


REDEFINING EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA

Selected Cases from
Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan



Edited by

MIR AFZAL TAJIK

TSEDISO MICHAEL MAKOELE

Redefining Educational Leadership in Central Asia

This book makes an important contribution to developing and diversifying the study and practice of educational leadership beyond its Anglo-Saxon roots to emergent contexts in Central Asia. It provides a significant step towards making school and higher education leadership more global through the research and scholarship presented in this volume.

—**Professor Tony Bush, University of Nottingham, UK,
President, BELMAS
British Educational Leadership,
Management and Administration Society**

Today's rapidly changing landscape in education calls for the transformation of institutions all over the world. *Redefining Educational Leadership in Central Asia* stands out as a comprehensive examination of educational leadership in the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. In this volume, contributors from across educational institutions consider leadership to be the most effective way to encourage voice and participation, improve the quality of education, and promote the collective responsibility for creating the society of tomorrow.

—**Dr. Timothy Edward O'Connor, President of the American
University of Central Asia (AUCA)**

As the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, I am delighted to endorse this ground-breaking book on educational leadership policies and practices in Central Asia, with a particular focus on Kazakhstan. This volume is a significant contribution to the field, as it brings together a collection of insightful chapters authored by accomplished experts and emerging scholars from nine different countries. These authors possess extensive experience in conducting cutting-edge research and teaching in Central Asia, as well as holding leadership positions in the education sector.

The diverse perspectives and insights presented in this book reflect a deep understanding of the context and complexities of educational leadership in Central Asia. The authors highlight how leadership is shaped and reshaped by the political, economic, social, and cultural landscape. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation of leadership philosophies and practices to meet the evolving needs of educational institutions and society at large.

I firmly believe that this book will serve as a valuable resource for school and university leaders, teachers, students, and researchers interested in educational leadership and the transformation of the educational landscape in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan. Therefore, I wholeheartedly recommend this book to

policymakers, leaders, researchers, practitioners, and students of leadership in Central Asia and beyond.

—*Sayasat Nurbek*, **Minister of Science and Higher Education
Republic of Kazakhstan**

Central Asia is one of the most exciting areas for those seeking to understand education reforms that are moving from tight central control to greater flexibility, innovation and autonomy. Such a radical shift requires a fundamental change in what it means to be an educational leader. Tajik and Makoelle's book offers a thoughtful and compelling perspective on how leadership is evolving to meet the needs of these countries.

—*Dr. Matthew Hartley*, **Professor and Deputy Dean
Board of Advisors Chair of Education
Founding Executive Director of the Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education**

Educational leadership is a contested notion because principles, practices, and approaches to leadership in education are situated in different social, political, cultural, and administrative contexts. Contrary to popular perception, one model or approach to educational leadership cannot be applied to all settings. Alongside this, there is a strong consensus among education policymakers and practitioners that educational leadership at multiple levels is one of the most significant factors that leads to improvement in the quality of education and student learning outcomes.

Post-Soviet independent states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries have initiated massive education reforms in response to disruptive technological advances, economic globalization, demographic shifts due to migration and mobility and the changing geopolitical situation. These reforms are underpinned by an expectation that education as a strategy would enable embedding democratic norms and practices in society. These expectations raise significant questions for educational leadership and how it is enacted across the education systems.

Mir Afzal Tajik and Tsediso Michael Makoelle must be congratulated for compiling this edited volume, which makes a unique and ground-breaking contribution to the field by bringing in multiple perspectives from the post-Soviet Central Asian context. The studies in the volume illustrate well the tensions in global and local practices in educational leadership and make a strong case for an inclusive policy formulation process that takes into account the voice of the practitioners at the grassroots level.

—*Anjum Halai*, **Professor & Vice Provost
Aga Khan University Pakistan**

Educational leadership, as a socially-constructed construct, is highly under-explored in Central Asia and Global South scholarship, and to that end, this is a very timely, important and useful addition to our understanding. The editors and authors, themselves leadership practitioners and scholars, immerse us in grounded, rich cases and meticulous analytical perspectives on the changes and continuities in the meaning, significance, enactment, and reconceptualization of education leadership in the contexts of nine countries across the globe. The volume's analyses provide important insights and raise critical questions about the centrality of the contextual factors and the ability of local education leaders to interact with the unfolding forces, opportunities and challenges that emerge from local-global dynamics. Leadership in education in Central Asia and elsewhere, whether at the levels of school or higher education, classroom teacher or ministry official, has become a defining factor that cannot be disregarded if we care about reforming education for quality, equity, and relevant education for all. This pioneering, in this regard volume, sets the stage for re-theorizing education leadership in the rapidly changing post-Soviet ideological, cultural, technological, and economic/resource contexts. A highly recommended read for colleagues in comparative, international education.

