

How Rurality Affects Students’ Higher Education Access in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

In this paper, I address the issues of rural disadvantage in accessing higher education. Taking an autoethnographic approach and building on research on rural education, which has shown that geography is an important stratifier of educational outcomes, I reflect on the factors that helped me to access higher education despite my rural background in Kazakhstan. I then argue that the role of students’ social capital in accessing higher education is critical.

Keywords: rural education, rural students, rural disadvantage, higher education access, social capital

It was my first day in the urban school; I was transitioning from a rural school in a small village of post-Soviet Kazakhstan. I remember how intimidated I was by the fresh paint, the sleek design, and ample supplies, so different from my shabby rural school. There were 25-30 students in each of the eight classes of third graders, whereas my rural school had only one class in each grade of no more than ten students. The language of instruction in the rural school was Kazakh only, but the urban school offered classes with both Kazakh and Russian mediums of instruction, and also taught English as a subject. In addition, there was an indoor toilet and a big canteen with variety of food choices. My parents chose this school among a wide variety of options—gifted schools, specialized gymnasiums, mainstream schools, as well as the different languages of

instruction including Kazakh, Russian, English or some combination of these; my rural school was the only school in the village.

Twenty-five years have passed since my rural school days. Today, I am pursuing a PhD in one of the leading research universities in the U.S. I have been deeply reflecting on the factors that helped me to access higher education and succeed in my career despite my low socio-economic background and social inequities in the educational system of Kazakhstan. Rural-urban disparities in Kazakhstan, as in many other countries, present a significant barrier to equitable academic achievement and remain an important policy issue (Baldwin & James, 2010; OECD, 2017). This problem reflects international trends in access to and equity in higher education as students from certain geographic locations, socio-economic levels, and racial-ethnic backgrounds continue to be underrepresented (Heller, 1999; Long & Riley, 2007; Ness & Tucker, 2008; Perna & Steele, 2011; Yoder, 2007). Almost half of the world population is rural (the World Bank, 2014), and around 50-80% of all schools are located in rural settings in a number of countries, including the U.S. (Aud et al., 2013), Australia (Halsey, 2017), Russia (Sinagatullin, 2001), and Kazakhstan (Mussina, 2018). However, research that addresses the issues of rural students and rural-urban disparities is lacking when compared to other populations (Bright, 2018; Byun, Meece, Irvin, 2012; Ganss, 2016). Multiple international studies reported that rural students are less likely to participate in higher education than their urban counterparts (Byun et al., 2012; Provasnik et al., 2007; Sparks & Nunez, 2014; Wilson, Lyons, & Quinn, 2013). Research suggests that poverty, geographic isolation, and a lack of resources are among the most salient challenges for rural students' academic and career success (Agger et al, 2018; Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Byun et al., 2012; Bright, 2018; Semke & Sheridan, 2012). However, rural areas are often neglected in politics and academia, isolated from resources, and coping with increasing economic and social problems on their own (Hawley et al., 2016). Moreover, rural people often feel marginalized by society (Kreiss, Barker, & Zenner, 2017) as the public focuses more on the needs of select underserved population not their own (Walsh, 2012).

In this article, I employ the autoethnography approach to analyze my personal experience for the purposes of "extending sociological understanding" about rural-urban disparities in Kazakhstan (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method, grounded in postmodern philosophy, that enables the scholar to write in a "highly personalized style," drawing on her experience in order to "extend understanding about a societal phenomenon" (Wall, 2006, p. 146). As such, autoethnography enables the production of new knowledge and offers local, small-scale knowledge that can inform "specific problems and particular situations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 29). Analyzing my personal experience inspired me to "make contact with and respect [my] own questions and problems" and use self-reflection as "valid way in the search for knowledge and understanding" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40). In writing autoethnography, I used

introspection as a source of data and “retroactively and selectively wrote about past experiences” (Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). In other words, I did not live through these experiences “solely to make them part of a published document” rather I assembled these experiences using hindsight (Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 275). Then I reflected on these experiences analytically by comparing and contrasting them against existing research literature (Ellis & Bochner, 2011). In applying this methodology, I argue that social capital plays a crucial role for rural students’ participation in higher education.

I will start by telling my own story of the role of social capital in accessing higher education as a low-income student. Then I will link my experience to the literature on rurality in education in international contexts and explore applications of social capital. Finally, I will introduce the case of Kazakhstan and conclude with recommendations and implications for further research.

