sociology-of-knowledge perspective because it entails an interaction between two sectors that, by virtue of being different subsystems or sectors of society, manifest different epistemes and regulatory mechanisms. Nevertheless, cross-sectoral transfer is well documented in the general educational research literature (albeit not in the comparative education research), especially the transfer of principles of market regulation from the economic sector to the education sector and the transfer of TQM (total quality management) principles from the health to the education sector. However, relevant for our analyses is the transfer of principles of accountability from the finance sector, in particular from public and administration reform, to the education sector. In contrast to these different variations of cross-sectoral or horizontal borrowing, intra-sectoral or

vertical transfer processes have been little investigated. Eric Johnson will discuss in this chapter a case (Kyrgyzstan) where the rationale for standardised testing and assessment reform was first applied in higher education and then passed down to general education.

Second, the question of how existing practices are impacted by policy import is often brushed off with a general comment on hybridisation. The case studies in Anderson-Levitt's edited volume (2003), as remarkable as they are, exclusively focus on how a global reform such as, for example, OBE takes on different meanings in various contexts. The destiny of existing policies in light of such global forces is not explicitly addressed. Arguably, it is no small feat to examine how one and the same reform is re-interpreted differently as this tells us something about culture and in particular about the culture of reform in the various policy contexts. However, hybridisation resulting from the encounter between imported and already existing policies is but one of several conceivable outcomes. Other conceivable outcomes are a replacement of previous policies, and at the other extreme, a reinforcement of what had already been in place. Again, hybridisation has been amply documented (e.g. Anderson-Levitt 2003), and replacement as an outcome of borrowing has also been well studied in societies that have undergone revolutionary changes (e.g. Spreen 2004). Both strands of research view policy borrowing, or more broadly speaking, globalisation, as a form of external intervention that inevitably triggers change. Even if we qualify this assumption by adding that, for a variety of political and economic reasons, so-called external interventions are frequently internally induced when politicians and policy makers utilise the semantics of globalisation to generate reform pressure, we are still left with those cases where policy import exclusively served to reinforce existing policies. Other than Silova's study on bilingual education policies in post-Soviet Latvia (Silova 2005a), there is little in the way of empirical evidence to suggest that policy borrowing is sometimes used to legitimise and reinforce existing practices. In this chapter, Gita Steiner-Khamsi supports Silova's earlier findings (Silova 2005a), and presents an additional case (Mongolia) where the introduction of OBE merely reinforced an elaborate monitoring system that had been in place for the past 30 years.

Third, the difficulty with mapping trajectories of transplanted reforms has been highlighted by several scholars in globalisation studies and has rendered the spatial connotation of borrowing and lending research highly problematic. Is OBE, for example, *originally* a New Zealand, Australian, Canadian or US reform? The answer varies, depending on the time period one is referring to and on the expert asked. In the end, how valid is the genealogical approach to the study of reform epidemics that, as in the case of OBE, spread like wildfire around the globe? Today, OBE is as much a Chilean, South African and European reform as it is a New Zealand or Australian reform. Late adopters of a reform do not necessarily resort to the original(s), but rather orient themselves towards early adopters of the reform from their own world-system, educational space, or reference horizon. In contrast to nineteenth-century borrowing research when scholars were content with tracing transplanted policies across the Atlantic (between North America and Europe), many scholars nowadays suggest giving up the idea of actually mapping the itinerary of a travelling policy. Frances Vavrus (2004) has coined the term 'referential web' to acknowledge multiple references for policy borrowing and invites us to abandon mapping exercises in borrowing and lending research. There is a special type of reference that has caught our attention in recent years (Steiner-Khamsi 2003). Politicians and policy makers increasingly make deterritorialised references to an imagined international community. They generate reform pressure domestically by

invoking fears of ‘falling behind’ and urge their constituents to comply with ‘international standards’ in education. In this chapter, Iveta Silova discusses a case (Kazakhstan) where the trajectories of OBE are ubiquitous and different OBE models were simultaneously used as exemplars for emulation.

The centrality of Central Asia

May this help convert Central Asia from the sort of dark hole in the middle that it was, to a real black hole whose gravitational attraction can soon engulf the outside and outsiders.

(Frank 1992: 52)

Andre Gunder Frank (1992: 52) ends his book *The Centrality of Central Asia* with this powerful statement demanding that Central Asia be given a place in world-systems theory. There were periods in history in which the three countries of our case studies viewed themselves as part of the same world such as, for example, in the thirteenth century under the Mongol Empire and in the twentieth century as Soviet Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) or as socialist ‘fraternalist countries’ (Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), respectively. These are but two periods in history during which the three case studies inhabited the same geo-political space. We focus in this chapter exclusively on the latter space and on its transformation into a post-socialist world-system in the heart of Asia. It is important to point out that more than 30 other countries inhabited the same post-socialist educational space at the beginning of the 1990s.

For one particular reason, the case studies on these three Central Asian educational systems is central for research on policy borrowing and lending: they are *late adopters* of OBE and in that capacity borrowed OBE at a time when it had already gone global or, in some places, was already in decline. These three Central Asian educational systems were second-hand borrowers. A brief comment on the history of OBE and other neo-liberal educational reforms sailing under different names might be useful here to substantiate the point about the late arrival of such reforms in Central Asia. New Zealand revamped its public sector in the 1980s leading up to the State Sector Act of 1988 and the Public Finance Act of 1989. Emphasising outcomes-based accountability, these two acts had great repercussions for the education sector. On the opposite side of the globe, the Thatcher government pushed at the same time for a series of neo-liberal and market-driven reforms in the UK. There, the 1988 Education Act for England and Wales introduced a national curriculum, standardised testing and parental choice, all of them signposts of a new neo-liberal era in educational reform that epitomised the language of public accountability, effectiveness and market regulation.

Serving as the main reference point for the three Central Asian countries, the *New Zealand curriculum framework* (Ministry of Education 1993) is commonly associated with a fundamentally new approach to curriculum reform. It places the individual student and his/her learning outcomes at the centre of all teaching, and dissociates the student’s learning outcomes from content taught in a specific grade. In many countries where the New Zealand reform model was adopted, OBE requires that teachers establish benchmarks for each individual student. At the end of each grade, and in some countries throughout the year, the student’s performance is regularly assessed in tests to measure whether the benchmarks have been reached. In practice, the proliferation of standardised

tests is but one of the impacts of OBE reform. Additionally, the benchmarks are noted in the teacher scorecards or outcomes-contracts, and teachers are held accountable for the performance of their students. Since OBE purports to measure the precise performance of a teacher as reflected in the learning outcomes of students, it has been propagated as a tool for quality enhancement in education, and aptly referred to as New Contractualism or New Accountability. Claims have been made by proponents that OBE, in opposition to content- or input-based curricula, is able to monitor the quality of education more effectively, and thereby respond to the quest for more public accountability in education.

