

Who Belongs in 'Our Common Home': Public Education's Role in Shaping Ethnic and Civic Identities in Kyrgyzstan

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16 April 2019

WORK IN PROGRESS

Abstract

What role does public education play in shaping civic and ethnic identities? This paper considers public education in Kyrgyzstan to explore the interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes of identity formation. In Kyrgyzstan, the right to education in one's "mother tongue" is enshrined in the constitution. In practice, this has meant that public education in Kyrgyzstan is offered in two state languages (Kyrgyz, Russian) and two minority languages (Uzbek, Tajik). In the past decade, the number of schools offering Uzbek-languages education has sharply decreased. Some see the shift as evidence of ethnic discrimination by the state following ethnic clashes in 2010; others have suggested that Uzbek parents are eager for their children to be taught in state languages for economic and social advancement opportunities. Using school enrollment data and qualitative data gathered from elite interviews, focus groups, and a systematic review of textbook and curriculum standards, I present a framework considering the content and structure of Kyrgyzstan's public education. With this framework, I argue that government-sponsored curriculum shifts are emphasizing the ethnic Kyrgyz nature of Kyrgyzstani identity and that minorities are opting in to that narrative through shifting language education preferences as a result of both material and ideational incentives.

Introduction

Understanding social identities is increasingly important for understanding contemporary political life. There has recently been an uptick in scholarly attention to identity as a variable (Abdelal et al 2006), including an effort to address identity with more analytical rigor and methodological sophistication (Brady and Kaplan 2000, Adams 2009). While nationalism is a thoroughly-studied concept in the social sciences (Gellner 1983, Hechter 2000, Gat 2013, Wimmer 2018), the micro-level mechanisms by which national identities are produced, sustained, and transmitted are relatively underexplored. Prior literature has focused on modernization and industrialization (Gellner 1983) and the need to mobilize for war (Tilly 1991, Posen 1993) at the root of nationalism. Some scholars have also considered education as a necessary component of nation-building processes. Much of what has been written about the link between education and nationalism assumes that mass schooling serves as an “immunization” of sorts against future identity building; a nation comes to be through nationalist schooling, and this sense of loyalty and belonging to the nation persists over time (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006, Balcells 2013).

In this paper, I consider public education as a potential mechanism of identity change, focusing on the ways in which mass schooling can shift the boundaries of social categories and the tangible content that makes them rich and meaningful. To what extent can governments intentionally use public education to foster a cohesive national identity? What role does public education play in shaping civic and ethnic identities? Under what conditions do communities opt into or challenge shifts in schooling policy?

To address these questions, I focus on Kyrgyzstan, a mountainous country of about 6 million people in Central Asia. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan’s leaders have oscillated between ethno-centric and ethno-pluralist narratives of national identity; the emphasis on an explicitly *Kyrgyz* vision for Kyrgyzstan ramped up following an intense episode of ethnic violence in 2010 in the country’s southern regions. I assess the role of schooling in

shaping ethnic and civic identity in Kyrgyzstan using a framework developed by King (2013) in her study of Rwanda; I consider the structure, curriculum, and pedagogical practices that define mass schooling in Kyrgyzstan to establish a link between micro-level educational factors and macro-level social and political processes. To do that, I focus specifically on implementing the integrated “ethics/citizenship” (*adep, jaran taanu* in Kyrgyz; *etika, grazhdanovedenie* in Russian) class taught in Kyrgyzstani schools from 1st to 11th grade within the context of Osh City, Kyrgyzstan’s second largest city and “southern capital.”

My goal for this paper is to present a rudimentary theory that accounts for how mass schooling can shape identity on two dimensions: through shifting boundaries of group inclusion and legitimizing content that makes identity meaningful. I will argue that in Kyrgyzstan, the structure of public education creates incentives for ethnic minorities to emphasize their civic, rather than ethnic, identity, even though state curriculum standards and common pedagogical practices emphasize an ethno-centric vision of the state.

The paper is structured as follows: first, I situate my theory within the existing literature on identity, nationalism, and education. Then, I will outline my methodological approach and offer some background on ethnicity and nationality in Kyrgyzstan. Next, I will explain the structure and content of contemporary Kyrgyzstan’s public education system with a focus on Osh City. Then, I analyze the results of my fieldwork and explain how identity change is possible through schooling. Finally, I will consider the implications of my findings and demonstrate how my explanation differs from dominant theories of education’s role in nationalism and identity.

Relevant Literature & Theory

A strong sense of national identity has been linked to positive outcomes such as the provision of public goods (Miguel 2004) and perception of the state’s legitimacy (Gellner 1983), though prescriptions about what *form* national identity should take and how to best cultivate a sense of national belonging are ambiguous. Social scientists have tended to group different forms of nationalism into two categories: civic and ethnic. Membership in civic nations is based on

citizenship within a state, rather than an ascriptive trait; this contrasts with ethnic nationalism, in which access to the privileges of national membership depends on one's ethnic identity. Oftentimes, the civic/ethnic dichotomy is framed as a "desirable/dangerous" one, though recent efforts to complicate the "civic nationalism good, ethnic nationalism bad" framing show how these categories are not mutually exclusive (Brubaker 1999, Megoran 2012, Downey 2015). This paper contributes to that thread of the nationalism literature by exploring a thicker description of national identity, one which considers identity to be dynamic and allows for multiple intersections of ethnic and civic/national identities.