My experience with social capital

My social capital both in and outside of my family seem to be among the major factors that contributed to my success. First, my parents were invested in their children’s success in school both emotionally and financially because they viewed education as the only way to get out of poverty. My parents helped me become aware of not only the limiting power of the structure, but also the transformative power of education and my agency to influence the future. Despite our limited financial resources, my parents paid for tutoring classes in my final year in school to prepare for the Unified National Test (UNT), the highly competitive exam that students take at the end of upper secondary school. Based on the results of the UNT, I was able to get the merit-based government-issued grant that covered the full costs of my undergraduate degree, which my family and I would not be able to afford otherwise. I also benefited from the Kazakh government’s merit-based scholarships to pursue my graduate degrees. My relationships with extended family members also contributed to my success because my grandmother in the village took care of me when I was young while my parents worked and lived in the city. Although my grandmother did not attend any school after the 8th grade, she also believed in the transformative power of education and shared her wisdom with me. Moreover, I transitioned from rural school to urban school in the third grade, which helped me access a better quality education.

Second, my education provided me with social capital that was not available to my family. For instance, I benefited from empowering relationships with teachers who motivated my continued investment to schoolwork. The school culture in Kazakhstan tends to value academic excellence, and high-achieving students seem to receive more attention from teachers, whereas low-achieving students are left behind. My teachers in school and university also provided valuable resources, such as information about various educational and career opportunities, recommendation letters, and networks of influential people

who would otherwise be outside of my reach. Moreover, my peers in school and university provided access to additional resources, such as job postings and exchange programs. In other words, relationships with my family, peers, teachers, and colleagues, had a positive and vital impact on my academic and career success.

While my story does not represent the norm for all rural students, as I am one of the small group of people who are bridging the rural-urban gap, it stimulates my questions about rural-urban disparity in Kazakhstan. Not every rural student has the opportunities that I had, such as transferring to an urban school, supportive parents and teachers, attending UNT tutoring classes, and access to higher education government grants. Inspired by my story, I want to explore the ways in which rural-urban gap could be narrowed for rural students in light of inequities in society. Why are some rural students able to find opportunities for academic and career success whereas others are not successful? How does social capital relate to academic and career outcomes for rural students? How do they overcome various aspects of rural disadvantage?

Rurality in Education

This story is not unique to Kazakhstan. Empirical studies in different parts of the world have demonstrated that although massification increased access to higher education, rural students continue to be underrepresented. In the U.S., scholars highlight the achievement paradox: although rural students perform at or above other students on the National Assessment for Educational Progress, only 29 percent of 18 to 24 year olds in rural areas are enrolled in university, compared with 47 percent of their urban peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Studies in the U.S. context also revealed that rural students attend less competitive colleges that “under-match” their school performance level (as cited in Pappano, 2017, n.p.). In Canada, rural students are not only less likely to attend higher education but also more likely to drop out than their urban peers (Ames et al., 2014). In Australia, scholars highlight that rurality combined with low socio-economic status produce the greatest educational disadvantages (Ferrier, 2006). In Europe, there is an increasingly broad consensus at the political level about the importance of expanding higher education participation in rural and isolated areas because such participation is a “key indicator of a healthy society” with a significant contribution to economic development (Elliot, 2018, p. 67).

Rural-urban disparities are especially acute in developing countries and have been at the center of policy debates. China’s rural-urban education inequity continues to persist with some 70 million rural students defined as “left-behind” children, cared for by their grandparents while their parents leave to work in cities (as cited in Gao, 2014). A study revealed that an applicant from Beijing was 41 times more likely to be admitted to a prestigious university than the one from the rural province (as cited in Gao, 2014). Similarly, in Iran, Russia, Turkey, and Romania rural applicants are significantly disadvantaged in

accessing higher education than their urban peers, mostly due to academic achievement and attainment at earlier stages of education (Kamyab, 2015; Konstantinovskiy, 2012; Dundar & Lewis, 1999; Voicu & Vasile, 2010). A study in Georgia found that rural students are 12 times less likely to apply to prestigious universities compared to their urban peers suggesting that geography is an important stratifier of educational outcomes (Chankseliani, 2013).