By the time the Central Asian educational systems adopted OBE in the first years of the millennium, OBE was already beyond its peak. The metaphor of an epidemic that first starts to spread slowly, then moves into a stage of exponential growth, and finally phases out appears useful in explaining the global dissemination of OBE. During OBE's phase of slow growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s only a few educational systems adopted the reform, notably New Zealand, Australia, England and Wales, Canada and the USA. The take-off point marks the beginning of the explosive phase when numerous educational systems selectively borrowed elements of OBE. Roger Dale (2001: 498) traced the 'global career' of the New Zealand OBE model in the 1990s. The important role of international donors, notably the World Bank and regional banks, for actively disseminating and funding OBE reforms in low-income countries is not to be underestimated.² By the time the Ministries of Education in Central Asian countries joined the chorus of public accountability and choice enthusiasts, ministries and teacher unions in other parts of the world were already disenchanted with OBE and had moved on to more effective curriculum or standards reform (e.g. Donnelly 2002). Incidentally, the nation-wide strike of the National Union of Teachers in the UK against excessive high-stakes exams and teaching to the test (December 2003) was concurrent with the period of greatest enthusiasm for OBE in Central Asia. Thus, the region under review in this chapter needs to be regarded as a late adopter of neo-liberal reforms. The ministries of education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia embraced OBE during the burnout phase of the OBE reform epidemic when other educational systems had already reached the point of weariness with similar market-driven and outcomes-based reforms. The very fact that we examine the adoption of OBE during the burnout phase of a reform epidemic implies that we in fact investigate three diverse local responses to a global reform movement. By implication, our case study analyses attempts to contribute to understanding 'policy attraction' (Phillips 2004).

OBE is Central Asia: cultural encounters with local research paradigms

The widespread criticism against any reform that is old, including OBE, made us delve into a search for reasons why OBE was so appealing to government officials in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia. The global OBE movement has generally been part of a larger new public administration reform that emphasises data-driven or evidence-based accountability and panoptic surveillance of system performance that is consistent with Foucault's (1991) observations of the modern state. As mentioned, the literature sometimes refers to these reforms as New Accountability or New Contractualism, or 'government by contract' (Schick 1998). According to Neave (1988), a focus on outcomes is embedded in the rise of the 'evaluative state', one that is committed to 'maintaining central control over the framing of targets whilst at the same time giving greater latitude

at institutional level to choose which course is best suited to the specific institutional circumstances' (Neave 1988: 11). As detailed by many (see Smyth and Dow 1998), outcomes benchmarking and monitoring are an essential part of the new technology of scientific management over school systems.

In the context of post-socialist Central Asia, this paradigm was not really new and exactly for this reason resonated so well with the education stakeholders in the three countries. The 'command economies' of the former socialist bloc were driven by data, benchmarks, and archives piling up data sets from the monitoring departments of each ministry. Reflecting on the processes of data collection during the Soviet period, the Russian Federal Statistics Service (1996) duly observed that Soviet statistical collection was noted for its 'sufficient intensity', relying on detailed data gathered through a great number of specially organised censuses and surveys. This data-driven research was an important part of the 'Soviet insistence on planning', which was clearly reflected in five-, seven-, and ten-year plans in all areas of the economic and social development of each country. These plans entailed the setting of specific, often highly detailed, targets for the output of intermediate and finished results/products; the specification of detailed plans to achieve those targets; the allocation of capital resources, raw materials, and labour by permits and licences; and the establishment of comprehensive price schedules reflecting the planners' preferences (Noah 1986). In other words, OBE was not really new in the post-socialist context, but rather revitalised a practice that was quite common in socialist times. Among other reasons, OBE resonated so well among the post-socialist policy makers precisely because it was so similar to the planning mania and fed right into their obsession with data-driven, evidence-based research reminiscent of the socialist period.

Despite some similarities with the socialist educational planning strategies, the global OBE reform was adopted differently in each of the three Central Asian countries under review. *What* exactly was borrowed from the global OBE movement is an important question given that any major reform, including OBE, is an octopus with several arms. For example, the global OBE package extends into reforms of the curriculum, monitoring of teachers, student assessment, teacher salary schemes, public accountability with regard to the quality of schools and, in some countries, is closely associated with school choice. The question becomes, to which component are decision makers in a particular country attracted to, and why? What impact does the global reform have on existing practices, and what are the prerequisites for introducing the reform in different contexts? The following three case-studies of Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Kazakhstan explore local policy constellations that account for the global policy attraction and discuss how the rationales, impacts and prerequisites for introducing OBE reform varied for each context or case.

Learning from above: vertical transfer in Kyrgyzstan

The outcomes-oriented educational reform movement in Kyrgyzstan emerged in a context of pervasive corruption, particularly in higher education. Long the pride of the Soviet system, the quality of higher education had come into question in Kyrgyzstan with frequent reports of admissions bribes and grade-buying. Outcomes-based education, with its emphasis on assessment, data transparency and accountability was attractive to Kyrgyz reformers committed to eliminating corruption. While the Kyrgyz reform was

originally focused on higher education, it has recently come to include wide-sweeping changes for general education. This case represents an example of vertical or intra-sectoral transfer. Put differently, the ‘travelling policy’ of outcomes-based education arrived in Kyrgyzstan in 2001 as a reform aimed at corruption elimination in higher education and three years later it made its way down the system to general education. The way that this vertical transfer occurred bears explanation.

An action plan for fighting corruption

The anti-corruption ‘revolution’ commenced with the appointment of a reform-minded Minister of Education in 2001 (IRINnews.org 2002, 12 September). Camilla Sharshekeeva, long a supporter of educational reform and a founder of the American University of Central Asia, was determined to combat corruption in higher education as the new Minister of Education. Alan DeYoung, an observer of the 2001 reform movement, writes that the new Minister of Education:

Described what she understood as the abuses of university rectors to pocket tuition fees paid by students and to sell supposedly free slots to the highest bidding students. Combined with the alleged selling of grades that thus weakens graduate quality, Camilla Sharshekeeva from the beginning of the entire education reform agenda had university organization and university leaders in her sights (DeYoung 2004: 217).

At the request of the Kyrgyz Ministry of Education, a USAID-led group met in spring 2001 and made a list of 74 problems with the Kyrgyz education system. The list of problems was then condensed into eight topical areas:

- 1 minimum academic standards
- 2 teacher retraining
- 3 new technologies
- 4 school management
- 5 use of data
- 6 higher education rationalisation
- 7 higher education funding
- 8 structural re-organisation of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC).

From the eight topical areas, four working groups were formed: School Management and Minimum Standards, Teachers Retraining and New Technologies, Higher Education Funding and Rationalization, and a group on the structure of the MoEC. The working groups met an average of twice a month between March and June 2001. In June, USAID put forth serious funding for the emerging reform effort and subcontracted John Clark, formerly of American University in Kyrgyzstan, to read the working group reports and draft an Action Plan for the reform legislation (DeYoung 2004).

The Action Plan, released six months later, had four main sections and sets of recommendations:

- General Management Reforms: develop financial accountability systems, public information systems, assure qualifications as the criteria in all hiring procedures, create school and university governance councils comprised of citizens and parents to monitor schools, initiate a standards and a merit-based national scholarship test for university scholarship allotments, create a system for identifying needy students in schools and helping them.
- Structural Reforms of the Ministry of Education and Culture: clarifying the chain of command, combine internal departments, increase departmental policy focus and strength, spin off the 'cultural' component of the Ministry, create an independent testing centre for the production of objective tests.
- School Management and Retraining: revise minimum academic standards for all subjects and grade levels, create pilot schools to test new teaching and administration styles, transition to a 12-year curriculum, develop guidelines for privatisation efforts, redevelop pre-schools, and design new ways to evaluate school performance.
- Higher Education Reforms: develop a board of trustees system to oversee rectors, create auditing capabilities for monies expenditures, revise minimum academic standards, retool curriculum to meet current social and economic needs, raise teacher salaries to reduce grade-buying, develop national university research centres, and establish a National Scholarship Test (NST) for financial aid allotment (DeYoung, 2004: 217–18).