Abdelal et al (2006) conceptualize identity on two dimensions: content and contestation. Content includes the formal and informal norms that define membership in the group, the social purposes and goals shared by members of the group, and how a person's worldview is shaped by their identity. Contestation consists of the boundaries of the identity, including the process by which a group negotiates membership and the permeability of membership characteristics. Adams (2009) explains that ethnography is a useful method for measuring identity boundaries (the distinction between in-group and out-group, and the degree of permeability between these categories) as well as changes in the content that boundaries encapsulate (the process by which a group negotiates its identity in relation to other groups at different levels). For example, Schatz (2004) argued that Kazakh identity is conceptualized and experienced differently depending on the direction of comparison; outwardly, Kazakhs define their identity in relation to Russians, while inwardly they define themselves by three descent groups, *juz*.¹

This possibility for emphasizing the salience of a particular identity and toggling between identities in different context has been studied experimentally. Robinson (2014, 2016) has pushed back against the assumption that civic identity in sub-Saharan Africa is weak relative to subnational ethnic attachment; lab in the field experiments suggest that increasing the salience of national identity through a prime as banal as a flag in the room is associated with higher levels of

¹ Though even this salient comparison can change over time, as demonstrated by Laruelle (2014) who argues that state identity in Kazakhstan has gone through multiple discursive stages, from an emphasis on Kazakh-ness to Kazakhstan-ness and finally to an outward-facing transnationalism.

trust. As Collier (2009) argued, “A society can function perfectly well if its citizens hold multiple identities, but problems arise when those subnational identities arouse loyalties that override loyalty to the nation as a whole” (pg 52). Chee-Beng’s study of Malaysia considers the role of the state in creating power relations among ethnic groups and between ethnic groups and the state. He argues that individuals “are socialized into an ethnic identity that acquires a primordial quality in local contexts that cannot be understood apart from the political processes in which government actions and the ideologies of the state play a role” (2000, 441-2). To what extent does the state have control over multiple identities and incentivizing loyalty to the state or collective national identity over subnational ethnic identities, however? If the state can affect identity, *how* does it do so effectively?

Education is an obvious but understudied source of socialization, as schooling shapes the values, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals. As such, the politics of education - including decisions about resource allocation to schools, de facto and de jure barriers to education access, and curriculum design - are relevant and important for understanding social and political systems more broadly. Relatively little has been written about the relationship between public education and nationalism, despite Gellner’s bold claim that “the monopoly of legitimate education is now more important, more central” to the state’s survival (1983, 34). The provision of public education is often conceptualized as a form of redistribution that follows from democratization (Ansell 2010), rather than a tool for managing state goals. Paglayan (2018) challenges that assumption and argues that mass schooling is better conceptualized as an elite tool for consolidating power and addressing problems of internal political order.

Even if we accept that education can be an instrument of state power consolidation, much of what has been written about the link between education and nationalism assumes that mass schooling serves as an “immunization” of sorts against future identity building. In this explanation, a nation comes to be through nationalist schooling, and this sense of loyalty and belonging to the nation persists over time. Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006) explain divergent post-communist political transitions by pre-communist literacy rates; those countries that

experienced pre-communist education with a nationalist spin harbored nationalist loyalty despite seven decades of Soviet rule. Similarly, Balcells (2013) looks at historical literacy rates and “scholastic revolution” across the French-Spanish border to explain variation in the intensity of Catalan nationalism. In both accounts, education imparts a sticky sense of national identity; the content of national identity is fixed by the initial “immunization,” and the boundaries of these identities do not shift.

In this paper, I argue that mass schooling can both shift the boundaries of in-group and out-group identity and function as a platform for negotiating and instilling content relevant to identity. To that end, I draw on a framework laid out by King (2013) in her study of how schools can be pathways to peace in the aftermath of civil conflict, in the context of post-genocide Rwanda. King’s framework separates structure and content of Rwanda’s education system. Structure encapsulates who has access to education (both de jure and de facto), how the education system is organized across levels (primary, secondary, higher) or within schools, and which language serves as the medium of formal instruction and informal interaction. Content, on the other hand, includes both curriculum -- what gets defined as legitimate knowledge, relevant skills, and valuable attitudes -- and pedagogy -- the process of teaching norms, values, and dispositions by virtue of both explicit institutional expectations and informal routine (Apple 1979, p 1-14). There are both top-down and bottom-up processes at play in determining the structure of public education, though curriculum and pedagogy are more clearly in the state’s power to control. In this paper, I try to show how the state creates incentives for ethnic minorities to opt into an ethnicized civic identity in Kyrgyzstan.

Methods

This paper turns to a case study to illustrate how education can serve to shift the boundaries and content of national identity. I conducted the bulk of the research for this paper over two months in summer 2018 and two weeks in spring 2019.² I interviewed Ministry of Education and Science bureaucrats in Osh City, teachers of ethics/civics classes from Kyrgyz-, Russian-, and

² This project was conducted under IRB protocol IRB-AAAR8782; given the sensitivity of discussing issues of ethnic identity in Kyrgyzstan today, I took great care with getting consent and maintaining my subjects’ anonymity.

Uzbek-medium schools in Osh City, and professors and university administrators at two universities in Osh City. I also draw from a focus group with ten teachers at an Uzbek-language school in central Jalal-Abad region and two focus groups of thirty students each at a university in Osh City. All interactions took place in Russian or Kyrgyz, per the interviewee's preference, and all notes use only pseudonyms and broad descriptions of the interviewee's position.