—*Sarfarozi Niyozov*, Associate Dean and Professor,
**Ontario Institute for Studies in Education,
University of Toronto, Canada**

Redefining Educational Leadership in Central Asia: Selected Cases From Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This book is dedicated to resilient teachers and selfless leaders whose tireless efforts have transformed lives, transcended boundaries, and ignited a passion for learning in students. Your impact extends far beyond the classrooms, schools, and universities as it reaches deep into the hearts and minds of generations to come. Your legacy will forever shine as a testament to the transformative power of education.

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables	<i>xi</i>
About the Contributors	<i>xiii</i>
Preface	<i>xix</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xxi</i>

Part 1: Secondary School Leadership Perspectives

Chapter 1 Leadership Context	3
<i>Mir Afzal Tajik</i>	
Chapter 2 Educational Leadership in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Historical Evolution and Reconceptualization of Leadership	19
<i>Mir Afzal Tajik and Rauan Yesselbayev</i>	
Chapter 3 Educational Leadership: Secondary Education Perspectives From Kazakhstan	37
<i>Tsediso Michael Makoelle</i>	
Chapter 4 Fundamental Educational Reforms Shaping School Leadership in Kazakhstan	49
<i>Lyazat Turmukhambetova and Tsediso Michael Makoelle</i>	
Chapter 5 Exploring the Development of Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan: Results From Two Successive Studies	75
<i>Gulmira Qanay and Matthew Courtney</i>	

Chapter 6 Kazakhstani Perceptions of Educational Leadership and Culture 103

Maganat Shegebayev, Aisham Seitova and Sazali Yusoff

Chapter 7 Kazakhstani Principals' Views on Equity in Gifted Education Programs 113

Galiya Daulet and Janet Helmer

Chapter 8 Myths and Realities of School Development Planning: Kazakhstani Principals' and Teachers' Perspectives 131

Assemgul Bukutova and Mir Afzal Tajik

Part 2: Higher Education Leadership Perspectives

Chapter 9 Higher Education Leadership in Contemporary Central Asian Contexts 155

Martha Merrill

Chapter 10 Academic Leadership and Navigating Changes: The Case of Kazakhstan's Higher Education Leadership 171

Aida Sagintayeva

Chapter 11 Higher Education Reforms and Policy Context: Implications for Leadership in Kazakhstan 181

Peter Shon

Chapter 12 University Leaders' Performance in the Higher Education System of Kyrgyzstan 201

Chynarkul S. Ryskulova

Chapter 13 Leadership Lessons From the Great Steppes of Central Asia: Opportunities, Obstacles, and the Way Forward 221

Mir Afzal Tajik and Tsediso Michael Makoelle

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 2

Fig. 2.1.	Bureaucratic Model of Leadership.	20
Fig. 2.2.	Mix of Bureaucratic and Participatory Models of Leadership.	21

Chapter 5

Fig. 5.1.	Teacher Leadership in Kazakhstan Schematic Model for Study 1 and 2.	90
-----------	---	----

Chapter 8

Fig. 8.1.	Theoretical Framework.	138
-----------	------------------------	-----

Chapter 5

Table 5.1.	Descriptive Statistics of Participating Teachers.	82
Table 5.2.	Study Phases and Data Collection.	83
Table 5.3.	Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Leadership Items and Scales: Study 1 and 2.	84
Table 5.4.	Inter-factor Correlation Matrix for Factors in Study 1 and 2.	87
Table 5.5.	Model Fit for the Life Satisfaction Models.	88
Table 5.6.	Item-Factor Loadings for Factors in Study 1 and 2.	88

Chapter 6

Table 6.1.	Result of Demographic Statistics for Kazakhstani Teachers, $N = 87$.	107
Table 6.2.	Descriptive Statistics, $N = 87$.	108

Table 6.3.	Multiple Regression Analysis of School Culture as Predictors and ‘Defining the School Mission’ Dimension of Instructional Leadership as Dependent Variable.	108
Table 6.4.	Multiple Regression Analysis of School Culture as Predictors and ‘Managing Instructional Program’ Dimension of Instructional Leadership as Dependent Variable.	108
Table 6.5.	Multiple Regression Analysis of School Culture as Predictors and ‘Developing School Climate’ Dimension of Instructional Leadership as Dependent Variable.	109
Table 6.6.	Multiple Regression Analysis of School Culture as Predictor Toward Trust as Criterion Variable.	109
Chapter 7		
Table 7.1.	Characteristics of Participants.	119
Chapter 9		
Table 9.1.	Data Relevant to Higher Education Contexts in Central Asia.	160
Table 9.2.	Freedom House 2020 Rankings.	162
Table 9.3.	Participation in International Organizations.	163

