

Promising Futures? Education as a Symbolic Resource of Hope in Kyrgyzstan

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PROGRAMMES OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN Central Asian societies—as in many other societies across the globe—are often presumed to be either reflections of dominant political and economic change or tools for achieving it. In this essay, which uses higher education reform in Kyrgyzstan as a case study for theoretical analysis, I argue for an alternative, more constructivist interpretation of the relationship between education and the political. This is that educational work is a key site for the articulation of social imaginaries and for defining the cultural and political practices through which they may legitimately be realised. My argument proceeds as follows. In the first part of the essay, I introduce some of the dominant claims made about the political meaning of higher education reform in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. I then offer a theoretical explanation of why education is an important space of cultural politics as well as an institution of socialisation, drawing on cultural theory, the sociology of knowledge and especially the work of Pierre Bourdieu to explicate how the idea of education may become an *idée-force*—‘an idea which has social force’—in contexts of major social change (Bourdieu 2001, p. 34). Following this I explore how the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan has been articulated within and against wider cultural discourses of Marxism–Leninism and neoliberal capitalism, and discuss how these processes of articulation have shaped the present-day imagination of the futures education might promise. I illustrate this specifically by looking at how certain pedagogical styles have become articulated as signifiers of ‘competing’ political cultures within the society. Finally, I consider the implications of this signification for the development of alternative ideas about educational reform.

Understanding education as a resource of hope

As in many other post-Soviet societies, initial post-independence assessments of education in Kyrgyzstan were made against a background of ‘total social collapse’ and in the context of a predetermined ‘transition’ of the society from parochial communist authoritarianism to liberal democracy, free-market capitalism and global citizenship.¹ While the rhetoric of reform emphasised the importance of depoliticising education by disentangling it from the requirements of centralised state power, education continued to be conceptualised as both a tool for advancing new forms of cultural and economic change and a space in which such changes might be practised, observed and evaluated.

There were (and are) justifiable laments about the ‘crisis of science and education’, which was understood to be caused primarily by ‘the economic collapse and the inevitable decline of state expenditures for the social sphere in these conditions’ (Bokonbaev 1995, p. 50).² In the late 1990s, the situation in Kyrgyzstan was similar to that in Kazakhstan, as described by DeYoung and Valyayeva (1997, p. 34):

The teachers we surveyed could in fact report that at one or another school, something positive might be happening. Nevertheless, they report, the national school system is in complete chaos. The overwhelming majority of those who answered our survey claim that schools are much worse than before and are steadily declining. They indeed do use the word chaos to describe this situation, as well as ‘collapse’, ‘breakdown’, ‘ruin’, and ‘devastation’.

Whatever their earlier hopes for freedom and autonomy and creativity had been, teachers today report their situation as disastrous: no respect, too little pay, and no coherent educational direction beyond what they may have in their own buildings.

However, these conditions have been an impetus for reform, and the criticisms have thus been matched by hopes that the crisis might open space for a new kind of education, either through re-legislating its functions, funding and organisation (Kakeev 1995, p. 6), or by embarking upon its curricular ‘humanisation’ (Isaev 1993). Institutions and practices of education in Kyrgyzstan hence function as resources of private and social hope. At a societal level, this includes the hope that literacy of all kinds will enable autonomy and independence; that socialisation will enable civility; that knowledge will cement social stability and economic development or provoke innovative change; and that cognitive, affective and technical skills will ensure meaningful and competent

¹ For an excellent critique of ‘intellectual reductionism in the analysis of transition’, see Thompson (2008, pp. 23–24). In my view, this is most accurately characterised as an embracing of neoliberalism, and for further reading on the economic, political and cultural dimensions of this regime I recommend exploring work by Antonio (2007), Bourdieu (2001) and Harvey (2005).

² See also Sabloff (1999).

labour.³ For educators and students, education often privately promises the fulfilment of desires which are denied possibility through other means—the possibility of open futures and economic security; professional recognition and satisfaction of work; personal self-development; membership in a privileged elite; protection from marginalisation and exclusion; and legitimacy under a global gaze of third-world neglect and, in some cases, disrespect. There is little ambiguity here about the social and political import of education; indeed, the belief that education is the natural bridge between a damaged past and improved future makes these localised hopes intelligible parts of a more global faith in the social value of education itself (Grubb & Lazarsen 2006; Popkewitz 1991).