Outcomes-based education is not mentioned by name, nor is the USA, but American OBE tenants and universal OBE 'best-practices' are clearly present: revising minimum standards, instituting objective assessments to test outcomes, promoting the use of data (outcomes) to manage the educational system, a focus on community involvement for monitoring, the aligning of learned skills to current conditions and, finally, a near obsession with accountability as a means to reduce corruption and improve quality without additional financial inputs. While the Action Plan lays out reforms for all sectors of the Kyrgyz educational system, reform observers claim that all participants knew that the Kyrgyz MoEC and USAID were only serious about the higher education reforms at that point (DeYoung 2004). However, the inclusion of suggestions for system-wide changes in outcomes, transparency and accountability in the Action Plan was sure to face resistance from powerful educational stake-holders.

DeYoung (2004: 213) claims that throughout the working-group negotiations, local Kyrgyz reformers had seen the advice from the Americans as an 'external threat' and resisted many reform ideas with the reply: 'Help us obtain fiscal resources and leave your ideas at the door, we had a better system than the West before, and we just need to be able to get back to what we had.' This attitude is consistent with a post-Soviet legacy that is at times nostalgic for parts of the Soviet era, including its strong educational system. Silova (2004: 75) writes that in the post-Soviet context, 'the language of new allies has triggered major conceptual disputes about how these newly "borrowed" ideas should be understood, internalized, and implemented locally.' The Action Plan did not bring new money nor did it leave western ideas 'at the door'; as the Action Plan was light on new fiscal resources and heavy on additional forms of evaluation and accountability.

Nonetheless, the Ministry of Education and USAID pushed on with the reform package by assigning a department and a timetable to each component of the Action Plan. DeYoung

(2004: 20) writes that, ‘The Action Plan, as suggested, basically called for scrapping almost the entire existing system of schooling in the Kyrgyz Republic and reinventing it with a very Western and “rational” flavor.’ However, as the reform’s focus on corruption in higher education had ‘crossed swords’ with powerful rectors and politicians, the reform legislation was eventually defeated, save the highest priority, the National Scholarship Test (NST). However, Sharshkeeva would have to push this reform from outside the ministry, as she was dismissed as Minister of Education in May 2002.

There are a variety of possible reasons why the NST survived while the rest of the Action Plan did not. Phillips (2004) theorises that in the implementation stage certain parts of reform policies are pushed faster and with more force than other parts. This was certainly the case with the higher education reforms, which DeYoung (2004: 218) claims were ‘fast tracked’. It is also possible that USAID was only serious about funding the NST, as they had the Educational Testing Service (ETS) ready to consult on the project and American Councils for International Education: ACTR/ACCELS ready to implement the test in country. It is no secret that reform proscriptions without funding and implementation capacity often go unrealised. Lastly, it is possible that the concept of testing for achievement and rewarding merit in the allotment of university scholarships resonated with legacies of socialist competition, such as Olympiads. So, while the NST struck at the heart of corruption and offered the largest area for rector-led opposition, it paradoxically survived. Its survival and eventual success had implications for the parts of the Action Plan that were left-behind.

The NST: leveraging and transferring outcomes down the system

The NST is an aptitude test similar to the SAT in the USA. In fact, the NST and its autonomous administering body, the Independent Testing Organization, are modelled after ETS in the USA. Each spring, the NST is offered to graduating seniors who want to be eligible for government-funded higher education scholarships. Explicitly aimed at equalising rural and urban educational opportunities and introducing a modern assessment culture, the NST is the only criteria used in determining the government allotment of highly valued university scholarships. This makes the NST high-stakes and highly visible. Offered in Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek languages, the test uses modern question construction, computerised and objective scoring, and rigorous methods aimed at fairness, transparency and accountability. Results of the exam are made public and the NST appears to be popular with school directors, parents and students. In fact, since 2002 over 100,000 students have sat for the exam (American Councils for International Education 2004, September 15).

The Independent Testing Organization lists the following successes of the NST in changing the culture of Kyrgyz education:

- Foundation of the non-profit educational NGO ‘The Center for Educational Assessment and Teaching Methods’.
- Independent, objective assessment through administration of the National Scholarship Test (NST) has provided fair access to university scholarships for over 15,000 students in 2002, 2003, and 2004.
- High-level political support has been attained: Presidential and Ministerial decrees called for independent testing and allowed NGO monitoring of the university

- enrolment process in 2003 and 2004.
- The 2003 'Law on Education' called for the NST for university entrance.
- Results of 2004 school director surveys indicate overwhelming support for independent testing as well as increased motivation of students to learn and teachers to teach due to the introduction of the NST.
- The science of testing and educational measurement has been bolstered in the Republic – the NST assesses cognitive skills through norm-referenced aptitude testing.
- Significant investment made in training of Kyrgyzstani specialists in modern assessment methodologies – attention to test and item performance through pre-testing and post-testing item analysis, test equating and differential item functioning (American Councils for International Education 2004, September 15).

By all accounts, the NST has also changed the nature of higher education admissions. While the test has not eliminated corruption, it has introduced a culture of scientific, outcomes-based assessment as a means to improving merit identification. The popularity and visibility of the NST has also had a much larger effect on the Kyrgyz educational system: the focus on outcomes, modern assessment and public accountability has been transferred to general education. Some Kyrgyz observers claim that this connection between higher educational reform and general education reform is not surprising in a system that places great importance on what occurs in higher education. McLean, Karimov and Asankanov (2002: 4) write of the Kyrgyz reform that 'it is unlikely that parents and students who perform poorly on these exams as a result of a poor educational experience will sit still and let this continue to happen. It is likely that substantial pressure will be brought to bear on school administrators, and those appointing them, when poor educational outcomes result.

Indeed, that was the hope all along. A USAID report on the NST claims, 'It is hoped that the testing format of the NST will provoke further debate and leverage reform efforts which are seeking to introduce better tools of educational measurement, *outcome oriented national standards, and even "outcome oriented" lesson planning at the classroom level* (Drummond 2003, emphasis added).

Clearly the NST and the attack on corruption in higher education were eventually meant by reformers to translate into system-wide changes in the approach to education in Kyrgyzstan. What is not clear is how fast they thought it would happen. It turns out that they would not have to wait long; in 2004 the system-wide outcomes-based discourse of the 2001 reform gained money and momentum and was realised in new reforms.

Travelling from higher to general education

In 2004 the World Bank approved a \$15.5 million Rural Education project aimed at preparing Kyrgyz children for the 'challenges of the future' (World Bank Group 2005). The OBE footprint of increased monitoring of outcomes and accountability with few new inputs is present in the new World Bank reform. According to a recent World Bank press release on the project, it will include:

An improved performance management system for teachers and principals and a related revised salary scale will be developed and applied in two pilot oblasts – Issykul and Talas. The project will strengthen student assessment by setting up a new Assessment Unit within the Education Ministry and by arranging for student participation in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The overall sustainability of the sector will improve, since the project will strengthen the country's education strategy in ways that optimize education outcomes within prevailing resource and implementation constraints

(World Bank Group 2005)

In addition to the new World Bank money for outcome-oriented general education reforms, USAID is funding a new secondary school teacher-training programme called PEAKS (Participation, Education and Knowledge Strengthening). PEAKS seeks to reform general education by training teachers in 'international methodologies' and modern assessments based on results, as well as improve parental involvement and the training of school directors and educational managers (USAID Data Sheet 2005).