About the Contributors

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Tsediso Michael Makoelle's span of teaching and research experience stretches for over 30 years, with the focus being on secondary and higher education. He has worked as a high school teacher, head of department, vice principal, and principal in several secondary schools in South Africa. He has also worked as a Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and Center Coordinator at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, the University of Johannesburg, and the University of Free State, South Africa. Dr Makoelle started working at Nazarbayev University over 8 years ago in the capacities of Associate Professor, then Director of Doctoral Studies, General Director for Research and lately, Full Professor and Vice Dean for Research at the Graduate School of Education. He is currently a visiting fellow at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia. Dr Makoelle has written and published extensively on the topics of inclusive education and educational leadership, management, governance, and administration for both national and international audiences and readership. He is a member of several international research bodies. He is a reviewer of grants and funding applications and manuscripts for publications for the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) and several international Scopus and Web of Science journals. He is passionate about educational leadership and inclusive education with research interests in school leadership, school effectiveness and improvement and inclusive pedagogy in countries of the South and beyond. He is one of the recipients of the prestigious Nelson Mandela Scholarship to the United Kingdom (UK). He holds the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Inclusive Education from the University of Manchester, UK, and a Doctor of Education (D Ed) in Education Management and Leadership from the University of South Africa (UNISA).

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publications on Central Asia include chapters on education in the edited books, *Central Asia: Contexts for Understanding and Globalization on the Margins*, an article with Janara Baitugolova and Chynarkul S. Ryskulova in the *Forum for International Research in Education* on university professors' reactions to educational reforms in Kyrgyzstan; a solo publication in the *EAIE Forum* on the Bologna Process in Kyrgyzstan; and an article with Chris Whitsel in *Central Asian Survey* on culturally-appropriate research practices in Central Asia. Together with Mark Kretovics, she also recently published an article on the assessment of university internationalization in *New Directions in Higher Education*.

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Aida Sagintayeva is the Dean of the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. Her research interests cover a wide range of issues related to the development of the national education system, including leadership, governance and management in higher education, education policy, academic and research excellence, as well as the social responsibility of universities. Dr Sagintayeva has extensive experience in leading international research and consulting projects in the field of higher education. During her career path, she has worked in various fields of education and gained extensive professional experience. Aida started her professional career as a faculty member at Dulati Taraz State University. She

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Maganat Shegebayev is an Associate Professor and a chair of the Department of Education at KIMEP University, Kazakhstan. Dr Shegebayev has had over 25 years of teaching and administrative experience and has been distinguished with awards for academic and service achievements, including the Certificate of Honor from the Ministry of Education and Science. In his activities, Dr Shegebayev has served as a task force member to develop the national program "Intellectual Nation" for the government of Kazakhstan. He has authored and co-authored several international publications. Dr Shegebayev has also been involved in various educational and research projects across Kazakhstan and abroad. His research interests cover topics related to linguistics, language policy and planning, critical thinking, business communication, and educational management.

Peter Shon has successfully graduated with a PhD degree and is working as Communication Officer at the Central Asian Research Centre for Educational Innovation and Transformation (CARCEIT) at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan. He has been working in education for nearly two decades, both in higher education and K-12 international schools. He has worked in Asia to establish and nurture emerging international schools in Taiwan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and China. Before his time in Asia, he worked as the Assistant Director of Admissions at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he closely engaged with domestic and international student populations. His research focuses on international and comparative studies, student mobility, educational policy mobility, and globalization.

Mir Afzal Tajik is an Associate Professor and Director of Doctoral Programs at the Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education (NUGSE) in Astana, Kazakhstan. He obtained his PhD from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada and his Master of Education from the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) in Karachi, Pakistan. Before joining NUGSE in September 2016, Dr Tajik worked as an Associate Professor and held leadership positions, including Interim Dean,

Associate Dean, Head of Graduate Programs, and Director of Outreach Centres and education development programs at AKU-IED. Dr Tajik brings over 34 years of experience in both school and higher education. His teaching and research specializations include educational leadership and management, school improvement, teacher education, qualitative research, English-medium instruction (EMI) studies, and community-based education. He has co-edited a book and published several chapters and articles with Taylor and Francis, Sage, Elsevier, Oxford University Press, Lexington Books, and other publishers. He is the recipient of the Nazarbayev University Award for Academic Integrity (The Kehinde Award, 2023) and the AKU's Award for Sustained Excellence in Scholarship of Application, 2009.

