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***Bilingualism of Students in Kazakhstan as a Challenge
for Inclusive Education***
***Dwujęzyczność uczniów w Kazachstanie jako wyzwanie
dla edukacji włączającej***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The objective of this article is to present the issue of Kazakh-Russian bilingualism as it relates to inclusive education in Kazakhstan. The study aims to gain insight into parents' perspectives on bilingualism and its role in their children's development.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: Bilingualism in Kazakhstan is a significant challenge for the education system, particularly as the country undergoes a process of linguistic derussification. The main research question is: How do parents in Kazakhstan perceive the bilingual environment in which their children are developing? The study was conducted with Kazakh parents (N = 107) using a bilingual online survey.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The theoretical section describes the linguistic situation in Kazakhstan and the changes that have taken place in this context. Bilingualism has been described as a unique factor that can either enrich or impoverish a child's development. The study compares students' low reading scores (PISA) with potential difficulties resulting from bilingualism. The empirical section presents the findings from the research.

RESEARCH RESULTS: Parents reported that their children speak primarily Kazakh (49.5%), followed by Russian (35.5%), and both languages (14%). Most children (73.8%) are surrounded mainly by the Kazakh language at home and at school. A significant majority of parents (90.7%)

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want their children to speak English in the future. For most parents, bilingualism is seen as a positive phenomenon; however, a small percentage (9.3%) view it as a potential threat to their children's development.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: The findings of this study can be used to inform further research on the developmental and social effects of bilingualism in Kazakhstan. They can also help educate teachers about the diverse needs of multilingual students, both in Kazakhstan and beyond.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **BILINGUALISM IN PSYCHOLINGUISTICS, KAZAKH-RUSSIAN BILINGUALISM, PISA, INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN**

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie problemu dwujęzyczności kazachsko-rosyjskiej jako kontekstu edukacji włączającej w Kazachstanie. Cel badań to poznanie perspektywy rodziców w spojrzeniu na zjawisko dwujęzyczności jako czynnik rozwoju ich dzieci.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Dwujęzyczność Kazachstanu stanowi wyzwanie dla systemu edukacji. Kraj przechodzi proces derusyfikacji językowej. Główny problem badawczy: Jak rodzice dzieci w Kazachstanie postrzegają dwujęzyczność, w jakiej rozwijają się ich dzieci? Podjęto badania wśród kazachskich rodziców (N = 107) z wykorzystaniem dwujęzycznej ankiety internetowej.

PROCES WYWODU: Część teoretyczna opisuje sytuację językową Kazachstanu i przemiany, które zaszły w tym zakresie. Opisano dwujęzyczność jako specyficzną sytuację wpływającą wzbo- gacająco lub zubożająco na rozwój dziecka. Zestawiono niskie wyniki uczniów w czytaniu (PISA) z możliwymi z utrudnieniami wynikającymi z dwujęzyczności. W części empirycznej zaprezentowano wyniki badań własnych.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Rodzice wskazują, że dzieci posługują się głównie językiem kazachskim (49,5%), rzadziej rosyjskim (35,5%) czy obydwojoma (14%). Większość dzieci (73,8%) otoczona jest głównie kazachskim i w domu, i w szkole. Najwięcej rodziców (90,7%) chciałoby, by ich dzieci w przyszłości mówiły po angielsku. Dla większości z nich dwujęzyczność jest zjawiskiem pozytywnym; tylko niektórzy widzą w niej zagrożenie dla rozwoju (9,3%).

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Badania można wykorzystać w projektowaniu dalszych badań nad rozwojowymi i społecznymi skutkami dwujęzyczności w Kazachstanie, ale też w kształceniu nauczycieli w zakresie zróżnicowanych potrzeb uczniów wielojęzycznych nie tylko w tym kraju.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **DWUJĘZYCZNOŚĆ W PSYCHOLINGWISTYCE, DWUJĘZYCZNOŚĆ KAZACHSKO-ROSYJSKA, PISA, EDUKACJA WŁĄCZAJĄCA, EDUKACJA W KAZACHSTANIE**