While these reforms are in their beginning stages, the discourse of neo-liberal reform and outcomes-based education has made its way from an original focus on combating corruption in higher education to programmes aimed at general educational assessment methods and educational outcomes. Silova (2004) observes that too many comparative studies of borrowing focus only on what is originally modified, omitted and accepted as a part of the transfer (p. 76). She argues that we must move beyond a focus on practices and recognise changes in discourse. Steiner-Khamsi (2000) claims that often when a reform is not implemented, a discourse is still transferred. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, a general education outcomes-oriented discourse that was started in the 2001 Action Plan is now being implemented three years later, possibly as a result of the popularity of the NST and the pressures it placed on general educational performance.

Recent outcomes-based reforms of general education in Kyrgyzstan, while not explicitly linked to the discourse of corruption elimination, must be understood in this context. A protracted and serious reform effort by USAID and the Kyrgyz MoEC in 2001–02 led to the implementation of the National Scholarship Test. The subsequent success and popularity of the test brought pressure to bear on secondary and primary schools in Kyrgyzstan. The NST's shift in focus from the inputs to outputs of education set the stage for the introduction of an outcome-orientation in Kyrgyz general education. This vertical or intra-sectoral transfer from higher education to general education has not happened on its own or without the agency of key actors. Parents and school directors have expressed their opinions, teachers have been re-trained, lawmakers have institutionalised reforms, and aid agencies have tirelessly pushed their neo-liberal 'best practices'. Highlighting the importance of individuals in 'travelling reforms', Camilla Sharshekeeva has travelled from the Ministry of Education over to the World Bank, where she is now heading up the new general education reforms.

Mongolia: banking on policy import

The outcomes-based education reform in Mongolia was part of a larger public sector reform. The Public Sector Management and Finance (PSMF) Law, approved by the

Parliament of Mongolia on 27 June 2002, advocated accountability and efficiency in the areas of governance and finance. In Mongolia, finance is the engine for any reform and not surprisingly the concept of accountability, permeating each section of the 2002 law, was linked to performance agreements and performance-based bonuses.³ The PSMF reform was funded by a \$25 million loan from the Asian Development Bank (Asian Development Bank 2003). The first loan was approved in December 1999 and the second loan of \$15.5 million targeting accountability and efficiency in health, education, social welfare and labour was granted in October 2003. In the late 1990s New Zealand became the magnet for policy pilgrimage. Each and every member of the Mongolian Parliament and all senior-level staff of ministries were sent on study tour to New Zealand. The policy pilgrimage from Mongolia boomed at a time when critical observers had already published and widely disseminated their doubts about whether the New Zealand-style public management reforms were applicable for developing countries (Bale and Dale 1998, Schick 1998).

Despite, or perhaps because of, Mongolia being a late adopter of the new public management reform, the various ministries carried out the reform without any further delay.⁴ In 2003, the Ministry of Education published a thick 319-page white handbook on outcomes-based education with numerous examples of student benchmarks and teacher scorecards (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2003). By January 2005, astute commentators on OBE started to refer to the book as the Big Grey Book because readers were browsing the opaque tome in vain to find solid criteria for evaluating educational outcomes.

OBE puzzles in the Mongolian policy context

Three puzzles are striking when we examine how OBE has been implemented in practice. First, holding teachers strictly accountable for their performance is not new in Mongolia. In fact, in place was a system where teachers were not only monetarily rewarded if they performed well, but also punished if they failed perform well. Thus, the study of the imported OBE reform in Mongolia is a good case for investigating the impact of policy import on top of already existing, similar practices. Does a policy import replace, hybridise or reinforce existing practices? We have several reasons to suggest that the OBE reform in Mongolia has merely confirmed what was already in place with regard to teacher surveillance. Nevertheless, the co-existence of several performance- and outcomes-based monitoring systems has significantly increased the bureaucratisation of the teaching profession. Drowned in paper work, teachers must submit their daily notes on students as well as monthly and semi-annual self-evaluations to the school administration.

Secondly, OBE was implemented without prior establishment of grade and subject-specific standards. On paper, the standards-based education reform was officially initiated in 1998. However, it yielded few results as the reform did not lead to the formulation of concrete and measurable standards. The curriculum, crowded with many different subjects and consequently leaving little instructional time for each of the subjects, has remained vague and abstract with regard to standards. This leapfrogging – moving directly to OBE without a prior establishment of standards – has left school administrators and teachers at a loss as to how and against which benchmarks they should evaluate outcomes. In the absence of clear and measurable criteria, school administrators and teachers have

resorted to monitoring practices established in the socialist past and endured in the post-socialist present.

Thirdly, consistent with OBE reforms in many other countries of the region, the OBE reform in Mongolia did not have any budgetary implications. Against all expectations, the budget lines for salary supplements and bonuses have not been enhanced to enable merit- or performance-based salary additions. As a result of the budget ceiling, the school administration has been trapped in a zero-sum game. In order to reward a few high-performing teachers, it needs to deduct income from many other teachers at the school.

How do schools, in particular school administration and teachers, deal with these three challenges of OBE in Mongolia? This case study focuses on the first puzzle and briefly interweaves the other two. It draws on two empirical studies in which we analysed teacher salaries in Mongolia.

The first study was conducted in May 2003 in two provinces of Mongolia (Uvurkhangai and Arkhangai) and examined how teachers as parents manage to pay for the high educational cost of their university-aged children (Steiner-Khamsi, Tumendemberel and Steiner 2004). We conducted 44 interviews with teachers in four schools and gathered information on how much teachers earn in total (including base salary, salary supplements and bonuses) and how much they spend for the education of their own children. The study identified three teacher strategies – expectation of reciprocity within the family, social redistribution within the extended social network and loans – that enable teachers to bridge the sizable gap between their low income and the high educational expenses of their own children.

The second source of information is from the baseline study for the Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) funded by the World Bank and implemented by the Open Society Forum (Soros Foundation). As part of the preparation of the survey instruments and the sampling plan for the PETS study, we interviewed principals and teachers in Ulaanbaatar and in the province of Tuv in January 2005.⁵

Discipline and punish teachers

In our Teachers as Parents study (Steiner-Khamsi, Tumendemberel and Steiner 2004), we were surprised to find the elaborate systems that are in place to discipline and punish teachers for their shortcomings. These systems, of course, reflect the high status and expectations attached to the teaching profession. In provincial schools, teachers are personally held accountable by parents and the school administration, not only if students do not academically achieve in class, but also if these students do not clean the classroom, are impolite, come late to class, do not wash themselves, do not engage in useful after-school activities, do not do their homework or do not take proper notes during class. The teacher who voluntarily tutors students after school so that she does not get humiliated by parents or have her salary supplement reduced is not an extinct species in Mongolia, but rather is alive, suffering and complaining. The system of teacher accountability relies on a myriad of regulations that keep teachers in line. Before explaining the bureaucratic apparatus for disciplining and punishing teachers, it is necessary to briefly present the Mongolian performance- or outcomes-based teacher salary scheme which has been in place for the past 30 years.

The full income of Mongolian teachers has traditionally consisted of base salary, salary supplements and bonuses. The *base salary* only constitutes approximately 57 per

cent of the income, and salary supplements and bonuses represent a great share of the full income. The base salary ranges from between \$45 and \$55 per month, depending on the rank of a teacher.⁶ The promotion criteria vary slightly for the different ranks, but they all include leadership skills of the teacher (number of teachers that are mentored or trained), ethics of the teacher (in practice commonly interpreted as non-alcoholism), grades of students and awards from 'olympiads' and competitions. Of all these criteria, winning at olympiads carries the greatest weight. That is, if a teacher wins at an olympiad for a particular subject matter, all the other requirements (leadership skills, ethics, grades of students) become inconsequential. Furthermore, if she wins at a high-level olympiad (provincial or national level), she is able to skip ranks, and is directly promoted to a lead teacher or methodologist. Interestingly, the promotion and salary increase also go into effect if a student wins at an olympiad or competition; the assumption being that the teacher must have supported and promoted the award-winning student, and therefore needs to be rewarded for that student. Critics of olympiads, one of the many legacies from the socialist past, point to the detrimental effects of linking teacher salaries and bonuses to students' outcomes in olympiads. This practice encourages teachers, according to the critics, to focus on only a few promising students, coach them for olympiads, and neglect the rest of the students in a class.