Lyazat Turmukhambetova is a researcher with a focus on initial teacher education (ITE) programs and mentoring. During her doctoral study at Nazarbayev University, she explored mentoring programs during the practicum within Kazakhstani ITE, showcasing the main challenges and research opportunities within the school–university partnerships. The insights gleaned from her research contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on effective mentoring strategies within the Kazakhstani educational landscape. Along with mentoring and ITE, Lyazat is interested in the research on equal access to education. In 2018, she participated in the SOROS Kazakhstan research fellowship and studied ungraded schools and their access to resource centers in Kazakhstani rural areas. Furthermore, in recognition of her research interest in gender equality and education, Lyazat represented the United Kingdom as a delegate at the UN Women in 2023, dedicated to using innovation and technological change to promote gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment.

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Preface

This book is fascinating and significant. Fascinating because it analyses the shift from the former centralized USSR system through a process of rapid and necessary change to all levels of education systems in Central Asian countries. In doing so, the book draws upon the substantial literature on change, context, and leadership. It is significant because it adds a dimension to our understanding of these key concepts. And it is a scholarly and accessible work integrating international insights with intra-national factors.

The editors provide introductory and concluding chapters, framing a series of varied case studies focused primarily on Kazakhstan and to a lesser extent Kyrgyzstan. However, the scope also addresses similarities – as well as considerable differences – across Central Asian countries more generally.

Case study contributors have extensive but quite diverse experiences of working in international contexts. Their backgrounds are similarly diverse, from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Taiwan, and North America. A commonality is leadership roles in Central Asian countries in management, teaching and research, and policy development.

The “story” which unfolds is not simple or linear. And it is sometimes counter-intuitive, at least from an outside perspective. It is easy, and sometimes convenient, to dismiss the demise of the USSR as creating a platform for sustained, unimpeded improvement and reform of educational systems. Case studies illustrate that realities of the former system included high participation rates, at least at the school level, tuition-free education, well-qualified and respected teachers, and numerous research institutes. But then, the break-up led to partial system collapse and the removal of much funding, decreased access to (particularly rural) schooling, among other challenges and setbacks.

It becomes clear that maintenance of core attributes combined with positive and innovative development has been difficult and complex and has been achieved to varying extents in Central Asian countries. At the same time, the case studies – qualitative and quantitative – illustrate many successful initiatives which have tackled inevitable challenges in areas such as excellence/equity, coping with decentralization, and professional development. The university sector (with support from donor agencies) has had a major role.

Hence, the quality of educational leadership in Central Asia – at all levels – has been critical in responding to vacuums and imperatives post-1991. And this leadership was shaped by a rapidly changing context. Kazakhstan, for example,

has transitioned from a low to an upper-middle-income country. Indeed, the scale and rapidity of change is challenging, almost bewildering, to the outside reader.

A strength of this book is articulating the problematic nature, no matter how benign the intent, of transplanting external theories and practices to foreign contexts. In response, the various contributors identify insights and understandings which have proven to be transferable and/or adaptable. This particularly applies to the role and form of leadership as key to achieving reform, although the nature, focus and developmental stage of these reforms differ across Central Asian countries.

Hopefully the book will be read, in a Western context, not simply as an interesting discourse on a “foreign” region. Rather, courses on educational leadership and change can use this book as a way of illuminating Western assumptions, bringing the latter into high relief and critique. And it is important to note that some case studies illustrate that the developmental connection and process have by no means only been with the West. As one example, the bulk of Kazakhstani higher education students studying in another country do so in Russia (acknowledged now to be more problematic because of the Ukraine-Russia conflict), followed by China through Belt and Road.

Without doubt, this book is an invaluable resource for educational leaders in Central Asia and those wishing to understand this region. In terms of *consolidating knowledge* of systems and practices, the book is very useful. In terms of *understanding the evolution* of such practices, this book illustrates the how and why. And, in terms of *proactive insight*, the book identifies dynamics (and institutions) which are leading to improvement at all levels of the educational systems.

This book will be influential and widely read. But the pace of change, and challenges and variation in achievement within and across countries, suggests another edition will be needed before many years have passed.