As a result of these subjective associations of education with social progress, discourses on educational reform are often framed in technical terms which focus on how knowledge production in general, and learning and teaching in particular, should be conducted in order to accomplish these socially agreed-upon ends. There is, therefore, voluminous publication of reports about the contributions that formal education—primary and higher, cultural and political—might make to the society’s economic, political and social ‘development’ (e.g. Anderson & Heyneman 2005; Berryman 2000; Briller & Iskakova 2004; Heyneman 1998). This is an internally contested body of knowledge which includes both academic research and organisational documentation, and a great deal of debate within Central Asian educational studies revolves around which types of education are most viable, progressive or desirable, and who (or what) should organise and finance them. On the other hand is a more minor collection of critical work which explores the ways that certain forms of education are implicated in creating or exacerbating social inequalities, studies the practical relationships between knowledge and power in classrooms and boardrooms, interrogates the politics of national and international educational policy, and highlights imbalances of cultural and economic power within programmes of ‘development education’.⁴

However, despite voluminous output, there has been relatively little research into the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan: to what education means and how it is experienced by educators and learners; to why different notions of knowledge, learning and social change garner uneven cultural legitimacy within the society; or to how and why beliefs about education become forged in efforts to construct meaningful narratives of personal agency

³ For more on education as a resource of hope in the contemporary global context, see Freyberg-Inan and Cristescu (2007), Giroux (2005), Lauder et al. (2006), Robertson et al. (2007) and Svi Shapiro (2009).

⁴ I am thinking here of work by Madeleine Reeves (2004, 2005), Alan deYoung (2002, 2007), and Safarov Niyozov (2006), which engage more directly with the cultural politics of education and the ethnographic study of and with educators in Kyrgyzstan. Norma Jo Baker and Chad Thompson have, individually (Thompson 2008) and together (Baker & Thompson 2009), also made important interventions in critically reconceptualising ‘liberal education’ in Central Asia.

against the ideological backdrop of an autopoietic and dehumanised notion of social ‘transition’.⁵ These questions matter, because in practice the concept of education signifies complex fields of expectation and desire rather than describing or prescribing it (Giroux 2005; Popkewitz et al. 2001). Furthermore, because education is regarded as a set of institutions through which individuals and groups can self-consciously shape the future, struggles over the cultural meaning of the idea of education rise to the surface of political discourse particularly clearly in conditions of social crisis and transformation. In such moments, the symbolic meaning of education assumes particular import as ‘both an ideal and a referent for change in the service of a new kind of society’ (Giroux 1985, p. xiii). As educational theorist Henry Giroux suggests,

education is that terrain where power and politics are given a fundamental expression, since it is where meaning, desires, language and values engage and respond to the deeper beliefs about the very nature of what it means to be human, to dream, and to name and struggle for a particular future and way of life. (1985, p. xiii)

Conceptualising education as a symbolic resource of hope in this way is thus important for understanding the complex politics of educational reform in ‘transitional’ societies; in this case, in post-Soviet Central Asian societies, and Kyrgyzstan in particular.⁶ Here, questions about how to theorise human nature, which are implicit in all educational activities, have become sites of struggle between competing notions of the human subject. Here, the choice of educational ‘models’—to follow an ‘American’ model in developing a system of standardised testing for university enrolment (Drummond & DeYoung 2004) for example, or to construct an institutional identity based on ‘critical thinking’ (Reeves 2005)—are choices about identity and geopolitical economy as much as they are problems of pedagogy and administration. They are intellectual and emotional investments not just in a particular way of doing things, but also in whole ways of being in the world. They are, in other words—and perhaps sometimes only in the deepest recesses of in other words—and perhaps sometimes only in the deepest recesses of consciousness—investments of hope in alternative futures.

Shifting focus: from educational facts to the ‘idea of education’

It is this deeper symbolic significance of education that interests me here, and that opens up possibilities for a critical analysis of educational reform from the perspectives of the sociology of knowledge and culture. Karl Mannheim once wrote that ‘when any human activity continues over a long period without being subjected to control or criticism, it tends to get out of hand’ (Mannheim 1991, p. 1). He also argued that by not subjecting our commonsense meanings to critical interrogation, we may find that ‘those methods of

⁵ For more on the project of the ‘critical study of cultural practices’ in the work of Pierre Bourdieu and other critical sociologists of culture, see Swartz (1997).

⁶ For further discussion, see Amsler (2007, pp. ix–xiv).

thought by means of which we arrive at our most crucial decisions, and through which we seek to diagnose and guide our political and social destiny, have remained unrecognised and therefore inaccessible to intellectual control and self-criticism' (Mannheim 1991, p. 26). Much more recently, this insight has been developed by critical theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who 'stresses the active role played by the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices in the construction and resistance of power relations' (Swartz 1997, p. 89). Bourdieu argued that as a site of organised power over the determination and distribution of cultural, social and academic capital, education is one of the most politically significant institutions in any society. For Bourdieu, the uncritical understanding of education as simply or primarily a tool for technical progress prevents us from recognising that it is the 'preeminent institutional machinery for the certification of social hierarchies in advanced nation-states, and for this reason a central ground and stake in democratic struggles' (Wacquant 2005, p. 134).