On both research trips, I collected primary documents relevant to the structure of public education in Kyrgyzstan and the curriculum and pedagogical practices relevant to teaching ethics/civics at the secondary-school level.³ This involved content analysis of ethics textbooks from an electronic library of books used in Kyrgyzstani schools,⁴ comparative analysis of the curriculum for the integrated ethics/civics classes in Russian and Kyrgyz, and rudimentary analysis of materials teachers said they used for instruction in resource-poor classroom environments. Following the collection of this data, I manually coded the Kyrgyz-language 2017-18 curriculum for ethics/civics classes according to grade and lesson, as well as theme, which was divided into 12 subcategories:

- Ethnic Kyrgyz (references to Kyrgyz-specific traditions, practices, folklore)
- Civic Kyrgyzstan (references to citizenship, rights, government, non-Kyrgyz groups in Kyrgyzstan)
- Family (interactions with parents)
- Character (references to good manners, valuable personality and character traits)
- Health (food, cleanliness)
- Nature (animals, nature; also coded “civic Kyrgyzstan” if referenced “*our*” nature)
- Religion (references to Islam or Tengrism; religious tolerance)
- Gender (references to proper behavior on part of girls and boys)
- Community (references to values like *yntymak* (harmony) and good relations between neighbors)
- Economics (personal budgeting skills, bazaar, finding work, migration)
- Global (references to international affairs; migration also coded here)
- Practical (quizzes, student presentations, end-of-term grades)

³ Whereas King (2014) grounds her examination of schooling practices in Rwanda in history lessons, I focus instead on the integrated ethics/civics curriculum. For reviews of how history is taught in Kyrgyzstan and the process of re-imagining the curriculum since independence, see Umetbaeva (2015) and Ismailova (2010).

⁴ The textbooks are located at www.lib.kg/lib/school.

Additionally, I come to this project with two years experience as an educator in Kyrgyzstan. For two years, I worked for the US Peace Corps teaching at the secondary school and university level. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I gained a deep ethnographic understanding of the Kyrgyz education system and pedagogical practices; I saw firsthand the gap between formalized state standards and the informal way of educating young Kyrgyzstani students in classrooms that often lacked textbooks, heat, and electricity.

Returning to Kyrgyzstan for research, I maintained this ethnographic sensibility and drew on my observations to think through questions of identity. While conducting this research, I was not aiming for a representative sample, and instead pursued an in-depth study that exposes the structure of public education in Kyrgyzstan and acknowledged the sensitivity of discussing ethnicity and identity in an area of the country that has experienced inter-ethnic violence.

Adams (2009) and Schatz (2009) both offer methodological structure to using ethnography for measuring identity. Adams acknowledges the danger of internal validity problems and subjective bias that come from ethnographic research;⁵ indeed, there are sampling issues and data likely to be affected by researcher's presence. But my initial goal here is to explicate meaning, rather than make a falsifiable prediction, about identity and education.

Background: Situating the Case

Before delving into the intricacies of civic education in Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to provide background about how ethnicity is understood and experienced in the post-Soviet context. In this section, I offer a broad overview of the history of institutionalizing ethnic and national identity in Kyrgyzstan. I briefly explain Soviet nationalities policies, including territorial demarcation, *korenizatsiya* (indigenization), and pro-titular language laws. Then I consider social and political developments regarding ethnic and national identity in independent Kyrgyzstan.

Before being incorporated under Russian rule in the mid-1800s, Central Asians might have responded to the inquiry "Who are you?" in many ways, categorizing themselves by religion,

⁵ Subjective bias can affect thick description, as well; Brubaker warned outsiders not to rely too much on what a particular artifact "means" at risk of reading too much into symbols and signs without emic relevance.

tribe, region, or language. In the Fergana Valley, Turkic- and Farsi-speaking communities lived peacefully side by side; ecological and economic adaptations have been identified as the reason for successful coexistence (Ismailbekova 2011, Liu 2012, Reeves 2005). In the 1920s, the Soviets took an intentional approach to developing ethnic and civic identities. By and large, the region had not experienced political organization in line with western conceptions of statehood, though this does not imply that people living in Central Asia were without law and order; khanates overlapped with complex tribal configurations to govern territories where sedentary and nomadic communities both lived. The Soviets viewed the “backwards” regions of Central Asia as needing help to develop a sense of nationalism, since it would only be possible to reach communism after having passed through capitalist and nationalist stages of development. To that end, Soviet bureaucrats deployed teams of ethnographers to determine the groups who would become nations. Distinct tribes and communities were collapsed into single nations through border demarcation; these lines were drawn primarily based on ethno-linguistic categorization. Groups of sedentary tribes seen to speak a similar Turkic language became Uzbek, while sedentary Persian-speakers were categorized as Tajik, for example.

Ethnicity was highly institutionalized in the Soviet system. Under Lenin, state building (*natsional'noe stroitel'stvo*) conflated language, culture, territory, and bureaucracy; what constituted “culture” largely needed to be constructed for those groups that had not previously been socially organized as such. Each republic – the highest administrative unit in the Soviet Union – was meant to be a territorial unit of and for the titular ethnic group: Georgia for Georgians, Estonia for Estonians, Kazakhstan for Kazakhs, and so on. This was institutionalized through *korenizatsiya*, or indigenization, a policy that ensured titular ethnic groups’ representation in local government and bureaucratic structures, as well as promoted a nation’s education in their own language (Martin 2001). Nations without their own state got many privileges, but not to the extent that the fifteen titular groups of the USSR did. Constructing the content of national identity was a major constitutive element of the Soviet project; over time, performing and celebrating national symbols (representative clothes, dances, meals) became an important part of life for Soviet Central Asians (Adams 2010). Expressions of national pride and

identity were often a double-edged sword, however, both for Soviet elites and locals. Elites in Moscow considered national pride necessary for ideological purposes, but feared its potential to disintegrate the Union. Locals took pride in their identity, but feared severe consequences for overt national expression.