Introduction

The education system in Kazakhstan views inclusive education as a key opportunity for national development. Since proclaiming its independence in 1991 – the last of the former Soviet republics to do so – Kazakhstan has emerged as the ninth-largest country in the world. It is a young and rapidly developing nation with ambitious goals, also in the fields of education and science. Kazakhstan is closely following global trends in the education of students with diverse needs, including those seen in Europe. However, Kazakhstan began this journey from a markedly different starting point than most European countries. The nation faced significant post-Soviet deficiencies in providing education for people with disabilities (Human Rights Watch, 2019a, 2019b). Nevertheless, as early as 2007, Kazakhstan included the right to inclusive education in its education law. This commitment was further solidified in 2015 with the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

According to the law, inclusive education in Kazakhstan

[...] can be realized through the implementation of a personalized pedagogical approach intended to include persons with special education needs, such as children with disabilities, migrants and refugees, oralmans (ethnic Kazakh returnees), national minorities and children in vulnerable social situations (UNESCO, 2021).

Diversity comes in different guises across different countries. This article seeks to raise awareness of the situation of bilingual children. Although the cited definition of inclusive education does not explicitly mention bilingual children, the authors aim to bring attention to the potential developmental and educational challenges faced by this group.

The Linguistic Landscape in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic nation, home to over 130 distinct national groups, which makes linguistic and intercultural challenges a constant presence. Despite Kazakhs comprising about 70.4% of the population and Russians 15.5%, Russian is spoken by around 70% of the population, while Kazakh is spoken by more than 92%, according to the 2021 census (National census..., n.d.). Additionally, 44.9% of the population (aged 5 and over) speaks two languages, 28.6% speak three, 1.7% speak four, 0.2% speak five, and 0.1% speak as many as six. However, the census does not specify whether this multilingualism pertains to daily communication or academic proficiency.

In Kazakhstan's multicultural society, Russian has historically served as the *lingua franca*, uniting people of different nationalities, cultures, and religions. Today, Kazakh holds the status of the state language. Its resurgence not only fosters the development of national identity but also symbolizes the nation's independence, unity, and consolidation. While Kazakh is the official language, Russian remains widely spoken, and the state

actively supports the learning and development of all the languages spoken by the peoples of Kazakhstan (*Constitution...*, n.d.). According to the Law “On Languages in the Republic of Kazakhstan” (O yazykakh..., 1997), every citizen has the right to use their mother tongue and to freely choose the language of communication, education, training, and personal development.

Bilingualism in the Light of Psycholinguistic Theories: Opportunities and Challenges

While the concept of bilingualism is commonly understood, its meanings can vary significantly. Bilingualism involves not just the ability to communicate in two languages, but also encompasses psycholinguistic criteria related to the order in which languages are processed in the mind and the degree of fluency in each (Kurcz, 2007).

Psycholinguistics identifies two distinct language systems: L1, the primary or mother tongue, and L2, the second language, acquired later (Haman et al., 2017). Differentiating between L1 and L2 can be difficult, especially in cases of simultaneous bilingualism. However, a person typically establishes their foundational linguistic framework in the mother tongue, the language acquired first and associated with the homeland, or the country in which a child is raised. The term “heritage language” refers to a language used at home or within a community that may not be the dominant language in the broader society but still holds cultural significance (Rothman, 2009). The linguistic landscape becomes even more complex in countries where multiple languages coexist due to cultural, historical, or political factors.

Even from this initial overview, it is clear that language acquisition can occur in various combinations. Research on migrant children highlights the complexity of these situations and their impact on child development (Haman et al., 2017). Typically, the mother tongue (L1) is acquired with high proficiency, often considered native-level. Proficiency in a second language (L2) can vary, with high proficiency sometimes referred to as near-native (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008). Lower levels of proficiency are characterized as non-native but fluent, with further levels indicating decreasing proficiency. Bilingualism is generally recognized only when a person achieves a level of fluency that allows effective use of both languages.

