Inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan: civil society activism from the bottom-up

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ABSTRACT
It is a common discourse in Kazakhstan that policy-making is state-driven with weak engagement of civil society. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan announced a transition to an inclusive education model by 2020. The present study sought to challenge the traditional perspectives on the policy-making process and to investigate to what extent and how civil society in Kazakhstan contributes to inclusive education reform. It employed a qualitative approach, interviewing seven representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) about their contribution to inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan. The findings show that the NGOs actively engage in revising the policies and ensuring their implementation. Furthermore, they facilitate the provision of methodological support to schools and professionals, contribute to promoting cultural change about perceptions of people with special needs, and inform parents, the state, and the public more broadly about the needs of children requiring additional educational supports. These findings give credit to the leadership of NGOs and suggest the need for government and schools to cooperate more closely with civil society organisations, which serve as change-agents in facilitating inclusive education in Kazakhstan.

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Introduction
As the ninth largest country in the world with a very diverse ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious population (Bridges, 2014), Kazakhstan is being required through ministerial reforms to implement an inclusive education model to ensure the absence of discrimination and marginalisation of ethnic or cultural minorities. However, to date the rhetoric of inclusive education reform has been heavily focused on a disability perspective in the framework of education in Kazakhstan that is influenced by the Soviet legacy characterised by a special or ‘correctional’ approach to dealing with children with special needs (Rouse & Lapham, 2013). During the Soviet period, it was a common practice to separate children with disabilities from their peers and educate them in so-called correctional institutions or at home by special educators referred to as ‘defectologists’. More so, a cultural stigmatisation of children with disabilities contributed to the commonly accepted traditions of isolating them in special residential care institutions (Gevorgianiene & Sumskiene, 2017).

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of an independent state, Kazakhstan required fundamental policy revision and policy-making efforts that touched all spheres of state functioning, including education (Bridges, 2014). After ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations [UN], 2007), Kazakhstan willingly took the responsibility to provide equity in educational access and participation of all learners including children with disabilities in mainstream education. Following this, a number of the State Programs for Education and Science Development were implemented where inclusive education was outlined as one of the major trajectories for development (Bridges, 2014; Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010). Specifically, the 2011–2020 programme for Education and Science development stated that by 2020, 70% of all schools in Kazakhstan are expected to become inclusive (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010). The concrete steps to achieve this threshold and how exactly inclusive schools should look like remains unclear in this state programme, yet the indicator is mentioned as one of the priority directions for national educational policy development.

Although governmental and institutional arenas serve as traditional sites for educational advocacy, community-based and grassroots organisations increasingly bring a significant contribution. Often though, their contribution to social and educational reform can remain unnoticed by researchers despite civil society organisations (CSOs) in Kazakhstan being already engaged with social issues and collaborating with a range of governmental institutions (Asian Development Bank, 2007). The number of non-profit organisations is growing from 400 in 1991 after Kazakhstan gained its independence to 1600 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 2015 (Kabdiyeva, 2015). Education is one of several focus areas where NGOs are active with up to 42% of NGOs operating in social spheres such as education and public health (Kabdiyeva, 2015). In education, the role of civic advocacy has been an essential part of facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups such as students with disabilities into mainstream education (Markova & Sultana- lieva, 2013). It is a common discourse in Kazakhstan that policy-making and reform are top-down processes, and society serves as implementers or executors of the laws and policies prescribed by the centralised government (Kassymova, Knox, & Mashan, 2008). This research challenges this traditional discourse by exploring the activism of NGOs. The present study investigates ‘In what ways and to what extent does the civil society contribute to inclusive education reforms in Kazakhstan?’