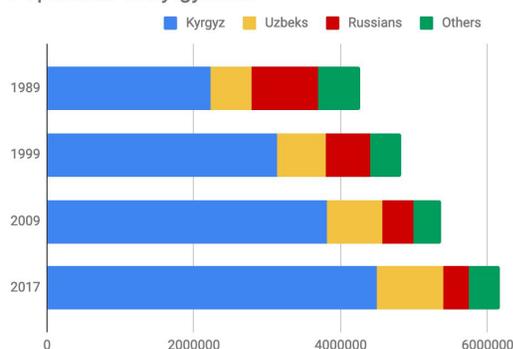
Scholars disagree about the intent and long-term impact of the Soviet nationalities policies, especially in a multi-ethnic region like the Fergana Valley. Conquest (2001) sees Stalin as the “breaker of nations,” promoting a colonial policy of divide and rule to distract periphery groups with interethnic hatred. Slezkine (1994) draws on the image of a communal apartment building (*kommunalka*) to illustrate the Soviet nationalities policy; Moscow granted every republic and autonomous province a separate “room.” Once people were divided into administrative units, most often based on language, the state supplied national identities and materials to fill and “decorate” the rooms. Hirsch (2000) takes a middle ground between these interpretations. She dismisses the idea that national-territorial delimitation of Central Asia was a nefarious attempt at divide-and-rule strategy. Rather, she saw the Soviet nationalities policy as an attempt to define a new, non-imperialistic model of colonization. The making of borders and nations was pragmatic; the Soviets “attempted to establish administratively viable national-territorial units without creating politically volatile situations” (218).

Kyrgyzstan is one of the world’s most ethnically diverse countries, scoring 0.624 on Fearon’s Cultural Fractionalization Index (2003, pg 216). This is more than twice the global average of 0.3 and is the highest score in the post-Soviet/Eastern Europe region. More than 80 ethnic groups live in Kyrgyzstan, 11 of which have populations greater than 20,000 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2017). As of 2018, Kyrgyz make up 73 percent of the country’s population; other large groups include Uzbeks (almost 15 percent), Russians (less than 6 percent), and Tajiks, Dungans, and Uyghurs (1 percent each). While Kyrgyz are a clear majority of the national population, there is significant regional variation in population density and diversity. Naryn and Talas regions⁶ are both often described locally as *taza Kyrgyz* (pure,

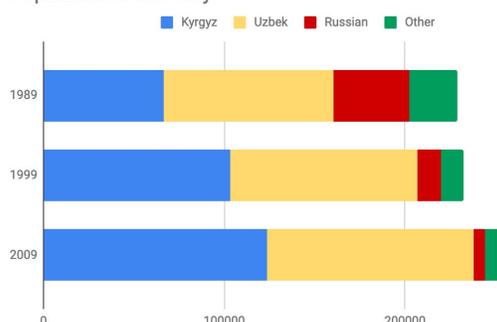
⁶ Unless otherwise specified, by region I mean oblast and district I mean raion.

clean Kyrgyz); the regional populations are almost homogeneous, but also small relative to the country's population. Jalalabad and Osh regions in the south are often described as “*dikie*” (wild) and “*bashkacha*” (different), ascribed to the highly concentrated Uzbek population in the south's urban areas. Indeed, whereas Kyrgyz make up more than 70 percent of the country's population, as of the most recent census in 2009 Osh City was split almost evenly between Kyrgyz and Uzbek.

Population of Kyrgyzstan



Population of Osh City



Despite the intention to avoid volatile - and potentially violent - situations, the intensity of ethno-ethnolinguistic ties and status divisions between titular and non-titular groups in the Soviet republics grew contentious in the late years of the Soviet union. After establishing parity in use and status between Kyrgyz and Russian in 1988, Kyrgyzstan's legislative committee proposed a shift away from bilingualism; in 1989, in a move analogous to developments in other republics, the Kyrgyz SSR adopted a law that established Kyrgyz as the sole state language. Although Russian was maintained as the “language of interethnic communication” as an attempt to reassure minority communities of the functional importance of both languages, many non-titular minorities viewed the language policy as discriminatory (Huskey 1995).

Competition over land and misunderstandings about whether Osh's Uzbek population would vie for secession led to riots and ethnic violence in Osh and nearby villages in June 1990 (Tishkov 1995, Liu 2012). Not long after, Kyrgyzstan declared independence from the Soviet Union and leadership struggled to manage a crumbling transition economy, corruption, and ethnic diversity. Askar Akaev, independent Kyrgyzstan's first president, pursued a pluralistic nation-building project. He appealed to the multi-ethnic character of the Kyrgyz Republic by plastering the

slogan “Kyrgyzstan - Our Common Home” (*Nash Obschii Dom*) on billboards and murals across the country (Murzakulova and Schoeberlein 2009). Akaev was ousted in a revolution in 2005; his successor, Kurmanbek Bakiev, loosened the nation-building project’s emphasis on “Kyrgyzstan - Our Common Home” and instead embraced a titular-centric nationalism. Another revolution in April 2010 removed Bakiev from power. Two months later, a fight broke out between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youths in Osh; while interethnic scuffles usually were settled as quickly as they began, this particular fight escalated into four days of rioting that left 400 dead and many thousands displaced along the border in Osh and Jalal-Abad regions (Khan, 2010). In the years following the violence, which locals euphemistically refer to as “The June Events,” tension between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks has remained.

This tension has played out in multiple spheres of Kyrgyzstani society - politics, business, and media included - but for the purpose of the paper I focus on public education.

Elements of Kyrgyzstan’s Public Education System

In this section, I examine the structure of Kyrgyzstan’s public education system, access to schooling, the curriculum for the integrated ethics/civics class taught in all grades, and relevant pedagogical practices and beliefs.

Structure

Structure encapsulates who has access to schooling, how schools are set up, how the levels of education link up, and linguistic practices that govern schooling.

The expectation that that every person could speak and study their native language was taken up into Kyrgyzstan’s constitution upon independence: “people of all ethnic groups forming the people of Kyrgyzstan [have] the right to preserve their native language and to create conditions for its study and development” (Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2017). In practice, this has meant that public primary and secondary schooling is offered in two state languages (Kyrgyz, Russian) and two minority languages (Uzbek, Tajik). When starting first grade, students enroll in

a “group” that determines the language of their core curriculum (a student in a Kyrgyz-medium studies history, math, physics in Kyrgyz, while a Russian-track counterpart in principle gets the same material, just in Russian). Schools where multiple language tracks are taught simultaneously by one set of teachers are officially designated as “mixed” (*aralash, smeshanyi*).