The insights of Mannheim and Bourdieu may be usefully applied to unpack the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan today, for while 'education' is widely discussed in public space, its deeper political and affective meanings are seldom articulated in an explicit way. Talk about education in Kyrgyzstan is ubiquitous and appears on diverse registers. The state professes an ostensible commitment to supporting education, although in practice this has translated into very low levels of investment in schooling (Ministry of Education 2006; Shagdar 2006; Tiuliundieva 2006), and into what Muzaffar Toursunov has referred to as a 'gap between good intentions and tangible improvements' (2008).⁷ Foreign governments have invested considerable sums of money in promoting and supporting particular forms of education, often as part of their more general 'development' and foreign policy programmes (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009; DeYoung 2002), and international organisations host a range of educational embassies and programmes, for example, the Asian Development Bank (Asanova 2006). Finally, individual philanthropists, namely George Soros and the Aga Khan, have built competing, multi-million dollar cultural empires around educational centres in the region (Silova & Steiner-Kamsi 2009).

Apart from basic facts of this sort, however, what might it mean to speak of the 'idea' of education? It is, of course, possible to identify formal institutions of education in Kyrgyzstan and to understand their declared functions within the society. It is also

⁷ According to the Kyrgyzstan Ministry of Education, Science and Youth Policy, the state budgeted 7.6% of its GDP to education in 1990, fluctuated thereafter with an all-time low of 3.5% in 2000, rose to 4.6% in 2005 and 8.7% in 2003 (Shagdar 2006, p. 521). In 2007, the United Nations reported that between 2002 and 2005 an estimated average of 4.4% of the GDP was directed towards education (United Nations Development Programme 2007, p. 267). To put this in some international context, during the same period Iceland (ranked first on the UNDP's 'human development' indicators, or HDI) spent an average of 8.1% of GDP, Sierra Leone (ranked last on the HDI) an estimated 4.6%, and Russia (ranked 67th of 177 countries/territories) an estimated 3.6% (United Nations Development Programme 2007, pp. 266–68).

possible to distinguish a wide range of educational practices within the society, including teaching, learning, facilitating, training, managing knowledge, consulting and researching; and indeed, doing so is an important element of pedagogical science in the society. For example, both Russian and Kyrgyz languages retain clear semantic distinctions between *vospitanie* or *tarbiyaloo* (cultural socialisation and moral improvement) on the one hand, and *obrazovanie* or *bilem beruu* (the transmission or refinement of knowledge and skills), on the other.⁸ Both languages have also incorporated the term *treining* (training), and each of these practices is further distinguished from the creative production of new knowledge through *issledovanie* (research). When prefixed by more narrowly focused adjectives—*narodnoe obrazovanie* (people’s education) or *dukhovnoe vospitanie* (spiritual or moral guiding), for example, or *sovremennoe* as opposed to *traditsionnoe obrazovanie* (‘modern’ versus ‘traditional’ forms of education)—the form of the idea of education becomes ever more filtered through the situated lenses of concrete political imaginaries.

However, knowledge of these observable institutions, functions and practices does not necessarily shed light on the underlying relationships, theories, beliefs, interests and emotions which give rise to and legitimise these social functions and practices of education in the first place. The multitude of terms which stand for ‘education’ in everyday discourse do not exhaustively describe or represent specific institutions or sets of practices, even though they are often discursively employed in this way. Rather, they work as a kind of symbolic shorthand for complex, tacit and often sublimated theories about the relationship between the transformation of subjective consciousness and the future condition of society itself, about the relationship between education and power, and the role of knowledge in social governance and subjective freedom. In addition to thinking about education as a set of institutions and practices, therefore, we can also consider it to be an idea. The ‘idea of education’ refers to any situated constellation of representations, images, values, relationships, memories and imaginations—and to the expectations and anxieties—that are embodied in and expressed through particular educational discourses and practices.

While an idea of education may thus share some elements of an ideology of education, the two concepts should not be confused. The first implies more fluid and less intentionalist relationships between reason and affect, signifier and signified, fact and imagination, and past and future. In particular, it extends theories of the materialist origin of knowledge and belief to explain how the meaning of any cultural practice emerges through symbolic constellations, in which ‘one moment sheds light on the other, and the figures that these individual moments form together are specific signs and a legible script’ (Adorno 1994, p. 109). The concept of an idea of education also allows us to recognise that emotions and practices of emancipatory consciousness (such as hope and fear) work to orient social action; in this case, shaping the character of educational practices and the outcomes of educational reform (Amsler 2008b; Anderson 2006; Rorty 1999; Zournazi 2002b). These affective dimensions of the idea of education are not

⁸ I am grateful to Madeleine Reeves for clarifying this terminology in Kyrgyz.