In order to understand and to assess the impact of NGOs in inclusive education development, a conceptual framework provided by Booth and Ainscow (2002) was chosen. This framework known as The Index for Inclusion was developed as a tool to guide schools or education systems in developing inclusive cultures, policies, and practices. The authors suggest it could be applied more broadly across other educational contexts as an analytical framework indicating systemic strengths and challenges across each of the three dimensions. For this reason, The Index for Inclusion was applied to conceptualise, capture, and categorise the varied activities of participants from local NGO’s that contribute to inclusive education reforms. The Index consists of three dimensions, which are creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies and evolving inclusive practices. The dimension of ‘inclusive cultures’ refers to the social values that welcome diversity and inclusion. It highlights a tight link of inclusive education to social inclusion more broadly. Inclusive policies refer to those policies and laws that welcome the diversity of
learners and minimise exclusionary pressures. Lastly, inclusive practices reveal what methodological materials and resources exist and how the learning process is orchestrated. This framework became widely used to promote inclusive education development in different settings and countries (Alborno & Gaad, 2014; Carrington, Bourke, & Dharan, 2012; Heung, 2006).

**Literature review**

In the international literature, the role of CSOs in the attainment of basic educational goals is becoming more recognised (Lexow, 2003; Kruse, 2003). Many CSOs are now expected to be involved in forming, implementing, and monitoring educational laws and policies (Mundy et al., 2008). Similarly, CSOs are often viewed as independent watchdogs and critics, complementary service providers, and partners to governments and ministries (Schurmann & Mahmud, 2009). The major role of CSOs has been described as one of ‘persuading the powers’, which means holding governments and the international community accountable for their promises to fulfil the ‘Education for All’ (EFA) agenda (‘Persuading the Powers’, 2012). Case studies seem to be the dominant way of studying CSOs in education reform (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2012; ‘Persuading the Powers’, 2012; Peters et al., 2008).

On a global platform, CSOs have taken part in educational reforms by employing strategies such as raising awareness via media tools, conducting research, delivering consultative services to governmental officials, building websites with information about inclusion, and much more in order to increase their participation in deliberating educational policy and budget (Mundy et al., 2008). For example, the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) program in Bangladesh demonstrates how one CSO intervened in the state development of a National Education Policy (NEP) in 2009 by collecting grassroots-level data on people’s perspectives and expectations on quality education (‘Persuading the Powers’, 2012). Similarly, in the Solomon Islands, the Coalition for Education Solomon Islands (COESI) engaged in conducting quality research in order to provide evidence-based policy input and to build its credibility (Carrington et al., 2017; ‘Persuading the Powers’, 2012). Similarly, a multiple case study analysis in Burkina Faso, Mali, Tanzania, and Kenya revealed that major activities of national-level NGOs in these four developing countries in Africa are constructing and equipping schools in poor areas, literacy training and curriculum development, capacity development in the formal system including training for teachers and local educational administrators, advocacy for child protection and gender equity, and education for marginal populations (nomadic, slum, refugee) (Mundy et al., 2008). These cases demonstrate that NGOs contribute to inclusive practices as much as they work in capacity building. Additionally, some CSOs used less formal platforms for raising awareness of minority issues in education, such as the National Coalition for Education in Nepal, which collected more than 150 narratives from women and girls who faced difficulties in accessing education (‘Persuading the Powers’, 2012).

One of the central stakeholders in inclusive education advocacy has always been the parental community (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). Parental advocacy groups around the world have initiated and contributed to the recognition of the rights for educational access and other social services for children with specific educational needs. For example, a grounded theory study concerning adoptive parents of children with Fetal
Alcohol Syndrome in the US revealed that parents engage in four dimensions of advocacy: raising awareness, seeking information on the experts and programs suitable for their children, advocating for individual accommodations, and monitoring to ensure policy implementation (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2012).

In Trinidad and Tobago, NGOs founded by parents facilitated the educational and social inclusion of people with disabilities by contributing to the professional development of specialists, and assisting with employment of people with special needs (Peters et al., 2008). This supports the research on parental activism globally, which evaluates the role of parent-driven NGOs as a primary change agent (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999).