The education system in Kyrgyzstan is blocked into four parts: pre-school (age 3-6), primary school (grades 1-4), secondary school (grades 5-11), and higher education (including 4-year universities, as well as technical institutes, trade schools, and 2-year colleges). Both public and private pre-school facilities are available in Kyrgyzstan; the relative popularity depends on many factors, but it can be said that Kyrgyzstani parents across ethnic lines find Russian-language pre-school incredibly attractive. Children start primary school when they turn 7; all subjects are taught by a single teacher in a single classroom all four years. When students “graduate” to secondary school in fifth grade, they are assigned a homeroom teacher (*klass jetekchisi, klassnyi rukovoditel'*), in whose classroom they sit during school hours. Teachers move around from room to room to give lessons in their respective subjects. Kyrgyzstani law requires children to remain in school through ninth grade, after which they can either drop out or transfer to a two-year college or technical institute. Secondary schooling lasts through eleventh grade, and the summer after graduating pupils take a college admissions exam (*Obshcherespublikanskoe testirovanie, ORT* abbreviated). The score a student gets on this exam determines where they can study (universities in Bishkek or Osh require higher scores, forexample), what field they can study (medicine and law require higher scores than teaching), and the funding source.

Curriculum

Through a standardized curriculum, the state defines what it considers legitimate knowledge, necessary skills, and valuable attitudes. In Kyrgyzstan, curriculum standards are decided at the Ministry of Education and Science in Bishkek, communicated to the District Board of Education (*raionnyi otdel narodnogo obrazovaniya*, abbreviated *RaiONO*), introduced to teachers by *RaiONO* methodological specialists at district-wide trainings before the start of every school year, and monitored at the school level.

Kyrgyzstani students take many classes at once. First graders take 9 classes a week, and by the time they reach eleventh grade pupils are taking anywhere from 16 to 18 classes each week depending on the language of instruction and type of school. They juggle math, science, and humanities courses; every year, minority language students take multiple hours a week of Kyrgyz, Russian, and English language in addition to their native language, as well as specialized classes on Kyrgyz and Russian literature.

Ethics was introduced to the curriculum in 2003 as part of a strategy to reinforce Kyrgyz *salttar* (traditions) and establish a strong foundation for Kyrgyz youth's spiritual development (Alimbekov and Jarashaeva, 2012).⁷ The specific balance of subjects each year depends on the language of instruction and the type of school, but in general their ethics/civic education can be broken into three parts: from grades 1-4, children take ethics (*adep, etika*) before taking a blend of economics (*ekonomikga kirishuu, vvedenie v ekonomiku*) and civics (literally "human and society:" *adam jana koom, chelovek i obshchestvo*) from grades 5-8. From 9th to 11th grade, students in most public schools take civics (*jaran taanu, grazhdanovedenie*) and economics (*ekonomika*) separately until they graduate.

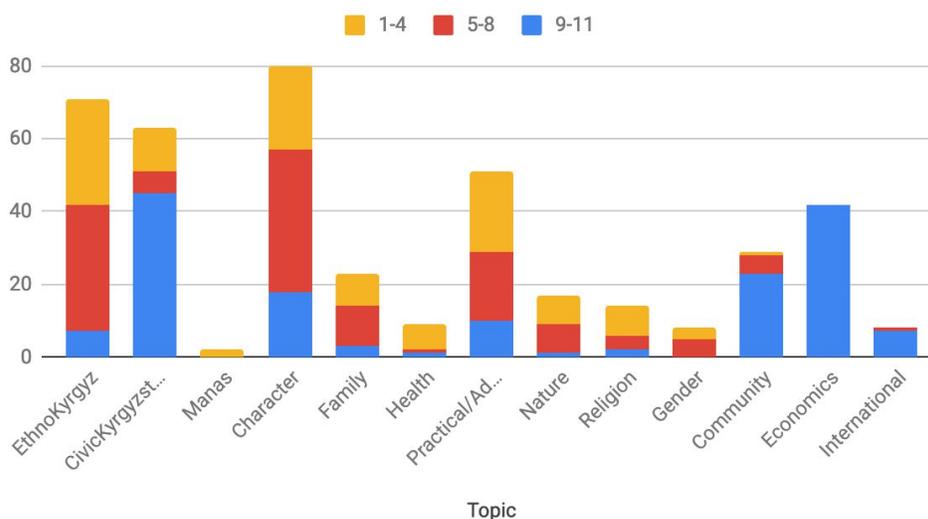
A wide range of topics are covered in ethics/civics. Figure 1 charts the content of the 2017/18 Kyrgyz-language ethics/civics curriculum in Osh City. I have broken out the content into primary school (1-4), early secondary school (5-8), and advanced secondary school (9-11). Children in primary and early secondary school spend significantly more hours of class time discussing content that is Kyrgyz-centric: first graders learn about the Manas trilogy, an epic poem that describes the unification of Kyrgyz tribes against Chinese invasion, and fourth graders learn about *mankurts*, a fable retold by famous Kyrgyz author Chyngyz Aitmatov about the dangers of forgetting one's mother tongue. By advanced secondary school, the content of civic education is significantly more neutral on ethnic questions and instead focuses on the structure of Kyrgyzstan's government, rights and responsibilities of citizenship in Kyrgyzstan, and democratic processes. It is important to note that ethno-centric material is pro-Kyrgyz, rather

⁷ *Adep/etika* replaced "iyman" (faith) classes taught by imams in schools; as told to me by a representative of Osh City's Board of Education, the government did not want such explicit religious influence in schools.

than anti-Uzbek. Tolerance is a critical feature of Kyrgyz nationalism and was repeated throughout ethics textbooks across languages and grades.