necessarily conscious elements of self-understanding or ideology, but apprehensible as what Raymond Williams once called ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 2001, p. 64), and what Ben Anderson has more recently referred to as ‘affective cultural politics’ (2006, p. 749).⁹ The concepts of the idea of education and of the constellation therefore enable us to map the diverse and often conflicting ways that the idea of education is instantiated in personal identity projects, struggles for cultural influence and contests of political authority in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

The cultural politics of educational reform in historical perspective

In order to understand these cultural politics, however, it is important to recognise that they are not uniquely post-Soviet phenomena. Education has been linked both symbolically and practically to the politics of technological and social progress throughout the history of modernist development projects in Central Asia, from Tsarist to Soviet and through to capitalist interventions (Amsler 2007; Thompson 2008). It is precisely because the idea of education can continue to (re)signify a range of competing political interests and visions of the future, and not because it marks a departure from them, that it remains as a key site for symbolic struggle.

As Kyrgyzstan began its geopolitical ascendance in Soviet space during the mid-twentieth century, the institutionalisation of formal education symbolised progress in both technological and cultural modernisation, thus legitimising Russian colonisation of the region and providing an orientation for the society’s Westward-looking development. In the official (Communist Party) narratives of this time, it was argued that prior to the October Revolution ‘the Kirghiz people were in number the most severely deprived, in the sense of education, enlightenment and knowledge, with only the elementary trappings of civilisation, and without a national written language’ (Tabyshaliev 1984, p. 161). From this barren memory of humble beginnings, the enlightenment of the imperial borderlands could be clearly mapped through the progress of formal education itself, and particularly of linguistic and scientific literacy: first as the population encountered ‘Russian and Western’ travelling scholars, and finally ‘during Soviet rule, when, among other socialist transformations, the culture of revolution was realised in the periphery’ (Tabyshaliev 1984, p. 162).

Some decades later, as the Soviet state struggled to contain growing forces of regionalisation within the non-Russian republics, this idea of education was criticised as having legitimised anti-democratic centralisation, and it was rearticulated to frame new localised visions that were linked to new projects of regional and republican autonomy—or as one Kyrgyz social scientist put it, to the ‘revolutionary renewal of Soviet society on the whole and in the union republics in particular’ (Isaev 1991, p. 32). In some ways, these ideas of education were integral parts of wider nationalising discourses across the non-Russian Soviet republics during perestroika. In another sense, however, they may also be interpreted through the lens of more subjective desires for recognition, self-

⁹ See also Ahmed (2004).

determination and resource control from subordinated members of an unequal society. As DeYoung and Valyayeva argued of teachers in Kazakhstan, ‘reform-minded professional educators tied many of their hopes for educational change to the national movement for glasnost’ as well’ (1997, p. 23). However, these hopes submerged soon after they surfaced, with the disappearance of the Russian ‘other’ of power and the emergence of new sites of economic power and cultural authority in the global North.¹⁰

Following independence, the horizon of social imagination about what education was, what it was for and how it ought to be accomplished in Kyrgyzstan became embedded in a meta-narrative of post-Soviet—and primarily neoliberal—educational and social reform. By the mid-1990s it was possible for once communist-identified educators to argue that ‘the paradigm of the new global thinking today is the assertion that the fate of humanity is becoming more dependent on the individual resources of the person . . . human capital, personality, its value orientations and morality’ (Arzymatova & Artykbaev 1995, p. 79). As one Kyrgyzstan-based social scientist wrote more explicitly,

the fact that Kyrgyzstan obtained an independent political status, the transformations occurring in society, the transition to a market economy and the democratisation of social life have created fundamental changes in the educational system . . . As our and foreign experience shows, the system of education requires constant improvement. In the history of our education, we also have had efforts to reform it. However, in the conditions of a totalitarian state and ideologised society, they could not objectively bring to fruition the renewal of education in the spirit of the times . . . The new conceptions of education maintain the independence of educational institutions from ideological institutions, creates the conditions for competition in the sphere of education and the free development of educational institutions in all forms of property, gives the legal foundations for the creation of ties with state and non-state institutions and also for the gradual decentralisation of state administration and the imagination of educational institutions with wide independence. (Kakeev 1995, pp. 6–7)

At first glance, none of these claims seems particularly remarkable. However, a closer reading suggests that the idea of education that is articulated here operates as a something of a symbolic shibboleth. To understand education in this particular sense, to accept the

¹⁰ The ‘global North’ refers to the world’s wealthiest and most industrially advanced societies, particularly in North America, Europe and Oceania. In a broader definition it also includes the economically strongest countries in Asia, and replaces both discursively and geographically earlier concepts of ‘first’ or ‘developed’ world. The analytical use of such spatial classifications is increasingly questionable, due to the deterritorialisation and globalisation of capitalism, the emergence of politico-economic alliances such as the G-7, G-8, G-20 and G-33, categories such as ‘BRIC’ (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and ‘emerging economies’. However, for the purposes of this argument and in the context of late-Soviet and early post-Soviet international relations, it remains useful. For more on the concept, see Therien (1999).

values and practices which underpin these programmes of reform, also communicates an acceptance of and at least formal commitment to the simultaneous affirmation of the economic, political and social values of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism. What it does not communicate, however, is an invitation to critically unpack all the symbolically pregnant and politically powerful references to ‘independence’, ‘transformation’, ‘the market economy’, ‘totalitarianism’, ‘ideology’, ‘competition’, ‘free development’ and ‘decentralisation’, or to interrogate the particular way that they are woven together into a particular constellation of what education is and is for.