As any organisation faces difficulties and challenges in understanding their own local political and economic context, it is problematic to generalise and apply the experience of certain cases to other contexts. The only notable research concerning parental activism in Kazakhstan was by Markova and Sultanalieva (2013), with the case study of NGO ‘Ashyk Alem’ founded by parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Through a series of interviews, observations, and two focus groups with the parental NGO, the research investigated the existing system of services that was provided by the NGO for children with special needs. Ashyk Alem has been advocating for specific changes in legislation regarding the treatment of children with ASD. An example of a policy change initiated by Ashyk Alem concerned the assessment of children with ASD, specifically when a family applies for a disability benefit. Previous policies required a child to be removed from a family into a psychiatric hospital for a month-long evaluation because autism is understood in Kazakhstan as related to schizophrenia psychiatric illness (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013). Ashyk Alem was instrumental in raising awareness of this issue by delivering a presentation in the Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan, which then discontinued the practice of child removal from the family for a lengthy assessment (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013). Interestingly, the authors (Markova & Sultanalieva, 2013) mention that there is no cultural tradition of parental activism in Kazakhstan and thus highlight how Ashyk Alem stands out in this regard as a unique case of advocacy for the rights of children with special needs.

Despite the potential of NGOs to contribute to the development of inclusive education in Kazakhstan, the official discourse suggests the absence of such activism and the state-driven nature of educational reforms (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2015). This is because Kazakhstan is a centralised unitary state, where the government exercises control over regional and local governance. Its authoritarian management system and decision-making apparatus can be characterised as being ‘top-down’ (Ibrayeva & Nezhina, 2013; Kadyrzhanov, 2005). Thus, political elites have the ability and more opportunities to shape state policies (Cummings, 2000; Dave, 2012). Official reports by the OECD (2015) and World Bank (Atanesyan, Batra, York, & Heider, 2015) describe the nature of educational reforms in Kazakhstan as state-driven with a weak engagement of civil society.

The OECD Review of School Resources (2015) mentions that in Kazakhstan, the number of NGOs that are active in the field of education is small and their influence is minor, citing the research of Ibrayeva and Nezhina (2013). However, when carefully reading the report of Ibrayeva and Nezhina, it appears that the authors describe CSOs more broadly rather than in the field of education specifically. The authors interviewed 30 ‘foreign and local experts’ who described local NGOs as lacking initiative, lacking
government support and recognition, arrogant, indifferent to the real needs of the population, and lacking public trust. However, what is not necessarily known are the experiences that informed the opinion of the participants and their area of expertise. An additional survey component was used to reinforce the previous findings. The survey of 144 people indicated that ‘only 46% could name one or two non-government organisations in Kazakhstan, with the United Nations being the most frequent (53%)’ (Ibrayeva & Nezhina, 2013, 51). Since the UN is an intergovernmental organisation rather than a NGO, it only strengthened the conclusion that there was a low awareness within the general public about NGOs in Kazakhstan. However, it remains questionable whether this low awareness has a causal relationship with the effectiveness of NGOs and if 144 respondents serve as a representative sample in a quantitative study from a population of 17 million people. Traditionally, the state is globally considered to be the central organ in an educational policy-making mechanism (Popkewitz, 2000). Yet, case studies demonstrate how NGOs worldwide have significantly contributed to EFA and inclusive education reforms. Among many other social groups, the role of organised parent advocacy in inclusive education reform history has been remarkable (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999). In Kazakhstan though, the dearth of research concerning the role and impact of Kazakhstani NGOs in inclusive education development required a deeper investigation to challenge the common perception about top-down policy-making.

Materials and methods

The researcher sought to document the experience of Kazakhstani locals working in local NGOs and the meaning they attribute to their contribution to inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan (Creswell, 2014). While this is a qualitative study, this investigation also employed a multiple case study approach describing the experiences of a small number of participants and their perspectives concerning one topic (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). In other words, the research did not attempt to capture a general or all-inclusive picture from every possible stakeholder. The conceptual framework provided by Booth and Ainscow in the Index for Inclusion (2002) serves as an instrument that guides the inquiry and the interpretation of data. This is further explained under the data analysis sub-heading.