Robert Baker
Former Professor and Provost
Aga Khan University

Acknowledgments

From the very realization and identification of the knowledge gap arising from the lack of credible literature on educational leadership in the post-Soviet region of Central Asia to the conceptualization, development, and successful completion of this edited volume, I, the lead editor, have had the great pleasure of working with several friends, colleagues, students, and scholars representing over nine countries around the globe. This project would not have been possible without their support, expertise, and encouragement. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deepest appreciation and gratitude to all those who have supported me, directly or indirectly, throughout this project. They generously shared their insights, research, and experiences to enrich this book and make it a comprehensive and insightful resource on educational leadership in Central Asia.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my co-editor, Professor Tsediso M. Makoelle, who triggered my motivation and pushed me to take the lead on this important project. Without his motivation, support, and trust in my abilities, I would have hesitated to embark upon this daunting task. In addition to his contributions as the co-editor, Professor Makoelle has also authored and co-authored several insightful chapters in this book.

I am immensely grateful to Aida Sagintayeva, (Dean, Graduate School of Education – GSE – at Nazarbayev University – NU), whose strong belief in the importance of research and dissemination of knowledge in the field of educational leadership in Central Asia has been a driving force behind this book. Not only did she encourage and wholeheartedly support this project, but she also contributed a chapter that added immense value and credibility to this volume.

My special thanks to all our team members – the chapter contributors, whose collective efforts and generous contributions have made this book a reality. I am truly honored to work with a team of highly accomplished scholars and leaders, as well as emerging and young scholars whose insightful research, engaging case studies, thoughtful analysis, and rich experiences have contributed significantly to the overall quality of the book. Despite their ongoing commitments and critical leadership engagements, they always ensured their timely response, willingness to review, revise, and refine their chapters, and overall professionalism that made the entire process smooth and enjoyable.

I am grateful to my university (NU) and department (GSE) for providing us with a conducive environment, institutional backing, and resources for research and scholarly pursuits. I acknowledge NU Collaborative Research Program (Grant # 021220CRP1322) and NU-FDC Grant (090118FD5307) that enabled me to visit

schools and universities across Kazakhstan and collect useful data about educational leadership and management practices. I sincerely thank the university and GSE administration, the Vice Dean for Academic Affairs, Vice Dean for Research, faculty colleagues, staff, and students who have always supported and appreciated knowledge sharing and scholarly endeavors such as this book.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my respected teacher, mentor, and friend – Professor Robert Baker – for writing the insightful “Preface” for this book. I am truly honored and most fortunate to have a friend like him. He has not only contributed to this book but to my entire education career. Thank you so much, Robert, for always supporting me and my work.

I am truly grateful to the distinguished leaders and scholars who have graciously provided their endorsements for this book. Your kind words of support and recognition have added immense credibility to our work, and we are truly honored to have endorsements from highly respected scholars and leaders from Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America.

Special thanks go to the Emerald Publishers for their invaluable technical, professional, and moral support. Their expertise, guidance, and commitment to quality have been instrumental in shaping this book into its final form. We are grateful for their collaboration and for believing in the importance of disseminating knowledge and insights about educational leadership from a relatively less-known and under-researched context of Central Asia. In conclusion, I sincerely appreciate everyone who has contributed directly or indirectly to this book. I hope this volume will serve as a valuable resource and ready reference for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and students in educational leadership and management in Central Asia, other post-Soviet states, and globally.

Mir Afzal Tajik

Part 1

Secondary School Leadership Perspectives

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Chapter 1

Leadership Context

Mir Afzal Tajik

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One of the key conclusions drawn from the policy and published work on educational leadership during the past few decades, both from developed and less developed countries, is that context shapes leadership in dramatic ways (Burak, 2018; Lytle et al., 2018). Therefore, leaders and leadership practices highly effective in one context are not so effective in another due to each context's peculiarities, complexities, and dynamism (Avolio & Bass, 1988; Bredeson et al., 2011). Despite these inevitable influences of context on leadership, educational policies and leadership scholarship often ignore the discernible intricacies of educational institutions and the voices of those working in the institutions (Lytle et al., 2018; Tajik & Wali, 2020). This is true in the context of Central Asia, where the post-Soviet independent states are going through fundamental changes in their geopolitical, socioeconomic, and cultural landscapes. Education is seen as a vehicle to achieve the political stability, economic boost, and sociocultural progress that these states aspire for. As a result, educational leaders work in the context of radical educational reforms, heightened expectations, often hidden, chaotic, real worlds of their day-to-day practices and changing leadership paradigms and roles (Frost et al., 2014; Tajik et al., 2021).