There is a consensus in the literature from different countries that in a child's early years of schooling, lower achievement levels, financial hardships, and lower parental expectations are important factors inhibiting the higher education participation of rural students (Baldwin & James, 2010; Bright, 2018; Byun et al., 2012; Chankseliani, 2013; Konstantinovskiy, 2012; Scott, Miller, & Morris, 2016; Yiu & Yun, 2017). Moreover, Nelson (2016) and Carr and Kefalas (2009) found that adults, particularly teachers and administrators, tend to invest heavily in college-bound rural students whereas less academically successful students are left behind. My story reflects the themes mentioned in the literature as the expectations of my parents, investments of my teachers, and my transition to a better quality urban school had a positive impact on my academic achievement. All of these, in turn, helped me to overcome financial hardships by accessing merit-based grants. By comparison, most rural students, including my former classmates and relatives, tended to apply to less prestigious and lower quality universities and faced challenges in competing for jobs with their urban peers.

In thinking about these differences, I see a critical role for social capital. Although limited in number, studies that focus on the role of social capital in relation to educational outcomes of rural students largely support the view that social capital promotes college attainment (Agger et al., 2018; Byun et al., 2012; Cogdell, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Tucker, 2010). While the term "social capital" has been broadly applied and has evolved significantly since its inception in the 1980s by such scholars as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993), in this study I define social capital as resources accessed through social relationships and used by individuals for purposive actions (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Scholars have determined three kinds of social capital that relate to educational outcomes of rural students: community, family, and school (Nelson, 2016; Nelson, 2018).

Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) and Nelson (2016) claimed that rural students are advantaged in community social resources as compared to nonrural students because rural communities are often small and have strong ties among residents, which facilitate interactions between rural students and adults. This community social capital in turn, according to Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) and Nelson's (2016) findings, increased the likelihood of a student's college attainment. Nelson (2016) also noted that although community social capital did not "explicitly support the college search process" (p. 249), it offered direct benefits for rural students who maintained close ties with their community through frequent home visits or relationships with peers on campus (Nelson,

2018). Moreover, Nelson (2018) claimed that the students who severed ties with their communities continued to receive the indirect benefits of community social capital such as “feeling comfortable seeking out supportive resources and relationships” in college (n.p.). Nelson (2018) concludes that growing up in tightly-knit communities, rural students might be used to being held responsible for their actions and they strived to maintain their identity of being “known as good kids” on campus as well (n.p.).

Nelson (2016) revealed that family social capital provided most rural students with generalized support, but college-specific support tended to correspond to parent’s educational level and income. Similarly, Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2012) found that rural students lagged behind their urban counterparts largely due to their lower socio-economic background and lower parental expectations for, and involvement in, their education. At the same time, Agger, Meece, and Byun (2018) argued that increased parental expectations not only predicted the educational aspirations of rural students but also predicted their postsecondary enrollment.

In addition, Nelson (2016) found that most rural students in his study benefited from school social capital mainly through a pro-college climate, peer networks, teachers, counselors, and academic tracking. In this way, Nelson (2016) extended the work of Stanton-Salazar (2011) to rural contexts by claiming that connections to institutional agents in schools were especially valuable for rural students with less family social capital. Nelson (2016) also argued for the “crossover nature” of family, community, and school social capital given their interconnectedness in rural areas, which thus cannot be disentangled (p. 277).

In my experience, my family, school, and community social capital played a pivotal role in my academic and career success. This research and my own experience suggest areas for further investigation on how rural students are able or unable to develop and negotiate social capital in their dynamic interactions with the macro- and micro structures in society, particularly in their aspirations for and pursuit of educational and career goals.

The Case of Kazakhstan

Almost 80% of schools in Kazakhstan are located in rural areas and cater to about 50% of the student population (Mussina, 2018). Close to 45% of the schools are ungraded schools, meaning that they do not have enough pupils to give each year group its own class and so teach students of different age groups together in one class (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018). As in other countries, rural schools lack qualified teachers and resources (Arnold et al., 2005). OECD Programme for International Student Assessment results of Kazakhstani students showed that school location, the language of instruction, the socioeconomic background of students and schools make a difference in student performance (OECD, 2017).