It is important to bear in mind that these promotion criteria, and with them, the performance-based salary scheme, have been in place since the 1970s, long before OBE reforms were being pushed. The competitions were conducted at each administrative level – municipality, district, provincial and national – leading to a whole host of awards and insignia. Most likely, each and every citizen won a socialist competition for something: for being the best worker, the best student in mathematics or the best stamp collector – to list only a few examples. The importance of olympiads and other performance-based promotion criteria was re-affirmed in government regulations of the post-socialist era (in 1995 and 2004). A common reaction among the interviewed teachers towards OBE, and in particular towards the teacher scorecards, was that OBE is socialist competition in disguise, because the emphasis is also placed on outcomes or performance. In addition, socialist-oriented teachers viewed OBE as an egotistical version of socialist competition in that it advocates competition without any social responsibility for a group or for the collective.

The *salary supplement* constitutes regular monthly income and is given for all kinds of tasks: the salary supplement for grading student notebooks is given to all teachers, including, for example, physical education teachers. All teachers are supposed to be knowledge-centred and students are expected to take notes on what the teacher says and consolidate that knowledge in their assignments. Other sizable income is generated from teaching a class for gifted students (20 per cent supplement to the base salary), or from serving as a class teacher.

In contrast to salary supplements, *bonuses* are usually one-time awards given throughout the school year. They are supposed to be given for special accomplishments of teachers, but in practice are – in the absence of clear evaluation criteria – determined arbitrarily by the principal, the education manager (assistant principal), and the social worker,⁷ who in trio constitute the school administration. The teacher scorecards, introduced in the wake of the OBE reform, fall into this category for two reasons: a high score (i.e. 60 per cent and more of all eligible points) calls for a bonus and given the

vagueness of the evaluation criteria they also mean that the school administration values the teacher for reasons mysterious to all other teachers.

As common as it is to obtain a salary supplement or a bonus, it is as common to lose it or to have one's salary, supplement or bonuses deducted. Deductions are the rule and not the exception. Salary deductions are grave and are only made for teacher absences, tardiness and drunkenness.⁸ In contrast, the complete withdrawal or deductions of salary supplements are very common. The school administration establishes its authority with teachers by constantly threatening to reduce their income, creating an atmosphere of intimidation and obedience in the school.

It is a striking feature of the Mongolian educational system that not only the laws and regulations are formulated meticulously, but also the sanctions for not obeying them. Apart from the host of regulations imposed by the district, provincial and central education authorities, each school also develops its own additional policies. In a school in the Bayangol city-district of Ulaanbaatar, for example, the supplement for grading student notebooks is only given if seven requirements are met, including: the full name and address of the student must be written in proper handwriting on the cover of the notebook, the student is not allowed to use pens with different colours in the note book (the teacher has a monopoly on the use of red ink), and there must be evidence that the teacher actually checked and corrected the student notebook.⁹ Non-compliance with any one of these conditions leads to a supplement deduction.

Another example for the punitive system is the regulation of class teachers. In Bayangol, seven criteria must be fulfilled to receive the full supplement for class teachers. In order to receive the full supplement, 70 points must be attained, 10 per criteria.¹⁰ The policy also clearly lays out how these points are deducted, leading either to a reduction or to an annulment of the salary supplement (Bayangol 2004b):

- For every student who is not disciplined: 5 points deduction.
- For every loss or damage of the classroom equipment and furniture: 5 points deduction.
- For not up-dating the class billboard (class newspaper, posters, etc.): 5 points deduction
- For every student who comes late or misses class: 1 point deduction.

It was in this culture of tight surveillance of teachers and of school salaries tied to performance that OBE was introduced in school year 2003/04.

The OBE teacher scorecards

The teacher scorecards are the most visible marker of OBE, signalling a difference between what had already been in place with regard to quality monitoring and the new system of teacher surveillance. In Mongolian schools, the teacher scorecard is a sheet of paper entitled 'outcomes contract'. Each school develops its own outcomes contract, but most of the contracts between teachers and school administrations are strikingly similar. An example from a school in Zuunmod, Tuv province, illustrates the kind of outcomes listed in such contracts (Zuunmod 2004). It includes 10 outcomes that first need to be self-evaluated by the teacher and then passed on to the school administration.

We list the outcomes in the following, along with a short description of how teachers and school administrators in Mongolia tend to measure them:

- 1 Class management: disciplining of students in class, keeping the class busy, organising extra-curricular activities for students.
- 2 Lesson planning: reflects the degree to which a teacher is organised, that is, whether she has a notebook in which she notes the topic for each lesson.
- 3 Student development: at the beginning of the school year, the teacher must formulate academic benchmarks for each student.¹¹ In the contract she needs to make a general statement on grade fluctuation in class.
- 4 Official documents and notes: refers to all documents that the teacher needs to regularly submit to the school administration, that is, cataloging teaching resources used in class, student registration and other reports for the school administration.
- 5 Teaching skills: although this outcome is self-assessed like all other outcomes, the teaching skills are supposed to be observed periodically by the education manager.
- 6 Teacher's creative work: counts how many teaching materials and booklets the teacher has developed. It has become a public concern that teachers generate additional income by forcing parents to buy these teacher products.
- 7 Professional development: number of courses or lectures attended and/or number of books read (called independent study).
- 8 Time management and task completion: indicates how often the teacher was late or absent from class and whether the teacher has carried out the tasks given by the school administration in a timely manner.
- 9 Teacher morality and responsibility: includes an assessment of one's own drinking habits, communication style towards students (abstaining from verbal abuse) and the school administration (obedience).
- 10 Maintenance of property and cleaning of classroom: addresses the condition of the classroom including the cleanliness and the condition of equipment and furniture.

Arguably, the imported OBE reform has been locally adapted or Mongolised in substantial ways. For example, indicators measuring learning and teaching outcomes have as much weight as indicators reflecting how well the teacher communicates with and responds to the school administration. The teacher must fill out the self-evaluation once a month and deposit it with the education manager (assistant principal). According to our interviewees, the education manager quickly reviews these sheets, checks them off and places them in his drawer. Very rarely are observations in class or discussions on the individual students scheduled and it is only towards the end of the semester when the school accountant informs the school administration about the savings made from school maintenance, repair, parental donations or salary and supplement deductions, that these teacher scorecards re-surface from the education manager's files. It is at this critical moment during the school year that the teacher performance on the OBE contract and other accomplishments of teachers, notably at teacher olympiads and competitions, are reviewed for bonuses. The OBE contracts are primarily seen as one of the many ways to earn more income and the teachers that we interviewed do not associate these contracts with improving the quality of teaching. For example, at the school in Zuunmod, Tuv province, the teacher scorecards are reviewed semi-annually. At the end of the fiscal year (December), the school succeeded in making considerable savings, and rewarded

all those teachers with a bonus that obtained 60 per cent or more of the available points on the teacher scorecard.