In studies of early bilingualism among Polish children in migrant families, bilingual children often scored lower than monolingual peers in several aspects of L1 development (Haman et al., 2017). Researchers have identified a risk of incomplete L1 acquisition when exposure to the language is limited before proficiency is fully developed. Additionally, multilingual environments can sometimes lead to language interference, which can potentially result in uneven language development in both languages. This situation is referred to as subtractive bilingualism (or submersion), as opposed to the additive bilingualism (immersion) that is usually expected (Kurcz, 2007). While the impact may be subtle during early development, it can eventually contribute to functional illiteracy.

Thus, while bilingualism can be a considerable developmental asset and a growth opportunity for linguistically gifted children, it can also present challenges for children with special needs and may even contribute to the emergence of such needs. Consequently, bilingualism should remain a focus of inclusive education.

Accommodating Bilingualism in the Education System and Its Impact on Educational Outcomes

Currently, Kazakhstan has 6,909 public schools, with over half (54%), or 3,743 schools, offering instruction in Kazakh, 1,055 in Russian, 5 in Uyghur, and 2,106 with mixed languages. Despite the larger number of Kazakh-speaking students, half of the resources in school libraries are in Russian. Educational institutions widely utilize electronic platforms such as BilimLand.kz, Kundelik.kz, and Daryn.online.kz, which provide digital educational content in both Kazakh and Russian across all school subjects. Schools are annually provided with textbooks and educational materials, including those in Kazakh, as part of a planned policy to strengthen the Kazakh language as the national language. In recent years, there has been a substantial rise in the number of students speaking the Kazakh language. The country now has 119 universities, all offering instruction in both Kazakh and Russian. Currently, nearly three-quarters of students study in Kazakh, compared to just 35% a decade ago when the majority of students were Russian-speaking (Nurullin, 2023). Although Kazakh is the official language, for a long time, it was effectively secondary to Russian in the country. While Russian no longer holds official status, it remains widely spoken. Paradoxically, many native Kazakhs still have limited proficiency in their national language, which poses significant challenges in education. In 2018, a decree mandated the complete transition to Kazakh as the language of instruction in schools, accelerating the process of derussification in education. Previously, about 25% of schools used Russian as the language of instruction (Kurmanowa, 2009). In 2022, Russian was removed from the curriculum in early grades and shifted to later grades as a foreign language, similar to English. Since 2023, Kazakh has been the language of instruction in all schools. Additionally, in 2017, the country began transitioning from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, a move expected to elevate the status of the Kazakh language and increase Kazakhstan's global engagement.

Do these measures truly ensure equal educational opportunities for students in different language contexts? Or could they be masking an educational barrier? To date, no research has been conducted on this issue, so it is important to examine the learning outcomes of students. Since 2009, Kazakhstan has participated in the international PISA survey. Table 1 summarizes the results from 2009 to 2022, revealing a gradual improvement in outcomes with a notable decline in 2018 (Nurbaev, 2020; Bocharova, 2022). This drop has been partly attributed to overrepresentation of students from Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools in the 2015 sample, who achieved exceptionally high scores. Another contributing factor was the younger age of many Kazakh students surveyed (many start

school at age six) and the introduction of computer-based assessments, which were new to Kazakh students. A remediation plan was implemented, yielding initial results in 2022 (Table 1), though substantial improvements are not expected for another 7–8 years.

Table 1. PISA Results of Kazakhstani Students from 2009 to 2022

Subject Area	2009	2012	2015	2018	2022
Mathematics	405	432	460	423	425
Science	400	425	456	397	423
Reading	390	393	427	387	386

Source: OECD, 2023.

Reading has consistently been the lowest-rated skill across all grades and years. Unfortunately, only about 40% of Kazakh students in 2018 and 2022 reached Level 2 or above in reading, compared to the OECD average of 78%. These scores suggest that most 15-year-olds struggle with text analysis and comprehension (Nurbaev, 2020; Bocharova, 2022; OECD, 2023). Unfortunately, existing studies on the causes these outcomes do not fully consider the unique bilingual context of the country or the challenges many students face during language transition. While multilingualism could be an asset for Kazakh students, there is a need for deeper research into whether bilingualism enriches or hinders their development. Currently, the link between reading difficulties and bilingualism is only hypothetical. To gain preliminary insights into this issue, we conducted a survey of parents to understand their perspectives on bilingualism as a factor influencing their children's development.