The neoliberal idea of education in Kyrgyzstan

From this example, we can better understand how the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan functions as what Bourdieu described as ‘a myth in the strong sense of the word, a powerful discourse, an *idé-e-force*, an idea which has social force, which obtains belief’; or more simply, as a complex idea or discourse that is imbued with performative social and political legitimacy, authority and power (2001, p. xx). As I have argued elsewhere (Amsler 2008a), many teachers, students and policy makers in the post-communist world—including some who are sceptical that this particular economic and political ‘transition’ is desirable or even occurring—maintain faith in the power of formal higher education to enable both individual and social progress within a global capitalist system. The rhetorical promises of a de-Sovietised, de-ideologised and liberalised education might even be said to have assumed the character of a new ‘education gospel’. Grubb and Lazerson define the ‘Education Gospel’ as a globalised discourse of education which ‘stresses the failures of schools and universities and then proceeds to reform them with more economic and utilitarian goals’ (2006, p. 295), in which teaching and learning are viewed ‘as central to national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy’ (Lauder et al. 2006, p. 3).

Many of the new ideas of education that have emerged since independence indeed resonate with hegemonic discourses of economic liberalism, democracy, development, global citizenship and civil society. Early on in its career of educational reform, the Kyrgyz state adopted elements of a neoliberal vocabulary, issuing a succession of laws and decrees on the necessity of ‘marketising’, ‘democratising’, and creating competition in (mainly higher) education. These included a Law on Education (1992), a national Education Doctrine (2000), an educational Development Plan (2002), adoption of the ‘Education for All’ goals specified in the Dakar Agreement (2002), constitutional revisions (2003), and a second new Law on Education (2003).¹¹ In another development, academics and managers at a small number of *vuzy* (higher educational institutions) in Kyrgyzstan have also worked since 1994 to ‘take an active part in [the] global project of the creation of [a] European–Asiatic space of higher education’ through implementing principles of the Bologna Process in particular fields (Dzhaparova 2006; Resolution

¹¹ See Amsler (2008a) and Ministry of Education (2006, p. 6).

2007).¹² National government bodies such as the UK's Department for International Development continue to monitor Kyrgyzstan's achievements in basic and tertiary education as part of a wider 'development' framework (Robertson et al. 2007).

However, the idea of education in Kyrgyzstan is obviously considerably more diverse than this, and neoliberal imaginaries of reform are far from hegemonic in practice (Amsler 2007, 2008a; Liu 2003). In the first instance, the hope that education promises brighter individual and societal futures often coexists awkwardly with educators' and students' lived experiences. Many schools and universities located outside the elite centres of cultural capital and economic privilege remain extremely deprived (DeYoung 2007, p. 243; Niyozov 2006; Tiuliundieva 2006; Toursunov 2008). Within the elite centres themselves, educators speak of subordination to gender, ethnic and cultural 'superiors', constraints on intellectual autonomy, and physically and financially impossible workloads (Amsler 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly, in recent years admiration for some of the educational achievements of the Soviet past has increased (Reeves 2005, p. 10), as has interest in localised theories of moral and cultural education, such as those based on the redefined 'seven precepts of Manas' (DeYoung 2007). DeYoung has highlighted the significant differences between the effort to 'build open societies' in the region, as according to the Soros Foundation's mandate, and the banking and finance initiatives to create 'future participants in the world capitalist economy', according to the Asian Development Bank (2002, p. 14). There are also now pockets of more radical creative development in education, such as the introduction of the Theatre of the Oppressed for use with rural communities and vulnerable young people,¹³ and critical research projects are routinely undertaken by the Social Research Center at the American University in Kyrgyzstan. One such study, funded by the Aga Khan Development Network, is particularly interesting here as it reveals the complex symbolic politics of work now being undertaken by a dizzying number of national and international organisations in order to construct definitions and pedagogies of 'civic education' in secondary, higher and adult education (Social Research Center 2007).