As mentioned repeatedly, the system of performance-based salaries is hardly new for the Mongolian education sector. In fact, there has been an elaborate and bureaucratic mega-structure of surveillance in place underpinned with a myriad of policy documents and laws regulating, administering and legitimising that structure in minute detail. The purpose of that structure is to control teachers and to reward and punish them by means of salary supplements/bonuses and deductions, respectively. What is novel, however, is the fact that teachers now have to self-evaluate themselves. From a Foucauldian perspective, one might propose that the OBE reform institutionalised a modern technology of surveillance that demands insight, remorse, and continued self-betterment (Foucault 1995, Popkewitz 1998, Rose 1998). In practice, however, the outcomes contracts encompass a wide array of objectives, many of them matching the concerns of school administrators, with little relevance for learning outcomes. The contracts are used to control the teacher rather than to monitor the progress of the student. Furthermore, the almost complete reliance on the system of self-evaluation fuels the suspicion of teachers that the school administration uses OBE and other performance measures to legitimise the practice of patronage and favoritism in schools.

The economics of OBE

All along, dating back to the socialist past, money has been the pulse for reforms in Mongolia. Intriguingly, some of these reforms are an exact replica of what is already in place. OBE in Mongolia qualifies as such a quasi-reform that has been used as a 'flag of convenience' (Lynch 1998: 9) to access international funding. Linguistic nuances matter here. Rather than claiming that the reform was funded with the support of large loans from the Asian Development Bank, it is more accurate to state that the Ministry of Finance was given large loans *for* implementing the New Zealand management and finance system. As with other donor involvement in Mongolia, the condition of reforming the public sector was the import of a particular policy. The importance of external funding becomes apparent when we consider the large number of 'national programmes' or 'action plans' that are publicly announced but never implemented due to a lack of funding. In contrast, by using the language of OBE, funds were secured, and OBE has been fitted into a myriad of already existing accountability systems. Banking on the travelling reform of OBE does not only apply to the government level, but it also applies quite literally to the school level. Leaving aside the dubious evaluation criteria for outcomes, a well-performing teacher in a Mongolian school manages nowadays to accumulate bonuses from different accountability systems and considerably lift her low base salary. Very much to the dismay of other teachers, however, this banking of bonuses is done at the expense of those who have to blindly accept salary and salary supplement deductions made by the school administration. In the Mongolian case, OBE merely reinforced what was already in place. By adding one more monitoring policy (OBE) to the series of firmly established teacher surveillance technologies, the government was able to get loans, and some teachers, bonuses. Banking on policy import was an important reason why OBE was so appealing to government officials and school administrators.

Kazakhstan: stretching the curriculum, stretching for Europe

In Kazakhstan, the outcomes-based education (OBE) reform emerged in the context of improving educational quality, which had significantly declined after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Significant reduction in state education expenditures during the 1990s¹² resulted in a gradual reversal of the educational progress achieved during the Soviet period, leading to decreasing enrolment rates, increasing non-attendance, and the deteriorating quality of education (Silova 2002). In particular, quality decline had been evidenced in a decreasing number of qualified teachers, reduced availability of instructional materials, outdated curricula and physical deterioration of schools (Silova 2002, Open Society Institute 2002, Chapman *et al.* 2005). As Chapman *et al.* (2005) highlighted, the challenge for Kazakhstan and other Central Asian governments has been to avoid further disintegration of their education systems and the recapturing of previous levels of education quality, while striving to build educational systems that reflect an elusive 'international standard' and prepare graduates who can be competitive for positions in more globally oriented economies. In Kazakhstan, for example, the driving force behind secondary education reform was the creation of a new education space, symbolising Kazakhstan's movement to new, European education standards. In particular, Kazakhstan's former Minister of Education, Nuraly Sultanovich Bektourganov (2002), explained that improving the quality of education was necessary in order to ensure that Kazakhstan's education system would produce 'competitive school graduates able to continue their studies in the higher educational establishments in Europe'. Furthermore, he explained that this reform would ensure that Kazakhstan would 'gradually occupy its place in the international educational space'.

Kazakhstan's 'quest for quality' (Chapman *et al.* 2005), was accompanied by two parallel, but interconnected processes, which ultimately triggered the emergence of OBE in the early part of this decade. First, higher education reform associated with the Bologna¹³ and Lisbon¹⁴ conventions emphasised the importance of reforming secondary education to ensure that school graduates are better prepared for undergraduate studies. Secondly, the extension of secondary education to 12 years was presented as an opportunity to revise Soviet-style curriculum and a necessary precondition for realigning both the primary and higher education systems towards European standards. A combination of these two education reform processes resulted in the emergence of OBE, signalling Kazakhstan's desire to join the Western alliance and increase its competitiveness in the global market. As President Nazarbayev explained, introduction of 12-year primary and secondary education and transition to four-year higher education would ensure Kazakhstan's 'competitiveness as a nation' (Kazakhstan Embassy in the USA 2004, March 23).

Internal and external pressures for secondary education reform

Interestingly, the idea of reforming secondary education in Kazakhstan's was originally initiated by higher education administrators and academics, who complained about the ever decreasing quality of high school graduates entering universities (Silova and Kalikova 2005). Initially driven by the widespread concerns of these academics, concerns about drastically decreasing education quality were later validated by the results of the National Unified Testing (NUT). Introduced in 1999, the NUT results revealed that a large number

of school graduates were poorly prepared for undergraduate studies. Since 1999, the percentage of high school graduates failing the NUT has remained unchanged, with 28–30 per cent of all potential higher education students failing the test (Ministry of Education 2004). The latest data by the Ministry of Education (2004) reveals that 24.2 per cent of all school graduates failed the test (with failure being determined by getting less than 40 of 120 points possible), while only 0.7 per cent received the highest scores (getting 101–120 points). Equipped with firm evidence of failing educational quality in schools, higher education administrators and academics began to put increasing pressure on policy makers to initiate secondary education reform, including revision of the existing curriculum.

Responding to the increasing criticism of the quality of the existing school system at the end of the 1990s, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education announced a comprehensive school reform in 2001. The aim of the new reform was to extend the duration of secondary education to 12 years (referred to as '12-year education reform'). Among the main reasons for the envisaged change, government officials cited world education standards, particularly European education standards, as well as education reform activities underway in other former Soviet republics (including the Baltic republics, Ukraine and Russia) and Eastern and Central Europe (including Hungary and Romania). Quoting the Declaration of the Council of Europe (1992), Kazakhstan's mass media stated that 12-year education was the most widely used worldwide. For example, one of the newspapers explained that students in 160 countries study 12 or more years, while only 25 per cent of all countries study less than 12 years in basic/secondary education (Semikina 2001). Therefore, transition from 11 to 12 years of study was presented as a key to achieving recognition of Kazakhstan's secondary education certificates by universities internationally, thus 'enabling young people from Kazakhstan to continue their studies in the best universities abroad' (Draft Conception 2002).

Although government officials had readily accepted the 'travelling policy' promoting the extension of the length of the study of secondary education, local re-conceptualisation of the reform idea resulted in an amalgam of different responses among the main education stakeholders. According to one of the surveys (Komkon-2 Eurasia 2002), the majority of education administrators (62 per cent of governmental officials and 46 per cent of school directors) supported the reform, while only 15 per cent of education specialists, 19 per cent of parents, 20 per cent of high school students, and 29 per cent of teachers thought that there was a need for extending the number of years in basic/secondary education. Despite differences in opinions, however, most of the respondents were unwilling to admit weaknesses of the current curriculum inherited from the Soviet Union (i.e. usually described as centralised, rigid, inflexible and overloaded). As Semikina (2001) noted, many experts questioned the need to extend education from 11 to 12 years, given that the Soviet model was so successful – 'fundamental, substantive, and strong in tradition'. Similarly, parents were not supportive of the reform, anticipating that it would cost them more to have their children enrolled in school for an additional year. Referring to Soviet educational achievements in maths and science, one of the parents explained: 'Why should we emulate Western models when they [the West] actively cultivate our educational models and schemes?' (Semikina 2001).