Figure 1

Content of 2017-18 Kyrgyz-Language Ethics/Civics Curriculum



Across all grade levels, “character” was the most frequently coded content matter. This reflects the Ministry of Education’s goals in establishing ethics as a subject of study. While many of the lessons on character were general (“How to be well behaved,” “How can a person be honorable?”⁸), what constitutes behavior and honor are grounded in a specific cultural context. This comes through in textbook and supplementary materials, which are produced largely by Kyrgyz academics and employees of the Ministry of Education.

The Ministry of Education puts out the standards and required materials in Kyrgyz and Russian; local District or City Boards of Education are tasked with translating into other languages if necessary. In the recent past, Osh City’s Board of Education has published the curriculum for grades 1-8 in Kyrgyz only, and for grades 9-11 in both Kyrgyz and Russian (a necessary distinction given that students in Kyrgyz-medium classes receive twice as many hours per week of civics at this level). An official at Osh’s Board of Education said that these standards are not published in Uzbek because it is not a state language and the teachers are capable of translating

⁸ 8th grade lesson 19, 7th grade lesson 7

the material themselves; the standards are not translated into Tajik because there are no Tajik-language schools in the city.⁹

Pedagogy

Pedagogy consists of both the explicit institutional expectations and informal classroom practices through which desired norms, values, and dispositions are transmitted.

The Kyrgyz word for education, *bilim beruu*, literally means “giving knowledge.” The phrase reflects the expected roles that teachers and students play in the learning process; teachers should transmit information they have gained, students should dutifully listen and absorb. Pedagogy in Kyrgyzstan relies heavily on rote memorization, and much class time is spent with the teacher writing information and exercises on the board while students copy the information into their notebooks verbatim. These notebooks are handed in regularly and checked to make sure students have written down the information correctly.

The gap between institutional expectations and actual classroom practices is driven largely by a lack of teaching materials. Textbook shortages are a chronic problem in Kyrgyzstani schools. Children are supposed to rent textbooks from the school, though often there are not enough books available in the library to serve the entire student population. Two, three, and sometimes four students crowd around a single textbook at a small desk to try to read the material and follow along in class. Given that the curriculum standards are written with a textbook or specific assignments in mind, it is simply not possible to meet the standards. One Uzbek teacher at a school in Osh explained that she uses her own materials to teach ethnics; among the collection included Kyrgyz-language books distributed by the Ministry of Education, Russian-language manuals given as a gift by an international organization, and several Uzbek-language books held together with tape that were printed in Tashkent in 1997, before the alphabet was changed to Latin. This mixing and matching of teaching materials is common, though access is easier in urban areas.

⁹ Interview in Osh City, March 19 2019.

An additional challenge is that teachers responsible for ethics and civics classes do not have opportunities for professional development or retraining similar to teachers of other subjects. Many of the teachers who end up giving lessons in ethics did not specialize in this field in university, like teachers of English or math for example; the Ministry of Education knew this would be a challenge and tried to create a training program through the Republican Institute for Training and Retraining of Teaching Personnel, which has multiple branches throughout the country (Alimbekov and Jarashaeva 2012, p. 3). The woman at the Institute in Osh who was responsible for retraining programs for ethics says she has been reassigned to teach handicrafts, though, because the Ministry is integrating ethics with civics and economics.

In a context with under-trained and under-resourced teachers, it can be difficult to judge what topics students actually cover in class due to sudden changes in school scheduling. When asked about lesson plans and teaching materials, a woman who teaches *adep* at a Kyrgyz-language school in Osh said, “I’ve been teaching 23 years, I don’t need a lesson plan because all the information is in my head.”¹⁰ Multiple teachers mentioned including lessons on corruption, migration, and terrorism for older students and Kyrgyz traditions for younger students, even though they were not explicitly included in the curriculum. Disrupting the flow of the standardized curriculum was not a problem, one teacher said, as long as she prepared for teaching demonstrations and grade distribution as they were scheduled.

School and classroom decorations are filled with what cognitive psychologists might call nationalist primes. The entrance of every school - regardless of the language of instruction - is decorated with Kyrgyzstan’s flag, the state emblem, the lyrics of the national anthem, and a poster that says “My homeland” (*Mekenim*). In many Uzbek-language and mixed Uzbek/Russian-language schools I visited, there were posters emphasizing internationalism with photos and idioms supposed to represent Kyrgyzstan’s multiethnic population. Additionally, teachers decorate their homeroom classes with posters that include verb tense charts or

¹⁰ Interview in Osh City, March 18 2019.

mathematical equations, depending on which subject is taught. Every classroom has posters with quotations from famous Kyrgyz historical figures and nationalist idioms, though the language of these posters is inconsistent.¹¹ Some of these posters are provided by the state (a common one presents the seven teachings of Manas, including unity and tolerance), while most are designed and paid for by teachers themselves.¹² (one poster in Uzbek-school, teacher made it with photos of her best students over the years displaying their artwork and projects).

Finally, concerts (*spektakly*) constitute another informal pedagogical element of schooling in Kyrgyzstan. For most major holidays,¹³ one of the school administrators organizes small concerts with singing, dancing, and performances in line with the holiday. Many of the concerts emphasize “the peoples’ friendship” (*druzhiba narodov*), a rhetorical holdover from Soviet times, when propaganda posters often featured representatives of the 15 titular nations wearing traditional clothing and holding hands. In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, school concerts uphold this idea by having pupils dress in traditional clothing of Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic groups (including Korean, Tajik, Turkish, and Chechen costumes) even if the school is ethnically homogeneous. In ethnically mixed schools, it is common for the teacher organizing the concert to showcase the talents of non-Kyrgyz children who have learned to play traditional Kyrgyz instruments, recite epic poems in Kyrgyz, or perform Kyrgyz dances.