In other words, the idea of education can only be articulated in particular terms by reading it through other symbolic discourses, social practices and material realities. Saying that education promises futures is not equal to saying that learning creates opportunities, or that progress in knowledge contributes to personal emancipation or social improvement. The idea of education can be symbolically reappropriated and reassigned to mean, represent and signify contradictory things. As Ghassan Hage recently argued, we therefore 'need to look at what kind of hope a society encourages rather than simply whether it gives people hope or not' (Zournazi 2002c, p. 152). In the words of Chantal Mouffe, 'the desire for hope is ineradicable, but if democratic political parties

¹² For details about initiatives to align Kyrgyzstani higher education with the Bologna agreement, see <http://www.bolognakeg.net/>, accessed 20 March 2009.

¹³ Theatre of the Oppressed Project in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia main website available at: <http://www.toprojectcentralasia.org/page2.php>, accessed 23 May 2009.

and democratic systems do not provide a vehicle for this then we are in the situation where other forms of hope are articulated' (Zournazi 2002b, p. 125). It is in this sort of symbolic space that an idea of education can assume mythological status as an inherently transformative and progressive practice precisely because no other futures are imminently imaginable.

It is against this concern that it becomes important to explore the ways that particular ideas of education are articulated, legitimated and challenged through educational practices. This is necessary not only in order to illuminate the relationship between politics and education, but also because such an understanding can help educators clarify the possibilities of advancing alternative visions of education and, by extension, of society. Whilst acknowledging the complex diversity of experience and activity in everyday practice, my point of departure for this argument is that a neoliberal idea of education either dominates or frames many discourses of educational reform in Kyrgyzstan, and that everyday educational practices are connected both symbolically and materially to wider processes of economic and cultural globalisation. This, of course, does not assume that all international educational organisations working in Kyrgyzstan are monolithic instruments of cultural imperialism.¹⁴ I rather would like to make the basic observation that within the society, and indeed globally, the horizon of imagination about possible approaches to economic organisation, political process and educational activity is not limitless or even very diverse. Few educators, students, governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations or international organisations now working in Kyrgyzstan are developing theories and practices of education which draw on any philosophical or political traditions in socialism, participatory economics, anarchism or other alternatives to capitalism. While this observation may be received as absurd in the 'post-socialist' context, the fact that it is so obvious and yet so seldom made or considered legitimate is significant. There may be no paragons, but there are certainly some clear parameters. In fact, the symbolic naturalisation of this historical conjuncture is one characteristic of a form of discourse that French sociologists Loïc Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu once called 'neoliberal newspeak'—in their definition, a globalising 'form of symbolic violence' that works through 'universalizing the particularisms bound up with a singular historical experience by making them misrecognized as such and recognized as universal' (Wacquant & Bourdieu 2001, p. 2).

Teaching for the transition: pedagogical form as symbolic politics

But how does a particular social value become interpreted and performed as a universal one? How do everyday activities—in this case, the choice of approaches to classroom teaching—function as sources of symbolic power? And how can we learn to see the cultural politics of education critically in situations where these politics themselves are interpreted as resources of personal and social hope? To answer these questions, I will consider the symbolic politics of 'lectures' and 'seminars'—or in other words, 'teacher-

¹⁴ Thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for highlighting that the argument might be read in this clearly reductivist manner.

expert' and 'student-centred' approaches to teaching (de la Soblonnière 2009)—in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. In recent years, particularly in those immediately following independence, the classification of these pedagogical forms into competing sets of political values has been a major activity for reformers from international organisations, the Ministry of Education, and the ranks of professional educators. This is, of course, not particular to Kyrgyzstan: the infamous thousand-strong student lectures in European higher education, late twentieth-century debates about the necessity for more 'student-centred' learning in Britain and the United States, the debate between the 'banking model of education' and 'critical pedagogy' in Latin America, and new developments in 'active learning' more internationally are sufficient evidence of a general (if not generalisable) trend.

In Kyrgyzstan, however, the debate has a heightened symbolic dimension, as it

becomes especially pronounced in societies experiencing fast paced political, economic and social changes, because the question of what should be taught and how it should be taught becomes a matter for the very future survival of the society. (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009).

Furthermore, in addition to (or rather than) being a technical choice about the value of different approaches to pedagogy, the normative classification of lectures and seminars in Kyrgyzstan 'requires teachers and students to respectively modify their thinking and actions towards education' (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009). For de la Soblonnière et al., this is primarily a problem of teachers relinquishing authority over knowledge production and students assuming responsibility for it. The authors argue that in Western societies, 'teachers and students have been exposed to both the teacher/expert and student-centred approaches from public debates and real-life experiences in classrooms', and that a 'variety of approaches have been developed under the umbrella of the student-centred approach' (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009). They contrast this to the more teacher-expert focus of teachers in Central Asian societies, most of whom had little exposure to this debate or to 'the alternative way to conceptualise education' (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009). The result is that 'in spite of all the changes in the educational system in the region during the last decade, we cannot say that there has been a significant shift toward a student-centered approach where the learner plays a more active, constructionist role' (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009).