Participants

Since this research focused on local NGO representatives, there were preliminary criteria for sampling. Inclusionary criteria for participation in the present study required the NGO representative to have been employed by a local NGO associated with disability-related or inclusion-related activities related to education/society for at least half a year. Their position at the NGO did not play a role in choosing the participants and this was not central to the research question.

The researcher contacted participants via phone calls to familiar NGO leaders engaged in inclusive education movement in large urban centres in Kazakhstan, namely Almaty and Astana. Five participants were selected and contacted, and two others were recruited via the snowball technique, suggested by the study participants who had already taken part in the study. All participants were to varying extent familiar with the researcher and had
some communication prior to being recruited. This element of personal connection allowed establishing rapport, which is highly important in the qualitative interview-based research in order to achieve deep, meaningful, and open conversation (Dundon & Ryan, 2009).

Two participants were mothers of children with special needs, two others were individuals with disabilities, and the remainders (three) were NGO management representatives who had neither a disability nor a child with special needs. As they told, each respondent had at least two years of experience working in an NGO that works toward the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Ethical approval for this research was provided by the researcher’s Institutional Research Ethics Committee.

**Instruments**

The main tool for the purpose of this study was semi-structured interviewing as this tool explores opinions in greater depth (Creswell, 2014; Saldana, 2011). The interview questions were designed with the purpose of addressing the main research question and guided by the literature review. The protocol included several open-ended questions and probes, which were used by the researcher when interviewing a participant. The questions in the interview protocol are open-ended in order to allow the researcher to probe for clarification and further detail based on individual experiences.

**Data analysis**

A set of codes identifying the patterns and findings that emerged and had significance for the purpose of this research was developed through an inductive coding method that combined thematic analysis as well as in-vivo codes (Creswell, 2014). These thematic categories were drawn from the conceptual framework of the ‘Index for Inclusion’ (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). The three-dimensional framework of the Index was employed to categorise and order the themes that emerged from the data. The three-dimensional framework of the Index consists of policy, practice, and culture as these are central to the issue under investigation.

**Results**

After coding the interview transcripts using the Index for Inclusion as the framework of analysis, in each of the three dimensions of policy, practices and culture (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) seven to nine themes were identified. The results of this analysis are detailed in Table 1 which summarises the results of the data analysis in accordance with categories and themes.

**Category 1: policy**

All participants of the study had experiences to share about their involvement in the policy realm of inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan. The most common themes that
emerged were regards to their participation in policymaking and policy revision. Thus, as the participant P1 explained:

A couple of times we caused a real change. For example, the policy that children with intellectual disabilities were not allowed to attend the mainstream school was canceled after several roundtables and discussions held by our foundation

In general, we provided recommendations to the ministry on reviewing the laws on operations of specialised institutions …

In general, lobbying and advocacy are commonly mentioned themes when NGO representatives tell about their work in inclusive education. These organisations work with the governmental institutions such as the ministries or the Parliament as well as with international organisations such as UNICEF, as the study participant (P5) explained:

In 2014, we were lobbying for creating the working group on inclusive education in the Ministry of Education. Also, I remember that during the creation of conceptual approaches to implementing inclusive education in 2015, our specialists commented on it as experts. We took part in the parliamentary meetings, political party meetings, and UNICEF; and we always tried to provide commentaries.

In summary, all study participants had something to share about their policy-making and policy-revising efforts and acknowledge a varying degree of collaboration with local and governmental authorities.

**Category 2: practice**

None of the NGOs represented in the study reported solely on policy issues, but they all revealed that they engage in improving practices of inclusive education. The most often mentioned topic was ‘projects’, which appears to be the primary way NGOs promote their inclusion agenda. All participants highlighted project-based activities. These projects vary in their visions and design, yet all are concerned with the practices of social and/or educational inclusion. For example, the participants (P5 and P7) shared the following:

We help children with disabilities and orphans. Our work is based on the projects implemented in the educational institutions (such as correctional and residential care institutions) aimed at ensuring children’s rights for development and education, and the promotion of equality.
I implement projects around inclusive education ... For example, I conduct regular seminars for teachers and school principals about my personal experience as a person with a disability in secondary and higher education.