Assessing Education in Kyrgyzstan after 2010

In this section I show how structure, curriculum, and pedagogical practices that define Kyrgyzstan’s public education system have developed since the ethnic riots of 2010 in Osh. I argue that after ethnic violence in 2010, the state fostered social-structural incentives at multiple levels of administration that made it more attractive to ethnic minorities to opt into an ethnicized civic identity through attending school in one of the state languages.

¹¹ In one ethics classroom at a Russian-language school I visited in Osh, the teacher had posters in English, Russian, Uzbek, and Kyrgyz.

¹² One poster in a mixed Uzbek/Russian-school in Osh featured photos of the teacher’s favorite students over the years displaying their artwork and handicraft projects.

¹³ These include official state holidays like Victory Day (May 9), Day of Kyrgyz Language (September 23) as events like famous author Chyngyz Aitmatov’s birthday (December 12).

The language of education and preservation of native-language schools for southern Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek communities are among the most contentious shifts since 2010. Megoran (2012) has written about how Kyrgyz insecurity about the survival of its language and internal disunity; public education has been a space in which that insecurity has been addressed with official policy. In 2013, then-president Almazbek Atambaev published a document envisioning the future of inter-ethnic relations in Kyrgyzstan; in Atambaev's view, schools constitute a key mechanism for "the formation of a common civic identity" in which every person would be aware that they are a Kyrgyz - notably not Kyrgyzstani - citizen (*Kyrgyz jarany*).¹⁴

Indeed, since independence, both the number and ratio of Kyrgyz schools has grown significantly. In 1991, there was only one Kyrgyz-language school in Osh, meaning Kyrgyz children were usually obliged to study in Russian- or even Uzbek-language schools (Megoran 2012, p. 13). By 2017, 12 of Osh's 53 public schools were teaching students only in Kyrgyz and another 10 were mixed schools offering instruction in both Kyrgyz and Uzbek.¹⁵ Data about the number of schools from the National Committee on Statistics does not include mixed schools and does not disaggregate by language between 2005-2012; this makes it difficult to observe shifts in registration and school designation before and after the 2010 events. Figure 2 illustrates the number of schools in Kyrgyzstan by language of instruction.¹⁶ Qualitative evidence from conversations in multiple districts within Jalalabad region and Osh City and student-level data on language of instruction gives a better idea of the impact of the 2010 riots on Uzbeks' decisions regarding the language of their children's education.

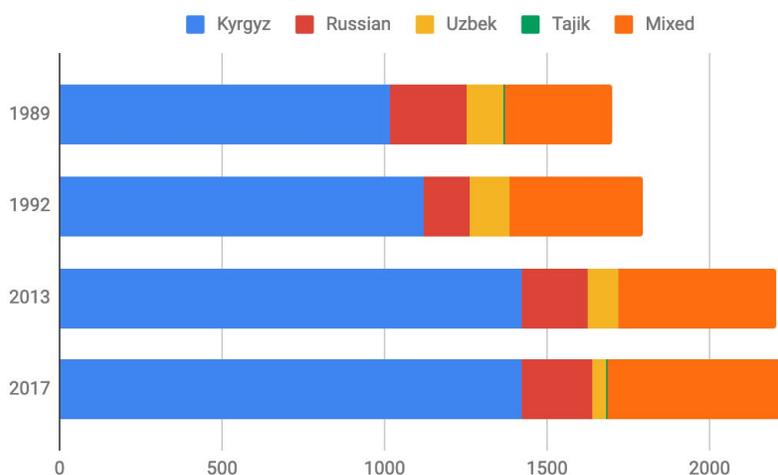
¹⁴ Atambaev, *Kontsepsiya ukrepleniya edinstva naroda v mezhetnicheskikh otnoshenij v Kyrgyzskoj respublike* (2013): 5.

¹⁵ Interview at Osh City Board of Education, June 12 2018.

¹⁶ A school's designation is recorded at the national level by the Ministry of Education; decisions about which language tracks to offer and how many classes to offer in any one track happen between the school and the District Board of Education (*raionnyi otdel narodnogo obrazovaniya*, abbreviated *RaiONO*). A measure of Kyrgyz-language schools doesn't mean much if for the past 3 years, the incoming 1st graders have registered as Russian-medium groups; data on the number of mixed schools doesn't reveal which languages the curriculum is offered in or whether the language tracks are evenly distributed within a school, for example.

Figure 2

Number of schools in Kyrgyzstan by language



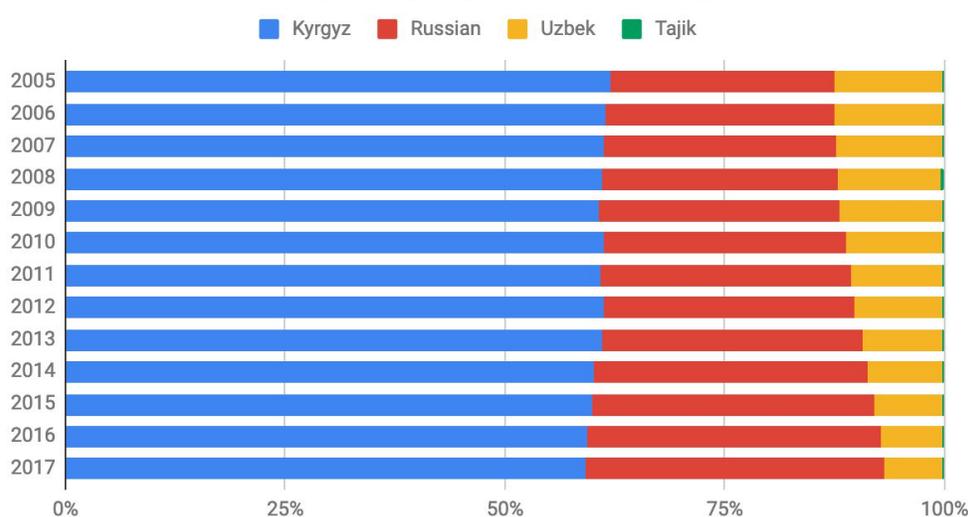
Data from National Committee on Statistics supplemented by Huskey (1995), AKIPress (2017), Ferghana News (2013)