The authors then offer four inter-related explanations for why a majority of educators may resist adopting new student-centred approaches to teaching: 'the lack of motivation, the reluctance to compromise their privileged position, the need for facilitating conditions, and the paucity of resources' (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009). However, they also argue that the normalisation of student-centred pedagogies is a normative struggle for influence:

Because the minority . . . of people promoting the student-centered approach do not have the benefit of widespread support, they have to be acutely aware of their message compared to those favouring the traditional teacher/expert approach who

try to exert influence on them. . . . In order to be persuasive, the minority proclaiming the student-centered approach must be doggedly vocal, unified and consistent in their arguments. Faced with such a determined minority, the majority who may feel no pressure to comply, may begin to engage in what theorists label a ‘validation process’. (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009)

If this is successful, they argue, it will give ‘Kyrgyzstan’s educational system . . . increased hope for applying a student-centred approach’ (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009). The question is, what is it exactly about this particular educational philosophy that promises hope for a better future for teachers, students and the wider society, and why? What is the political and economic content of this hope? Why would it require a social movement to legitimise and normalise it in the educational community? And how is the ‘validation process’ referred to above dependent on the transformation of symbolic power; of what Bourdieu called ‘symbolic capital’, or the resources of authority to interpret and define the world?

Here, individual and institutional preferences for teacher-expert pedagogies rather than for student-centred ones are interpreted as a sort of wilful resistance to progress, a lack of motivation to try something new, ignorance about the possibilities of the primary alternative, and a war of position waged to maintain professional status and hegemonic authority within the system. However, the debate may also be interpreted as a practical example of a more generalised ‘struggle for the production and imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world’ (Bourdieu 1989, p. 22). This is thus not simply an attempt to shape teaching practices, but a political project to change the world by changing the way that people make sense of it, by altering the distribution of value and esteem within existing social classifications, and thereby altering the distribution of power amongst classes themselves (Bourdieu 1989). Disagreements about the pedagogical merits of authoritative, positivist, behaviourist philosophies of teaching and constructivist and participatory ones (de la Soblonnière et al. 2009) are also struggles to establish new collective identities and ‘beliefs about the very nature of what it means to be human, to dream, and to name and struggle for a particular future and way of life’ (Giroux 1985, p. xiii).

To clarify how this is articulated with wider political and economic projects in practice, it is instructive to examine how teacher-expert and student-centred approaches are classified in relation to one another in a dualistic way, and how they function as normative ‘signs of distinction’ (Bourdieu 1989, p. 20). Figure 1 lays out, in schematic fashion, some common normative connotations of the concepts of ‘the lecture’ and ‘the seminar’ in educational discourses in contemporary Kyrgyzstan. These terms represent, respectively, the teacher-expert and student-centred approaches, and in practice are used to signify a diverse range of actual teaching practices.¹⁵ Each approach occupies a

¹⁵ For further reading on semiotic theories of denotation (the literal or intended meaning of a sign) and connotation (a sign’s symbolic, affective and ideological meanings), see Barthes (1977), Hall (1980) and Panofsky (1970).

different location within the broader culture and political economy of post-Soviet educational reform. The ‘lecture’ is associated primarily with the old society and ways of being, which must be overcome in order to make room for new and more progressive possibilities in both the classroom and society. It is thus symbolically marked not only as pedagogically inferior but also politically dubious, and articulated as being antithetical to the new idea of education itself, or related only to its distorted or dysfunctional form. The ‘seminar’, on the other hand, is a space in which students are invited and expected to engage in ‘active learning’ and critical thinking, and is routinely associated in affirmative ways with the progressive idea of education. This dualism is schematised in Figure 1.

Lecture	Seminar
→ ‘transition’ →	
didactic	interactive
passive	active
authoritarian	democratic
illiberal	liberal
dogmatic	critical
domination	autonomy
power	freedom
backward	progressive
traditional	modern
old	new

Figure 1. Symbolic connotations of teacher-expert and student-centred pedagogies in educational discourses in Kyrgyzstan

These normative connotations are not merely legitimised through reference to alternative but recognisable traditions of educational theory (for example, those of John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire), but also affirmed through their homologous affinity to dominant discourses of capitalist development and liberal democracy. The political character of this dualism is hegemonic rather than dialectical in character; the aim being to define a unidirectional ‘transition’ in educational identities and reforms that can reflect and serve the wider ‘transition’ from state to market in the society’s geopolitical economy. The symbolic politics of teacher-expert and student-centred education is strikingly homologous to the cultural connotations of the ideas of ‘the state’ and ‘the market’, which Wacquant and Bourdieu proposed in their ‘summary table of the elementary forms of neoliberal thought’ (Figure 2). This set of oppositions, they argued,

rests on a series of oppositions and equivalences which support and reinforce one another to depict the contemporary transformations advanced societies are undergoing, economic disinvestment by the state and reinforcement of its police and penal components, deregulation of financial flows and relaxation of administrative controls on the employment market, reduction of social protection and moralising celebration of ‘individual responsibility’, as in turn ‘benign, necessary, ineluctable or desirable’ (Wacquant & Bourdieu 2001, p. 5).