Another participant (P3) mentioned project realisation in the counter-position to the policy realm. She believes that inviting NGOs to such platforms as round tables and discussions initiated by the governmental authorities does not bring actual results and real policy changes:

We have many working groups created, but they do not actually work. It all ends up being endless roundtables and conferences, which bring no result. I realised it is better to create our own projects and then to suggest them as a full model to the government.

Within contribution to practices, it was evident that some NGOs were involved in training specialists and educators about the ways to accommodate the educational needs of children with disabilities. As interviewees stated, the NGOs engage with building professional expertise of teachers and personnel in mainstream schools, kindergartens, and private educational centres. Several participants mentioned this point in their interviews. For example, the participant (P1) described their experience with the provision of training programs:

Our motivation to organise training seminars for specialists was to equip them with skills to work with children with special needs in the mainstream settings. It was not initiated by the government. It was our decision to do these pieces of training because even if the inclusive model will be implemented, our teachers are not ready.

While some interviewees explained that training programs are delivered by specifically attracted professionals from abroad, others described training delivered by local parents of children with disabilities. It was mentioned that parents may also be invited to lecture and to educate emerging specialists, as the participant (P3) explained:

Last week, one of the state universities asked me to deliver lectures to their students about special pedagogy. I was asked because I have experience, and their professor did not have such. So, practical experience is important.

Overall, the participants’ responses describe various contributions to capacity building in the field of inclusive education. Some study participants indicated they had served as researchers themselves and explained how they presented their evidence-based methodological recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Science. In general, these activities included engaging in professional training of teachers, supporting parental advocacy skills, and developing contextual methodologies for inclusive pedagogies.

**Category 3: culture**

A common response from the study participants concerned societal awareness of children with disabilities and social inclusion inside and outside of the mainstream school environment. Some participants described how they worked with parents of children with and without special needs, providing information concerning the rights of children with disabilities. The data highlighted that parental involvement in inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan is not only directed towards the general public and the authorities, but also on promoting the idea of inclusion among other parents of children with special
needs. Empowering and sharing knowledge with other parents who have children with disabilities was mentioned by study participants (P3 and P2):

It is an opinion of all parents, not only mine, that inclusive education is the major indicator of social adaptation. We need to move to a stage when we can openly speak of children with disabilities and foster tolerant attitudes in society, not like when it was Soviet times, when they were hidden. We always say our parents that these children should attend everything that children without disabilities attend.

For example, someone shares that her child is suggested to be educated at home, but we know the child and understand that home-based schooling is not the best option. We start suggesting this mother to refer to inclusive schools. So, we promote it by empowering parents so that they could advocate for their children, for their development, which is the most important thing.

The data revealed that a variety of tools were intentionally employed to create a shift in perceptions about inclusion. For example, participant (P7) explained how she organised photo exhibitions to portray people with various disabilities who achieved a lot in education. Participant (P1) described how they were using media platforms and banners in the cities in order to bring attention of the public towards the presence and the issues of people with disabilities in the society:

… we always highlighted the importance of social inclusion and that our children are no different from others. Also, in collaboration with Akimat (local administration), we prepared banners about social inclusion and we still have those all-around Astana.

Many interviewees specifically mentioned their projects and programs aimed at inclusion in sports. For example, two NGOs that were represented in this study were formed in order to deliver sports classes for children with disabilities, and both gradually transformed to the unified inclusive programs (meaning the programs that involved children with and without disabilities all together) because other children who did not have a disability wanted to join the programs too. Thus, study participants (P1 and P2) claimed the following:

We also organised a number of events dedicated not to inclusive education, but rather to social inclusion. These include various sports events.

… we want our children to do sports, because although academic classes are beneficial, together with sports it works out better. So, we started looking for sports opportunities and there were not any.