Given the unfavourable environment for introducing the reform yet feeling the pressure to reach 'European standards', the first attempts at re-conceptualizing the extension of basic/secondary education to 12 years did not involve any major revision of curriculum.

In fact, some of the government officials suggested leaving the existing curriculum intact (10 years), while simply adding one year at each end of the existing education structure. Some experts argued that the first (additional) year would provide opportunity for children to get better prepared for entering elementary schools, while the last (additional) year could be used either for more intensive preparation for college or for developing professional vocational skills. In other words, the initial discussion resulted in accepting the broader concept of the ‘travelling policy’ without implementing major changes in the inherited, Soviet-style curriculum content and process (Silova 2005b). Interestingly, the first draft of the ‘Concept of Twelve-Year General Education in the Republic of Kazakhstan’ (2001), which was prepared by the Ministry of Education experts, did not mention ‘outcomes’ or ‘outcomes-based education’.

Re-defining educational quality through OBE

The draft concept was heavily criticised by many teachers and academics, as well as representatives of non-governmental organisations. In 2001, the Soros Foundation-Kazakhstan (SFK) brought together a working group of approximately 70 policy makers, academics, teachers and NGO representatives to discuss how the extension of secondary education could be used to revise the entire curriculum to address several specific education issues. Following several meetings, the group highlighted some of the weaknesses of the current secondary education system. First, the education system did not adequately reflect the new education paradigm, which emphasised individualisation and diversification and allowed upper secondary education students to make choices between academic studies and vocational paths (i.e. moving away from Soviet centralised curriculum model). Secondly, current educational curriculum was ‘outdated’ and ‘overloaded’, raising major concerns for the quality of education and the health of children. Thirdly, many secondary school graduates, who did not enter higher education institutions, faced difficulties finding employment after graduation due to their lack of basic vocational skills. Finally, there was a growing concern over the quality of general secondary education, including a lack of child-centred teaching/learning methodologies and assessment systems. Combined, the working group saw the 12-year education reform as an opportunity to re-define the concept of ‘education quality’ in Kazakhstan.

Drawing attention to these specific education problems, the SFK addressed a variety of international experts to discuss possible alternatives for curriculum reform in Kazakhstan. From 2001–03, a ‘global network of education agencies and academics was mobilized’ (Seddon 2005) that included education experts from different countries, including former Soviet Union republics (Russia, Latvia and Estonia), Eastern and Central Europe (Hungary, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia), as well as Finland, South Africa, Australia and the USA. Common to all these experts was their experience with implementation of OBE in their countries. Hannes Voolma (personal communication 2005) explained that the idea was to invite education experts from a variety of countries that had previously undertaken curricula reform aimed at the introduction of outcomes-based education. By inviting a variety of experts, the working group had an opportunity to study different strategies used by policy makers in formulating and implementing OBE in a variety of contexts.

The focus of the first meeting was on the changes required in Kazakhstan’s educational system. As Seddon (2005) noted, this focus on change was a given. A key feature of the

meeting was a presentation by Tom Alexander who had been Director of Education and Social Policy at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and a current Education Sub-Board member of the Open Society Institute (OSI). Alexander's presentation highlighted features of the changing global context and argued for a specific approach to education reform in Kazakhstan. First, his presentation established a framework for policy making based on the synergies between policy areas such as education, labour markets and social issues. This framework challenged the established Kazakh view that education was about gaining more and more knowledge, by arguing for connections between education, social policy and the labour market (Seddon 2005). In particular, Alexander argued that education should not be a stand-alone domain concerned with inducting young people into established knowledge traditions, but should focus on developing the kinds of capacities that enable young people to learn how to learn and how to demonstrate the kinds of literacies that support young people's labour market outcomes and enable them to address social issues. In this vision, Kazakhstan's education system was to move away from an emphasis on knowledge acquisition to an emphasis on skills, especially meta-cognitive or learning to learn skills.

Although these ideas were initially highly contested by many representatives of the working group, they laid the foundation for more focused work by a smaller group of Kazakh educators (later referred to as the 'analytical group'), which received on-going support from SFK through regular trainings, workshops and meetings with different international experts. In 2001, the analytical group prepared a policy paper, which outlined the dimensions of change in Kazakhstan's education and proposed a new, previously unarticulated solution for school reform – introduction of OBE in the context of the 12-year secondary education reform. The policy paper presented outcomes-based education as 'an approach to system wide improvement in education', which would define clear statements of expected outcomes to guide the organisation of the learning process, introduce learner-centred models, professionalise the role of teachers and increase community participation in the learning process. The analytical group continued to work together on a regular basis, organising public discussions, conferences and workshops across Kazakhstan in order to disseminate and discuss the idea of OBE with a larger group of Kazakhstan's education stakeholders.

In 2002, some members of the analytical group were included in a working group organised by the Ministry of Education, where they made key contributions to the development of the 'State Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2005–2010' (Ministry of Education 2004) and a new policy paper 'General Secondary Education Standards in the Republic of Kazakhstan: Current Situation, Exploration, Alternatives' (2003). In fact, the draft of the 'General Secondary Education Standards' officially acknowledged the importance of financial and intellectual support of SFK in the development of the draft policy document, as well as individual contribution of some members of the SFK analytical group. These two documents (i.e. the State Program and draft Standards) became the first policy instruments that institutionalised the idea of OBE in education legislation. In particular, the State Program outlined the main principles of OBE, which included a shift from 'facts-based' to 'skills-based' learning, a move from 'teacher-centred' to 'learner-centred' education models, as well as a transition from 'knowledge-acquisition' to a 'systematic understanding of the world, society, and people ... ability and desire to independently and creatively use, broaden, and deepen this understanding' (p. 28). In addition, the State Program

underscored the importance of critical thinking, reasoning and reflection as some of the main goals of the teaching/learning process. Finally, the State Program introduced the idea of national education standards ‘oriented at student outcomes in a form of basic learner competencies’ (p. 29). The draft ‘National Standards Concept’ further elaborated these ideas and defined a concrete plan for the development and implementation of OBE in Kazakhstan (e.g. the action plan includes concrete activities and budget from 2005–10).

To summarise, the emergence of OBE in Kazakhstan was accompanied by ubiquitous international references, which were de-territorialised as different OBE models were simultaneously used as exemplars for emulation in the initial stage of reform formulation. Although the main principles of Kazakhstan’s OBE bore remarkable resemblance to global discourses on outcomes-based education (e.g. Spady 1994), neither the State Program nor the draft National Standards Concept made any references to specific educational practices in other geographic contexts, except for quoting the elusive ‘international standards of education’. In this way, introduction of OBE played a symbolic role, presenting itself ‘as a drastic break from current educational practices and as a means of providing educational success for all students’ (Capper and Jamison 1993: 427). Interestingly, a simple extension of the education system to 12 years of education was not perceived as a viable option for joining the European education space. It was precisely in combination with OBE that the extension to 12 years’ education was perceived as the most effective means for improving education quality, a necessary precondition for increasing Kazakhstan’s competitiveness in the global market and a successful mechanism for ‘entering the common world educational space’ (State Program 2004: 46).