Educational leaders around the globe, particularly in developing countries, including Central Asian states, are operating in a rapidly changing context driven mainly by the nation-states' economic, social, technological, and political priorities. These rapid changes demand educational institutions to improve the quality and equity of education but with little autonomy attached to such demands (Miller, 2016). Educational institutions in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have seen new geneses of changes and educational reforms since their independence in the 1990s. According to Silova and Niyozov (2020), most of the post-Soviet states in Central Asia have initiated radical educational reforms by adopting Western education values such as students-centered learning, updated curriculum, formative assessment, decentralized governance and management, and internationalization of higher education through alignment with Bologna process and other international standards.

The OECD reports of 2014 and 2008 indicate that the rapid technological change, economic globalization, and increased migration and mobility have led the Central Asian states to reform their education systems. For example, in Kazakhstan, the Autonomous Education Organization (AEO) Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) was established in 2008, aiming to become an experimental platform that develops educational programs, conducts monitoring, research, analysis, approbations, implementation, and realization of contemporary models of educational programs on primary, secondary, and high schools (NIS, n.d.; Yakavets et al., 2017). NIS AEO is a network of 21 schools assigned as “pathfinders” or “flagships,” whose experience – including its curriculum – is being transferred to the mainstream school system (NIS, n.d.). In addition, Kazakhstan has also adopted a trilingual education policy – the trinity of Kazakh, Russian, and English languages (Mehisto et al., 2014), inclusive education, STEM education, a new curriculum, and assessment reform. At the higher education level, the establishment of Nazarbayev University (NU) is a significant milestone in the government’s commitment to reforming the country’s higher education. Similar reforms have been initiated at all levels of education in other Central Asian states.

These radical changes in school and higher education have transformed the role of educational leaders, who now need to lead changes beyond their individual institutions to contribute to the success of the entire education system (OECD, 2008). As a result, there is an increasing demand for these leaders to redefine their roles and responsibilities in order to work beyond managing the day-to-day routines of their institutions (Stewart, 2013; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wallace Foundation, 2011). The need to redefine and revisit educational leadership is not unique to Central Asia. The leadership literature originating mainly from the Western context provides valuable insights into how the concept of leadership has been defined, redefined, and debated over time. For over a century, many different theories, approaches, and models have been developed, mainly in the Western world, to understand the concept and practices of leadership in educational institutions. In their review of leadership literature, Bush and Glover (2003) found “more than 350 definitions of leadership but no clear and unequivocal understanding as to what distinguishes leaders from non-leaders” (Bush & Glover, 2003, p. 4). Other researchers have discussed various theories and typologies of leadership that have evolved over time (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Bush, 1995; Oberlechner & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2002). It may be helpful to refresh our memory and understanding of some of these theories and typologies in order to connect them to contemporary leadership practices. For example, the “great man or great person” theory assumes that great leaders are born, and only certain people born with a heroic nature and charismatic qualities are predestined to become great leaders (Galton, 1869). The “trait theory” reckons certain people have innate qualities such as intelligence, ambition, and perseverance that make them different. People with such traits and qualities are best suited to leadership (James, 1880, cited in Oberlechner & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2002). The “behavioral” theory argues that great leaders are not necessarily born but developed through training, experience, and environment that develop in them the behaviors

and skills required to become great leaders (Fiedler, 1967). The “situational” and “contingency” theories have a common assumption that neither one leader nor one leadership approach is appropriate in all circumstances and situations. For a leader to be successful, there must be a match between the demands of the situation/context and the knowledge and skills of the leader (Oberlechner & Mayer-Schoenberger, 2002). The “participatory” theory assumes that leaders, however capable and knowledgeable they might be, cannot succeed individually. For them to become successful leaders, they must consider the inputs and contributions of all other people in their organizations (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). The rebirth of this theory can be seen in the more recent accounts of democratic and distributed leadership (Harris, 2008). The “transaction” or “management” theory places leadership on a system of reward and punishment (Cherry, 2012). The leader’s job is to first communicate tasks and expectations clearly to the members of the organization and then reward those who succeed and reprimand those who fail (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). The last one is the “transformational” or “relationship” theory which assumes that effective leaders build collegial relationships, trust, and empathy among team members and enhance their performance through intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and inspirational motivation (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Since then, there have been many more leadership models that reflect the development of management, administration, and leadership studies, such as ethical and moral leadership models (Bao & Li, 2019; Fullan, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1992), feminist models (Thurber & Zimmerman, 2014), cross-cultural leadership models (Snaebjornsson et al., 2015), and toxic models (Saleem et al., 2021), to name a few. Ethical, moral, and authentic leadership recognizes values, decisions, and actions that are authentic, socially responsible, and justified on moral and ethical grounds (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bush & Glover, 2014). These leadership models stress transparency, integrity, accountability, and creating a culture of mutual trust and respect in schools (Starratt, 2007). The feminist model emphasizes the importance of gender equality and women’s empowerment to create an inclusive and equitable school environment (Thurber & Zimmerman, 2014). Similarly, the cross-cultural model recognizes and values diversity and pluralism to promote shared understanding, respect, and appreciation for different cultures, beliefs, and values in educational institutions (Snaebjornsson et al., 2015). On the other hand, the toxic leadership model involves fear, intimidation, manipulation, and control to maintain order and discipline in the workplace. This kind of leadership often leads to high turnover, low motivation and morale, and poor performance (Saleem et al., 2021).