After some participants mentioned their involvement in the projects around sports that do not directly promote inclusive education reform, the researcher became curious about this trend. Therefore, the third interviewee who also mentioned about undertaking similar projects was asked additional probe questions. When asked to explain why these NGOs chose to work outside of the formal educational system and do sports or arts instead, the reply of the participant (P3) was:

While inclusive education reform is happening very slowly and hardly, there are opportunities to create inclusive environments with supplementary education facilities, where there are no restricting conditions, no unified curriculum, and a broad spectrum of opportunities for creativity and freedom of specialists. Children with diverse educational needs can benefit there.
The participants also mentioned using art classes to facilitate the formation of inclusive values among peers. Such projects as inclusive theatres were described by two study participants (P1 and P2), and others mentioned art therapy. Arguably, this is not directly linked to promoting inclusive cultures in the society, but the participants explained that they believed that art or sports classes promote inclusive values among the peers and wider society.

**Positioning the role of NGOs in inclusive education reform**

When reflecting on the direction of inclusive education reform, there appeared to be three groups of opinions generated by the study participants. These groups identified three different degrees of a perceived NGO contribution to the reform: complementary to the governmental efforts, equal to the governmental efforts, and more significant than the governmental efforts. The first group believed that their contribution to inclusive education reform as NGO leaders was insignificant and rather complementary to governmental efforts, and the systemic change itself is introduced ‘from the top’:

> Since we have the state program for the development of education, which is the national plan stating that schools should be inclusive by 2020, I think that everything depends on the officials… but there must be collaboration between different stakeholders and NGOs, although the main power is in the hands of the state (P7)

The second group believed that the reform is both state-driven and society-driven. The main locomotive for inclusion is parents of children with special needs, and the government contributes to the reform by supporting such parental groups. Therefore, they placed a stronger focus on civil society, while also highlighting the activism of governmental officials.

> I think inclusive education reform is both top-down and bottom-up. It starts with our requests at the grassroots level, but then it is supported and developed by the authorities, and the policy then comes down again to be implemented in schools and so on. It is the process of interaction in a cycle. But the initiators are parents. (P3)

> Civil society still plays its role. We, as parents of children with special needs, achieved that the government decided to follow this path of inclusion. So, the movement needs to be both ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’. And there must be as many of ‘bottom-up’ initiatives as possible. The primary agent is a parent … (P2)

The last group put the major emphasis on the civic activism, claiming that the inclusive education reform happens mostly from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective. ‘This process is only bottom-up, the government does not need this reform, and everything is done by people like us’ This groups viewed authorities as an opposition to NGOs who advocate for inclusion and almost fought for their path towards equal educational access for all.

> I think the movement to support inclusive education reform is only bottom-up. Despite the popular belief that it is top-down because the authorities approve all those laws, these efforts have no weight without bottom-up support. The government can ratify any laws and agendas because the UN or someone else from outside makes them to do so, but nothing works in practice until the parents or other activist make noise around it. What is written on paper would not be implemented. There is this gap in “making the policy work”. If bottom-up activists did not do anything, we would not have any of those changes happening in legislation.
and practice. There are broad and general policies suggested by the UN, but making them work and making sense of them is achieved by the bottom-up activists. (P1)

The practice of pilot projects overtakes the ministry’s movement toward inclusive education. The pace of civil society is faster and they can initiate changes on the ministry level. (P5)

These opinions spread almost evenly. Two participants claimed that the reform is bottom-up, two opposed, and the remaining three placed themselves on a middle ground. Yet, everyone described their contribution to this process, even though the perceived extent of how influential this contribution is in comparison to the governmental capacities varies.

Discussion

The evidence from NGO representatives about their activities around inclusive education revealed that it would not be accurate to claim that inclusive education reform is a solely state-driven reform, as these data demonstrate that Kazakhstani NGOs believe they bring a significant contribution to its development in policy, practice, and culture realms. The following sub-sections discuss the results in relation to each dimension of The Index as the conceptual framework for the present study.

Policy

Since the literature review revealed that the state has usually been considered as a central actor in the policy-making mechanism in education, the inquiry about the role of NGOs in creating policies was an important component of this research. The data reveal that although the NGOs do not usually receive recognition for policy contribution, as the final versions of policy documents are approved and signed by the Ministry of Education and Science, they do participate in all stages of policy-making, such as policy formation, policy revision, and policy implementation.