Lessons learned from late adopters

In the introductory section, we presented the epidemiological model of global reforms to draw attention to the time factor. The timing of when a global reform is adopted, that is, whether it is borrowed at an early, growth, or burn-out stage matters a great deal for the study of travelling policies. The three cases of OBE borrowing in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Kazakhstan represent examples of late adoption in that OBE had already reached its peak of global dissemination and in some cases faced a decline in its popularity by the time it was implemented. By implication, we study the adoption of global reforms when we investigate late adopters. This simple statement is indeed far-reaching when we consider the lively academic debate (see Anderson-Levitt 2003, Steiner-Khamsi 2004b) on whether globalisation in education exists in reality, or is rather imagined and constructed. At face value, we side with a neo-institutionalist perspective (Meyer *et al.* 2003) on international convergence of educational reforms. In our example, the concepts and language of OBE did indeed experience a global career and the evidence of OBE adoption in these three Central Asian countries would be foolish to deny. Upon closer scrutiny, however, such a perspective applies a macro view of long-term changes and does not sufficiently examine what is happening on the ground.

Once we disaggregate our three case studies of late adopters and distinguish them contextually, additional perspectives open up. The global OBE reform was adopted so differently in each case that one wonders whether the same reform served as the exemplar of emulation. The reasons why OBE resonated in the first place, the impact that OBE

had on existing practices and the prerequisites for introducing the reform varied for each context or case. In Kyrgyzstan, the OBE reform was seen as a response to corruption in education, in Mongolia it was embraced for economic reasons and in Kazakhstan it was driven by a political quest to become part of western advanced economies. The impact of these reforms also varied considerably. As mentioned in the introduction, in Mongolia, for example, OBE merely reinforced the elaborate teacher surveillance system that had already been in place for several decades, whereas in Kyrgyzstan it advocated a new public accountability and advanced standardised testing. Finally, one would assume that OBE is either a result of a comprehensive curriculum reform or at least leads to one *a posteriori*, calling into existence clear standards or outcomes for each grade level and subject matter. Again, all expectations of a clear sequence of events are shattered in our cases; all of them suggest leapfrogging in that these educational systems bypassed a comprehensive curriculum reform before introducing OBE, and whether OBE *per se* will trigger a curriculum reform in the near future is, at this time, beyond our assessment.

Having listed a few features of how OBE was locally adapted in the three contexts, the question arises as to whether ‘OBE’ was perhaps an unfortunate choice of terminology? The answer depends on what one establishes as a comparative framework. Compared to early adopters in New Zealand, Australia, the USA and the UK, there is indeed a very loose correspondence between neo-liberal ideology and the actual implementation of ‘OBE’ in the Central Asian countries of our study. But once we stop to compare the OBE of late adopters in Central Asia with the OBE of early western adopters, a different picture emerges. In an attempt to explain this loose coupling between ideology and implementation, we propose to interpret this phenomenon as one that is endemic to all global reforms, including OBE. By the time OBE went global, it did not any longer stand for a clear programme of change, but it represented an internationally shared understanding among government officials with regard to ‘international standards’. This particular discourse was sufficiently vague to be embraced by many and precise enough in its label to send out a signal of internationalisation. Arguably, global reforms leave a lot of room for local implementation, especially when many countries have already adopted OBE in their own, idiosyncratic ways. How these standards are filled with meaning depends on the cultural context and as these case studies illustrated, on the local policy conflict that the act of borrowing is predisposed to resolve.

Notes

- 1 António Nóvoa and Martin Lawn’s concept of ‘education space’ (2002) is closely related to Schriewer’s notion of ‘reference horizon’ (Schriewer *et al.* 1998) in that both terms denote a cluster of societies with either a common past or a desired common future. We use these two terms, and a third – world system – interchangeably, acknowledging that there are several world systems.
- 2 One of the chief architects of OBE in New Zealand, Maris O’Rourke, was appointed as a senior officer at the World Bank in the mid-1990s. With her move from New Zealand to the USA in 1995, OBE moved along with her. It experienced an explosive growth in low-income countries receiving grants from the World Bank.
- 3 Article 47 deals with ‘Assessment of Performance Agreement’ and Article 49 with ‘Payment of Performance Bonuses to Employees’ (Parliament of Mongolia 2002).
- 4 The greatest delay occurred at the parliamentary level. The first draft for the Public Sector Management and Finance Law was submitted in 1997 (see Lanking 2004), but only approved

in 2002. Once it was approved, the ministries were eager to adopt it, with the financial support of ADB, to their sector.

- 5 The baseline study was conducted in collaboration with A. Gerelmaa (Open Society Forum, Ulaanbaatar).
- 6 The monthly base salary ranges from 53,200 tugrik (\$45) for a regular teacher to 63,840 tugrik (\$55) for a teacher with the rank of an 'advisor'. According to the government regulation 42 (Offices of the Prime Minister *et al.* 2004: 274) and the regulation of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education and Science *et al.* 1995: 220–4), there are four ranks for teachers: regular teacher, methodologist, lead teacher and advisor. Promotion to a higher rank entails a salary increase of 5–25 per cent.
- 7 The social worker used to be the head of the communist pioneer organisation in the school, and was in a powerful position. Nowadays, the social worker continues to be part of the school administration and is in charge of extracurricular activities.
- 8 In one school in Ulaanbaatar: drunkenness calls for a 20–40 per cent salary deduction, depending on how often the teacher has shown up drunk in school in the past month.
- 9 The complete list of seven conditions for receiving the supplement for grading student notebooks is as follows (Bayangol 2004a): (1) Full name and address on notebook cover written in proper handwriting, (2) tidy cover of notebook (i.e. not dirty and not ripped), (3) no crossed out or corrected words, (4) legible and neat handwriting, (5) complete and correct notes on the lessons, (6) no mixing of ink in the same notebook, and (7) evidence that the teacher actually checked and corrected the student notebook.
- 10 The seven conditions for class teacher supplement, each carrying 10 points, are as follows (Bayangol 2004b): (1) cleanliness of classroom, (2) discipline of the class, (3) clothes and dressing of students, (4) condition of class furniture and equipment, (5) attendance of students, (6) making use of class billboard, and (7) accomplishment of given duties and responsibilities.
- 11 In discussion with Mongolian teachers, the argument has been made that in the absence of standardised tests (standardised tests 'only' exist for the 4th, 8th and 10th grades) the establishment of academic benchmarks at the beginning of the semester encourages grade inflation at the end of the semester.
- 12 Despite Kazakhstan's economic recovery at the end of the 1990s, investments in the education sector have remained considerably low compared to pre-independence levels. For example, education expenditure as a percentage of GDP has decreased from 6 per cent in 1990 to 3.4 per cent in 2001, while the overall spending on education from the state budget declined from 24.5 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent in 2000 (State Statistical Agency of RK 2001). The share of education investment from the local budgets had also decreased from 32.3 per cent in 1997 to 17 per cent in 2000 (Asian Development Bank 2002).
- 13 The 1999 Bologna Declaration points out that a Europe of Knowledge is an important factor for social and human growth. The Convention follow-up – the Bologna Process – aims to establish a European Higher Education Area by 2010 in which students and staff can move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications. This overall goal is reflected in the main action areas defined in the Bologna Declaration: (1) adoption of a system of degrees essentially based on two cycles; (2) co-operation in quality assurance and recognition; and (3) promotion of mobility (Nyborg 2004).
- 14 In 1997, Kazakhstan was one of the first CIS countries, which signed the Lisbon convention 'On recognition of qualifications, referring to higher education in European region'. Ratification of this document requires positive solution of general education extension with the further recognition of higher education quality.

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