The diversity of leadership models reflects the complexity and multifaceted nature of leadership, which no single model can fully embody. Each model is based on a philosophical position guiding its purpose, focus, characteristics, and enactment. Therefore, a leadership model might work in a particular context but fail to yield the desired results in another context due to its limitations and inherent biases (Bush & Glover, 2014). These theories are helpful to understand and make a distinction between different approaches to leadership. However, leaders in developing countries often struggle to understand these rather abstract

theories and relate them to their contexts (Singh, 2010). Most leaders in developing countries, including Central Asia, could not situate their leadership approaches within the wider leadership theories that originated in the West (Khaki et al., 2023). The main difficulty faced by these leaders is what Harrison calls “epistemic imperialism” (2015), in which Western leadership theories and models are imposed on these leaders without cross-cultural validity and link to practice in the local context (Snaebjornsson et al., 2015). The imposition of Western ideas and theories is problematic as leaders in developing countries cannot comprehend and clearly link these theories to how leadership is defined, understood, and approached in their local contexts. Thus, this volume is an attempt to bring together the voices, views, experiences, and reflections of educational leaders from Central Asian states about the way they conceptualize, understand, and enact their leadership roles. Before we discuss more about this volume and its purpose and content, it is critically important to discuss why leadership matters.

The importance of educational leadership role in improving the quality and equity of education and making state education reforms successful has been emphasized in many studies, both from the more developed and developing countries (Gunter, 2016; Huggins et al., 2017; Khaki et al., 2023; Miller, 2016; OECD, 2014; Stewart, 2013; Stone-Johnson, 2014; Wallace Foundation, 2011). Discussing the significance of leadership, Leithwood and Seashore-Louise (2012) argue, “To date, we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (p. 3). This argument is supported by Miller (2012), who asserts, “. . .If sound leadership at the policy level is a seed of development, then sound leadership of educational institutions and at the classroom level is arguably a flower of development” (p. 9). The national-level education policies are to be implemented at the school level. The principal’s role is crucial in communicating the policy to school staff and ensuring its successful implementation (Grace, 1995). However, in most cases, school and university leadership is not involved in the national-level education policymaking process though they are told to implement policies (Ball et al., 2011; Bowe et al., 1992; Jennings, 1977). The increasing pressure put on educational institutions for continuous improvement has both intensified and fostered the importance of the leadership role in educational institutions (Huggins et al., 2017).

Emphasizing the role of school directors in Kazakhstan, Frost et al. (2014) have identified the need for starting a robust discussion on the role and responsibilities of school directors in Kazakhstan and extending to them the level of autonomy they need to play a significant role in taking education reforms to the next level. Other researchers have suggested the role and responsibilities that educational/school leaders must perform in times of radical changes in the education landscape. These include (but are not limited to) creating the conditions and culture necessary for promoting professional learning communities in their institutions (Dufour, 2002); becoming lead learners themselves and setting the tone for teachers, students, and other staff members to continue to learn best practices to meet the needs of all students (Eckman, 2006); making informed

decisions for system improvement; and more importantly having a full grasp of the nature and purpose of the state education reforms (Lambert, 1998; Smith & Andrews, 1989).

King (2002) also argues that educational/school leaders are expected to play multiple roles in achieving the goals and targets set by the state education reforms and responding to the constantly changing environment but with insufficient autonomy and resources. Other studies claim that schools and universities do not work in isolation of the state as “the state has certain outcomes it wants schools [educational institutions] to achieve and also has certain preferred ways it wants these schools [educational institutions] to operate” (Miller, 2016, p. 98). Thus, the state’s intervention in setting parameters and conditions for how educational institutions should operate has implications for the leadership role, particularly in developing countries including Central Asia, and more specifically, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where the governments, policymakers, and education authorities are keen to modernize the education system they inherited from the Soviet era.