There were several cases described by the participants, which explained how some policies were created or revised due to the active involvement of the NGOs. For example, the access to mainstream education for children with intellectual disabilities became possible after one of the NGOs lobbied against the law restricting such a placement in schools. Cancelling this restrictive policy does not imply the full access of children to quality inclusive education, but it is a major step in moving away from the segregated model. Some policy changes were not concerned with the educational sphere itself, but they can be relevant in enhancing the accessibility of schools. Thus, a provision of free bus rides for parents of children with special needs means supporting their movement. In rural areas, where there are schools often located far from some villages, such a policy on free bus rides can ensure that families can afford transportation for their children and themselves, as the parents may wish to accompany a child to get him or her to school. The fact that parental NGOs describe how they were able to lobby these changes in legislation Kazakhstan confirms the theory of Trainor (2010) and the claims of Scott, Lubienski, and DeBray-Pelot (2009) who viewed parents of children with additional educational needs as intuitive advocates and agents for systemic change. In addition, the NGOs are monitors of policy implementation, as often they
are the direct consumers of the policy changes. If they see that the signed policy does not actually work, they have demonstrated some capacity to contribute to policy enactment by holding the authorities accountable for their decisions. This point was articulated in the literature review (Lexow, 2003; Kruse, 2003; Mundy et al., 2008), where NGOs are described as watchdogs for policy implementation.

In promoting policies around inclusion, the collaboration of NGOs with the formal authorities on both local and national levels is crucial for success. All study participants highlighted cooperative relationships with Akimats, which are local governing bodies. The relationships with state-level authorities such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Parliament, and political parties are more multifaceted, as some participants described lines of cooperation, while others were less optimistic and condemned the censorship they had to experience or other discontentment. Yet, this aligns with the theoretical overview of Lang, (2013), who underlined reciprocal and cooperative dynamics between NGOs and governments. It is possible to conclude that NGOs in Kazakhstan work to promote inclusive education and the rights of people with disabilities and have some influence at the political level.

**Practice**

Project-based operations of NGOs in Kazakhstan seem to be employed as a common vehicle to achieve change. Each NGO representative described the projects they implement around inclusion and the recognition of the rights of children with disabilities, including the right for quality education. From the data it appears that these projects are often viewed as a more effective tool to create change. Perhaps because they are under the control and supervision of the NGOs, they are less bureaucratised, and allow working directly with the service consumers, that is children with disabilities. Some study participants explained that their ambition is to realise projects as an exemplary model of inclusion in order to further promote it the state officials and to translate the experience on a nation-wide level.

According to participants, raising the expertise of specialists in special and inclusive education was mentioned as a common goal of many NGOs. As mentioned in the findings, local NGOs may attract either international experts or local specialists to train teachers about inclusive pedagogies. Other times, the parents of children with special needs serve as trainers themselves and deliver lectures to emerging specialists and prospective teachers about the ways to accommodate the needs of their children. This confirms the literature review findings that placed parents as the disability experts are key strategists in promoting inclusive education (Trainor, 2010). For example, the case of Ashyk Alem, when parents organised training seminars and invited teachers in order to strengthen their pedagogical competence (Markova & Sultanaliyeva, 2013). Therefore, building competence of specialists is another strong contribution of the civil society in inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan.

The development of methodologies is another area where the results of this research indicate civil society is active. Although this requires a strong expertise, NGO representatives demonstrate their commitment to promoting inclusive education by attracting the specialists and scientists to research in this context the ways to support a child's learning.
Culture

A shared feature emphasised by all study participants is their contribution to raising awareness about people with disabilities and the challenges they face in the society. As the literature review revealed, CSOs internationally raise awareness about the marginalised people, printing books, involving TV channels, creating websites, and organising marches aiming to catch the public attention to their needs and problems.