State	Market
→ globalisation →	
constraint	freedom
closed	open
rigid	flexible
immobile, fossilised	dynamic, moving, self-transforming
past, outdated	future, novelty
stasis	growth
group, lobby, holism, collectivism	individual, individualism
uniformity, artificiality	diversity, authenticity
autocratic (‘totalitarian’)	democratic

Figure 2. Summary table of the elementary forms of neoliberal thought
Source: Wacquant & Bourdieu (2001, p. 5)

The homologies between these two otherwise unconnected sets of symbolic oppositions—the connotations of educational philosophies on the one hand and of ‘neoliberal newspeak’ on the other (Wacquant & Bourdieu 2001)—suggest that even the most seemingly technical debates about pedagogical practice in Kyrgyzstan may be inflected with a wider cultural politics of capitalist globalisation.¹⁶ It is, therefore, important to recognise the explicitly political role that such signifying concepts and systems of classification play in naturalising a neoliberal idea of education within the organisation of everyday teaching practices, and ultimately into the governance of self, esteem and social hope.

¹⁶ This, of course, does not preclude their simultaneous articulation with other discourses, such as that of post-Soviet ‘democratic transition’ as described by Chad Thompson (2008, pp. 23–25), or of cultural struggle between ‘East’ and ‘West’ (DeYoung 2002).

Conclusion

The notion of ‘symbolic politics’ can evoke a rationalised image of individuals, often in elite positions of social power, instrumentally creating and using ideas, representations and symbols in conscious and deliberate ways in order to accomplish particular political objectives. In this instrumentalist view, symbolic representation is conceptualised as a mechanism of political manipulation, of representing constructed things—or in some cases as constructing imaginary things—which are then transformed into cognitive and affective objects that can be externalised and appropriated to unify conflicting groups, crystallise a collective emotional experience, or reduce complex and ambiguous political situations into simplified narratives or images for mass conversion. The purpose of studying symbolic politics from this perspective is to understand how the dysfunctions of language, knowledge and cultural imaginaries work to construct representations of ‘social reality’ which serve and extend the interests of the powerful. The attraction of this approach is that if we can decode these signs we can see through them, perhaps catching a glimpse of the ‘real’ political reality.

Without doubt, in cases of wilful propaganda this intentionalist theory of meaning offers a useful, if partial, framework for analysis. In this essay, however, I have attempted to present a different relationship between the symbolic and the political—namely, that these forms of power are mutually constituted and constituting. To illustrate this, I have attempted to explore how and why the idea of education—particularly the neoliberal idea of education—has assumed particular subjective meanings and action-orienting potentials for educators in Kyrgyzstan. Despite widespread acknowledgement amongst many that the official narrative of Soviet-led educational progress was frequently deployed as a blatant ideology to legitimise economic, cultural and political control, and amongst many others that developmentalist views of education may be equally as ideological, there are also deep, lasting, emotional attachments to both ideas which cannot be explained away through blunt concepts like false consciousness, or by dismissive accusations of ‘uncritical thinking’. It is important to understand ‘why certain forms of truth come to prevail, and be challenged, at different historical moments’ (Popkewitz 1991, p. 43), and what particular hopes the idea of education enables that education itself may not.

Taking this theoretical suggestion seriously does not require a direct critique of either teacher-expert or student-centred teaching. It does not mean that we should adopt an uncritical position towards uninspired and disempowering forms of education, much less towards undemocratic or anti-democratic politics; indeed, far from it. My personal preferences for dialogical learning are themselves informed by critiques of the ‘banking concept of education’ and philosophies of a more ‘critical pedagogy’, which aspires to the co-construction of meaningful knowledge for social transformation through the democratic organisation of educational relationships (Freire 2000). The point is rather to de-fetishise these concepts and to be aware that they are affective and political signifiers as much as they are descriptors or prescriptions of lived realities. The aim of such analysis is to enable educators to become more reflexively and collectively conscious of how our most taken for granted ideas of education are shaped through discursive constellations, and how they in turn acquire what Bourdieu defines as ‘world-making

power', which enables certain people to establish a 'legitimate vision of the social world and its divisions' (Swartz 1997, p. 89). The problem is not that we construct the future in a particular way, for cultural philosophy tells us this is a necessary condition of our existence. The problem is rather that if we mistake our symbolic representations of the world for the world itself, we might miss important political opportunities to imagine and shape it otherwise.

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