Figure 3 shows how the ratio of students getting instruction in each language has shifted over time. While the proportion of students enrolled in Kyrgyz has stayed the same since 2005; Uzbek enrollment has decreased, replaced by Russian-track enrollment. This matches what I heard from teachers and community members in Osh and multiple villages in Jalal-Abad. Some explained that it was important for their children to learn to speak Russian properly, “because it is a state language” while others mentioned the long-term economic advantages of knowing Russian. Labor migrants disproportionately come from Kyrgyzstan’s southern regions; many of those who leave for work in Russia are ethnic Uzbeks. Some of the teachers and parents I talked to said it was important for their children to be educated in Russian in case they move and need to enroll in a Russian school, or because a cleaner accent will help them in job security once abroad.¹⁷

¹⁷ For more on labor migration from Kyrgyzstan, see

Figure 3

Student Enrollment by Language as a Percentage of Total



Few people mentioned higher education opportunities as a reason to study in a Russian school, though the squeezing out of Uzbek-language options for advanced education could certainly be a factor. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Education and Science discontinued the option for secondary school students to take the ORT in Uzbek, leaving only Kyrgyz and Russian as testing options (EurasiaNet 2013). At that point, taking the ORT in Uzbek would not have led to many higher education opportunities anyway, given that all Uzbek-language university options had shut down. The People's Friendship University, founded by leader of southern Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek community Kadyrjan Batyrov, was burned and damaged beyond repair in the midst of the June 2010 riots; the university's license was revoked by the Ministry of Education in August 2010. Kyrgyzstan's first president founded Kyrgyz-Uzbek University in Osh and established independent Uzbek philology and pedagogy departments Osh State University to demonstrate the state's commitment to produce well-educate ethnic citizens of Kyrgyzstan (Megoran 2012). Osh's municipal government renamed Kyrgyz-Uzbek University to Osh Social University and folded the Uzbek-language departments into other programs, pushing out experienced teachers and limiting the options for Uzbek-speaking youth to pursue university degrees.

While it is possible for Uzbek students to take the ORT in Russian or Kyrgyz, multiple people expressed frustration at how difficult it is to overcome the literacy and content gap.¹⁸ It is telling that any discussion of preferences of language education was centered on Russian as a state language of Kyrgyzstan or Russian as a language of opportunity to work specifically in Russia. None of the Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks I spoke to expressed desire to migrate to Uzbekistan, reflecting similar findings as Ismailbekova (2014).

Beyond structural challenges for Uzbek-speakers, small changes instituted to the curriculum every year add up to disadvantage those studying in Uzbek or Tajik. Before the 2018-19 academic year, the Ministry of Education increased the number of hours for English from 2 to 5 per week for early secondary school students. Increasing the number of hours for English has meant decreasing the number of hours for other classes, though with each language track having a different number of hours per week for ethics/civics this has had an uneven effect across schools. In Uzbek and Tajik schools, it has meant holding the hours dedicated to Kyrgyz, Russian, Kyrgyz literature, and Russian literature classes constant while decreasing the hours for native language instruction and Uzbek/Tajik literature. Teachers at a focus group in central Jalalabad expressed frustration at how the shift in hours unevenly affects ethnic minorities; one young woman said, “Year by year, we are getting fewer and fewer [hours]. We are Uzbek, we need Uzbek language.”¹⁹

There is a tension between structural and curriculum patterns; Uzbeks explain the benefits of switching from Uzbek-language education to Russian, but for teachers who remain in the Uzbek-language track, it is upsetting to see their language and literary traditions sidelined in favor of the state languages and English.

Still, many educators spoke about the need to emphasize the collective over individual ethnic elements. “Our children are no longer Uzbek or Kyrgyz, but Kyrgyzstani [*Kyrgyzstantsy*]. The process isn’t 100 percent complete, but maybe 70 or 80 percent here in Osh.” For teachers who

¹⁸ Focus group, central Jalalabad region, May 2018.

¹⁹ Focus group, central Jalalabad region, May 2018.

work with Uzbek students in Osh, the trend of Kyrgyzstani nationalism increasingly reflecting Kyrgyz nationalism was not a huge problem. A Kyrgyz academic and university administrator in Osh, “We need to transition away from *Kyrgyz, Uzbek* to *Kyrgyzstani*. Otherwise, we just exist separately - Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Dungan, Uygur, Russian - and are weak. We need to integrate all together to be strong.”²⁰

Implications and Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered a rudimentary theory about how mass schooling can function as a mechanism of identity change, rather than locking in national identity. Drawing on in-depth interviews with educators and experts, content analysis of curriculum and classroom materials, and data about school enrollment and language of instruction, I presented a case study of Kyrgyzstan’s public education system.

The challenge of data availability and the sensitivity of the question make it difficult to elucidate bottom-up mechanisms of minority community buy-in, but in the paper I have argued that after ethnic violence in 2010, the state fostered social-structural incentives at multiple levels of administration that made it more attractive to ethnic minorities to opt into an ethnicized civic identity through attending school in one of the state languages.

While this paper focuses specifically on Kyrgyzstan in a post-conflict context, the analysis could travel to other regions and literatures, including post-Soviet national identity, identity formation in multi-ethnic societies, and nation-building projects in weak state contexts.

²⁰ Interview with Kyrgyz academic and university administrator in Osh City, March 19 2019.

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