It is curious that several interviewees highlighted sports as a tool to promote social inclusion. Many also described using arts for the same purposes. The participants explained that via sports and arts, it is possible to unite children, to allow them making friends, and to build their social skills. Therefore, this aspect of promoting social inclusion is intertwined with achieving inclusive education, as it is not only about placement and the provision of study materials, but also about the feeling of belonging and acceptance in the school community.

Some participants also shared how they work with the parental community, including parents of children with as well as without disabilities. Since there is an established tradition of segregation, many parents of children with special needs are often unaware of the rights for education available to them. Some may believe that institutionalising their children is a better approach. However, the NGOs also described their work on informing these parents about the available options for their children, and suggest inclusive education as a preferred model in some cases. For the same reason, the parents of typically developing children often resist the placement of the peers with special needs in the same classroom where their children study. NGO activists conduct informative work explaining the legislation and sharing personal motivating experiences to convince these parents that inclusive education is not harmful, but actually beneficial for all. Thus, the civil society promotes inclusive cultures among the public and the parental communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research focuses on civil society activism to advocate for inclusive education reform. The present study focuses not on the content or the goals of inclusive education reform, but rather on how this reform is being shaped and developed by different forces. By studying local NGOs and how they describe their participation in educational reforms in Kazakhstan helps us to better understand the influence of civil society activism in the Central Asian context. More specifically, these findings challenge certain assumptions concerning policy formation in a post-soviet country that is typically conceptualised and implemented from the top down.

This research was initially conceived through a political science lens, as education in political science has long been a neglected and an underestimated research field (Jakobi, Martens, & Wolf, 2010). More so, the role of civil society in inclusive education is not commonly researched as well. However, even with the dearth of literature relating to inclusive education in Kazakhstan, it became evident that contributions to educational reforms in inclusive education were not only located within the sphere of policy. Because of this, the case of Kazakhstan makes this research even more significant as it fills a variety of gaps in the literature concerning civil society activism, advocacy, and educational practices in a little researched context of post-soviet Central Asia. The findings
reflect that not only do NGOs in Kazakhstan engage in all dimensions of inclusive education reform, they have also demonstrated a capacity to drive these reforms from a grassroots level. This research describes the variety of tools such as media platforms and public banners that local NGO’s employ to create a shift in perceptions about inclusion and persons with disabilities. Altogether they demonstrate an active role in driving societal and political change.

As the literature review provided evidence on how different CSOs internationally promote inclusive education within the three realms framed by Booth and Ainscow (2002), the findings of this research demonstrate that the activism of NGOs in Kazakhstan is also central to educational reforms in this regards. In this instance, NGOs are serving as the catalysts for and the instigators of this reform process. They are active participants in policy revisions, ensuring their implementation and monitoring their outcomes. They are providing methodological support to schools and professionals and promoting cultural change concerning perceptions of people with disabilities. Through their actions, they inform parents, the state, and the public more broadly about the rights of children with disabilities to receive quality inclusive education. They show by using a variety of approaches beginning with personal stories and ending with research-based recommendations voiced in the Parliament how these civil activists facilitate the reform.

It was evident that some believe that their role extends beyond supporting this process, whereas other perceived themselves as primary catalysts for change. Despite the spectrum of opinions about the degree to which the civil society is involved in this reform process, every participant agreed that there is a systemic contribution of NGOs to inclusive education in Kazakhstan.

What this study revealed supports recommendations for the need to provide more financial or resource support for these local organisations in order to develop a culture of inclusion and associated practices. This is important as to date there are no clear guidelines on the implementation of inclusive education in Kazakhstan as the policy is currently being written. It would be helpful if some support could come from the state as well as from other NGOs, because building cooperation among multiple lines provides capacity-building opportunities to the civil society sector. The findings from this research acknowledge the benefits and influence of civil society activism as a bottom-up approach, and how their contributions enhance current inclusive education reforms in Kazakhstan.

The limitations of the study are inevitable due to the study sample. Since only NGOs in two largest cities of Kazakhstan were involved, much remains unclear about the role that other regional organisations play in inclusive education reform.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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