Similar to the Russian government’s policy of access (Gounko, 2012), Kazakhstan’s policy also seems to be based on the assumption that secondary

schooling provides all students with the same quality of education and thus creates equitable opportunities for higher education access. However, this policy neglects the existing disparities in the quality of secondary schools. According to OECD (2017) “the systemic challenge of lower-quality, less well-resourced schooling for rural and low socio-economic students presents a major barrier to equal academic achievement, but measures to address this remain limited” (p. 27). This policy suggests Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social reproduction since educational disadvantage is perpetuated by social and cultural constraints, which are prevalent in educational attainment, another area for further research.

Kazakhstan’s law on education guarantees free public higher education on a competitive basis, but the focus on competition results in the inequity of access (OECD, 2017). State support is provided in the form of government-issued grants, which are the “mechanisms used to draw students into disciplines where there is projected need for growth” (OECD, 2017). Eligibility for state support is determined on the basis of the results of the highly competitive Unified National Test (UNT), which students take at the end of upper secondary school. Students who fail the UNT have to cover the full cost of their education on their own or find alternatives such as attending lower-quality private universities. This dual-track tuition fee policy “exacerbates the inequities that are already present in virtually every system of higher education: the disproportionate representation of students from already privileged families” (Johnstone, 2009). The discourse around UNT demonstrates the importance of higher education for students’ career prospects. Unlike higher education, Vocational Education and Training (VET) has a very low status in Kazakhstan as 91.4% of secondary school students do not plan to go to VET (MES RK, 2018).

UNT was a "reforming initiative" at the time of its establishment in 2004 because there was a need for a national system to ensure merit-based access to higher education (Winter, Rimini, Soltanbekova, & Tynybayeva, 2014, p. 107) and to combat corruption (Jumabayeva, 2016). However, there are many problems with the current practice of the UNT related to the massive influence of the test results on students, teachers, and educational institutions, as well as the content of the test itself (Winter et al., 2014). For example, an increase in suicide cases among teenagers has been attributed to stress linked to the UNT (Lee, 2013; Ussupova, Kamalova, & Kuzmina, 2015; Zhumaliyeva, 2009). Furthermore, private tutoring became widespread with the introduction of the UNT, as students’ main focus in the final years of high school was to prepare for the subjects tested on the UNT (Jumabayeva, 2016). Tutoring exacerbated social inequities, such as the rural-urban divide, because it was almost exclusively available to students whose parents could pay extra money for private tutoring (Silova, 2009). Silova (2010) claimed that “the proportion of private tutoring consumers from urban areas exceeded the number of students from rural areas by approximately 24 percentage points” in Central Asia (p. 333). Moreover, due to the emphasized importance of UNT core subjects, there has been a trend for school teachers to “focus on the examination and to ignore aspects of the

curriculum that are not tested directly and that do not contribute to better examination results” (Hill, 2010, p.10). This has led to narrowing of the curriculum because both urban and rural schools started to implement a hidden curriculum titled “Course preparation for the UNT” (Jumabayeva, 2016).

There is a correlation between UNT mean scores and the socio-economic background of students (OECD, 2017). Rural students are more likely to be of low socio-economic status and to have lower scores on the UNT (Bukanova et al, 2014). Similar to the argument of Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Devey, and Crowley (2006), the resource inequities in rural areas seem to explain deficits in attainment and standardized test achievement. About two-thirds of students from poor families self-fund their studies as they have no financial support (OECD, 2017). Although some positive measures are targeted at disadvantaged groups, such as the 30% admission quota for rural students, the UNT system and lower preparation level of rural students for the UNT result in inequitable access to higher education (OECD, 2017).

Rural students also face unique challenges in transitioning to higher education and have more difficulty in this process than urban students (Ganss, 2016; Xiulan, 2015). Although many first-year students face challenges in transitioning into higher education, rural students experience this change differently because of the changes in environmental conditions and social connections (Ganss, 2016). Ganss (2016) found that rural students are less involved, have less accurate expectations of college, feel more socially disconnected, and face greater challenges in making friends than first-year students overall. Rural students may also face inner conflict about leaving home to go to college (Moore, 2018;). Moreover, Xiulan (2015) stresses the process of student transition from rural to urban culture. By distinguishing between the strategies that students employ in this process, such as a) remaining committed to rural culture, (b) disconnecting from their rural backgrounds and embracing urban culture, and (c) practicing a rural culture but with the intention to embrace urban culture, Xiulan (2015) argues that none of these strategies are satisfactory because they may cause confusion and conflict. This in turn creates barriers to rural students integration into college. For instance, in Kazakhstan, the vast majority of higher education institutions are located in urban areas, and rural students have to cope with the abovementioned challenges in both the transition to the university system as well as the transition to urban culture.