The current volume, therefore, is an attempt to redefine the role of educational leadership at school, district, and higher education institutions (HEIs) in times of radical educational reforms in the post-Soviet independent states of Central Asia, specifically Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The purpose of the book is to provide readers with a research-based comprehensive account of how educational leaders conceptualize their leadership roles, the way their leadership roles have evolved over the three decades of independence, how and what they are learning from changing contexts of their work, the complexities and challenges they face, and how they respond to those in the post-Soviet Central Asia. As a pioneering work in this region, the book provides policymakers, researchers, and practitioners with a reservoir of knowledge and insights to draw from while reviewing and revisiting leadership policies and practices in the climate of radical reforms and heightened expectations from these leaders. It is a welcome addition to the existing literature on educational leadership in this region, where there are not many studies on this critically important topic.

The editors and authors of the chapters in this volume represent nine different countries, including Canada, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, South Africa, Taiwan, and the United States. The common factor that brought them together to embark upon this project is their rich experiences of teaching, research, and academic and administrative leadership work in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, they have sound backgrounds and an in-depth understanding of the geopolitical, sociocultural, and educational policy context. The 13 chapters in this volume contribute to a broad range of concepts, models, and practices within the scope of the educational leadership domain, both from secondary school and higher education leadership perspectives. These chapters are organized and presented in two parts: (i) secondary school leadership perspectives and (ii) higher education leadership perspectives. The key themes discussed in the first part of this volume include the historical evolution and reconceptualization of educational leadership, the metamorphosis of the concept of school leadership, school reforms and leadership, teacher leadership as a new phenomenon, leadership and culture, leadership

toward equity in education, and the myths and realities of leaders as planners in the context of secondary schools. The chapters in the second part of the volume cover such themes as defining and contextualizing higher education leadership in Central Asia, the role of leadership in navigating changes in HEIs, implications of recent reforms and policy initiatives for leadership, policy gaps and issues with university leadership, and critical lessons learned and a way forward for educational leadership in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Chapter 2 by Mir A. Tajik and Rauan Yesselbayev describes the concept of school leadership as it was understood and practiced during the Soviet time. It discusses how the notions and practices of school leaders have evolved and are being redefined and reconceptualized in post-Soviet independent Kazakhstan. The chapter analyzes the new rules for appointing school principals, the socio-cultural factors that affect the selection process, the leadership style and practices of school principals, and the challenges faced by school principals in urban and rural schools. The authors argue that educational leaders, including school principals, work in the context of radical educational reforms, heightened expectations, often hidden chaotic, real worlds of their day-to-day practices, and changing leadership paradigms and roles. Consequently, there is an increasing demand for these leaders to redefine their roles and responsibilities to be able to work beyond managing the day-to-day routines of institutions (Ischinger, 2014). However, there is very little autonomy and support available to these leaders, particularly at the school level. By discussing these challenges, this chapter makes an engaging read for secondary school leaders, researchers, scholars, policy-makers, teachers, and leadership students.

Chapter 3 by Tsediso Makoelle provides a comprehensive account of the metamorphosis of the concept of educational leadership and how the various reforms brought to schools have influenced its application and understanding in an evolving and transforming secondary school leadership context in Kazakhstan. This is done by providing an overview of the conceptualization of the notion of school leadership, then discussing the attributes of school leadership in a Kazakhstani context and its challenges. The author argues that although the conceptualization of school leadership is context-dependent, some elements of it are shared across different countries. It is clear from this chapter that two opposing views of school leadership, i.e., the bureaucratic and centralized school leadership and the decentralized and distributive school leadership, coexist in Kazakhstani schools. This indicates that school leaders are gradually moving toward more decentralized and distributive school leadership practices. Some lessons are drawn from the process of implementing educational reforms and the evolving notions of school leadership and practices within the transforming post-Soviet Kazakhstani secondary education landscape. This chapter makes a valuable read for teachers, scholars, education leaders, and policymakers.

Lyazat Gapbassova and Tsediso Makoelle, in Chapter 4, provide an overview of the policy shifts and some of the major reforms introduced in Kazakhstani schools between 1991 and 2000 (the decade of policy borrowing and adopting international best practices), 2001 and 2010 (the decade of policy implementation or policy dumping), and 2011 to date (the period of scaling up major reforms).