This transition is further complicated with rural students residential arrangements in dormitories, rental apartments, or in their relatives’ houses. For example, some students might need to build relationships with their urban relatives; these family relationships can be further complicated if students feel like a burden to their urban relatives. Students also have to build relationships with their peers and teachers. To build these relationships, rural students might need to bridge rural-urban cultural divides. One rural girl in my dormitory in college had never used a shampoo before. Many of our peers viewed her as backward based on this minor cultural difference. She also had difficulty

communicating with the mostly Russian-speaking population of the city as she used to speak only Kazakh in her village. Although she had relatives in the city, she tended not to seek their support as she felt like a burden to them. While this student had overcome the socio-economic barriers to higher education access for rural students, she had many more cultural barriers to overcome. Therefore, it is crucial to support rural students in their transition by designing interventions targeted at rural students' academic and social engagement, by creating a more diversified environment in which rural students feel respected and valued, as well as by collaborating with rural schools to smooth rural students' transition into college and help students establish more accurate expectations of college.

Conclusion

Rural-urban disparities in Kazakhstan, as in many other countries, remain a major barrier for rural students' academic and career success. Rural students are less likely to participate in higher education compared to their urban peers due to a number of factors, such as lower quality schooling, lower socio-economic status, lower parental expectations, financial hardships, and geographic isolation. Even when they access higher education, they face untold challenges in transitioning and integrating into university and urban life.

Attaining a higher education degree does not always mean that one is able to secure a good job. My mother frequently share with me that my relatives were skeptical that I would be able to find a job after I finished my undergraduate degree because we did not have sufficient financial resources or the influential connections to guarantee placement, which is the case for many rural and low-income students. Despite this, I still had developed sufficient social capital that contributed to my success. My parents motivated me to do well in school and helped to access urban education. I relied on support from my teachers and peers in choosing my major and university. So, coming from low-income family did not limit my ability to develop relationships with others—the social capital I developed through this confluence of factors contributed to my ability to access free higher education. Comparing my experience to the experiences of my classmates from rural schools or to the experiences of my relatives from rural areas, many of whom did not attend university or attended low-quality universities and face challenges in competing for jobs with their urban peers, I argue for the need for more research on rural students' equitable access to higher education and on how social capital relates to their educational and career outcomes.

While I have approached the issue from a personal lens, there is value in autoethnographic writing like this as it has a potential to address unanswered questions, include the new ideas of the scholar (Wall, 2006) and to “produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 284). This analytical framework brings me to an all-too-limited number of studies that focus on the role of social capital in relation to the educational and career outcomes of rural youth, finding that social

capital plays an especially crucial role for their higher education participation in light of economic and social isolation (Agger et al., 2018; Byun et al.; Nelson, 2016; 2018). It is important to consider that rural youth face structural inequities in society and their social capital may or may not contribute to their educational and career success.

Moreover, there is, overall, a lack of research focused on the voices of marginalized students, especially in the post-Soviet context. Viewing youth as agentic beings could increase our understanding of how the social capital of youth could contribute to the reproduction of inequities or could transform inequities if it is converted into other forms of economic and cultural capital (DeJaeghere, Wiger, & Willemsen, 2016). By focusing on the experiences of youth from the youth perspective, we will also be able to better understand what type of relationships youth find most helpful in developing their social capital including their relationships with teachers, administrators, parents, relatives, and peers. In addition, most of the research and literature on social capital focuses on the experiences of students in the western context, which not only biases our understanding of the potentially more comprehensive and globally diverse concept, but also leaves a gap in the literature regarding the conceptualization and application of the concept outside the global core.

It is essential that the government agencies, schools, and families help students to cultivate social capital regardless of where they call home, but how can we do such work is a driving question for me and I hope for other scholars. In addition to the system-level, top-down changes suggested by OECD (2017), such as providing means-tested financial support, improving the quality of primary and secondary schooling, expanding the use of e-learning, and accelerating current efforts to reform the UNT, there is a need to consider the voices and needs of rural students. Students are not passive recipients of adults' resources but are active in developing their own social capital. Getting students' perspectives might help design adequate measures to address the issues of rural disadvantage.

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