Method

Bilingualism is often seen as highly desirable: the ability to speak two languages is generally perceived as more advantageous than knowing just one. It opens up greater opportunities for communication, education, and employment. Few people, aside from specialists, recognize any potential drawbacks. However, bilingualism can sometimes necessitate additional support for children. The authors of this study hypothesized that examining parents' perspectives could clarify the potential link between perceived reading difficulties among Kazakh students and bilingualism, which may negatively impact their learning process.

The primary research question was: How do parents in Kazakhstan perceive the bilingual environment in which their children are being raised? To address this question, a diagnostic survey was conducted using an original, anonymous questionnaire designed for parents. The survey included 12 open-ended questions covering topics such as: the language spoken by the child; the language spoken by those closest to the child (at home, in school/preschool); the language used during interactions with peers and media; the choice of school based on language; and expectations regarding the child's

future language learning. One open-ended question asked parents to explain their rationale for choosing a school with instruction in a specific language. Parents of children who were already able to read were also asked to assess their child's reading proficiency in both Russian and Kazakh. Additional questions inquired about the child's age and any special educational needs.

This survey, conducted in both Kazakh and Russian, serves as a pilot study before further research. It was available through the Forms application from November 15 to December 12, 2023, and parents were invited to participate by teachers from several schools in Uralsk (Oral), located in western Kazakhstan. A total of 107 parents responded, representing children in the following age groups: 3–5 years (18 respondents, 16.8%); 6–9 years (31 respondents, 29%); 10–14 years (32 respondents, 29.9%); and 15–18 years (26 respondents, 24.3%). Regarding developmental concerns, 56.1% of parents reported no issues, while 30% noted visual impairments, 9.3% reported speech disorders, and some indicated mental disorders (4 children), motor disabilities (2 children), hearing impairments (1 child), or autism (1 child).

Results

When asked, "What language does your child speak?" 49.2% of respondents answered Kazakh, 41% said both Kazakh and Russian, 8.2% said Russian, and 1.6% said English. In response to the question, "What language do speak with your child at home?" 80.3% of respondents said Kazakh, 11.5% said both Kazakh and Russian, and 8.2% said Russian. When asked, "What language does your child speak in kindergarten among friends?" 59% of parents responded Kazakh, 27.9% both Kazakh and Russian, and 13.1% Russian. We would like to highlight the significant differences in the responses to these initial questions.

The next question addressed the language of programs on TV or the Internet (movies and cartoons) that the child watches. Half of the respondents (50.8%) reported that their children watch such programs in both Kazakh and Russian, 29.5% in Russian, 16.4% in Kazakh, and only 3.3% in English. When asked about the language in which their child communicates with peers, the vast majority (75.4%) selected Kazakh, 18% selected Russian, and 6.6% selected both Kazakh and Russian. Additionally, most parents (72.1%) indicated that they would like to send their child to a class where Kazakh is the language of instruction, 21.3% preferred both Kazakh and Russian, and 6.6% preferred Russian.

When asked why they want to send their child to a class taught in Kazakh, respondents most frequently answered that they want their children to know their native language, often citing their national identity as the reason. Typical responses included:

- "Because we are a Kazakh family, and we speak Kazakh at home."
- "Kazakh mentality, education, and tradition. I respect the language of our people."
- "Because I am Kazakh, my child must speak Kazakh and know the language. We must preserve the language of our nation, understand its history, and pass it on as

a heritage to the next generation. We should learn other languages but respect our own! Let the Kazakh language express our heritage!"

- "In Kazakhstan, we should speak the traditional Kazakh language."

Respondents also provided developmental and educational reasons:

- "It will help him deeply understand his language."
- "A child should be primarily educated and raised in their native language. Other languages can be learned at any stage of life."
- "To excel in reading in class."
- "There is nothing better for language development than education in the native language."

One parent expressed regret: "I wish my son had been taught in his native language."

Another reason for choosing Kazakh was related to the child's future career: "I think it will be difficult for him to work in the future if he doesn't know Kazakh, because all the documentation is in the official language."

Arguments in favor of Russian focused on the benefits of bilingualism, such as:

- "To have more opportunities in life."
- "Being bilingual is so convenient."

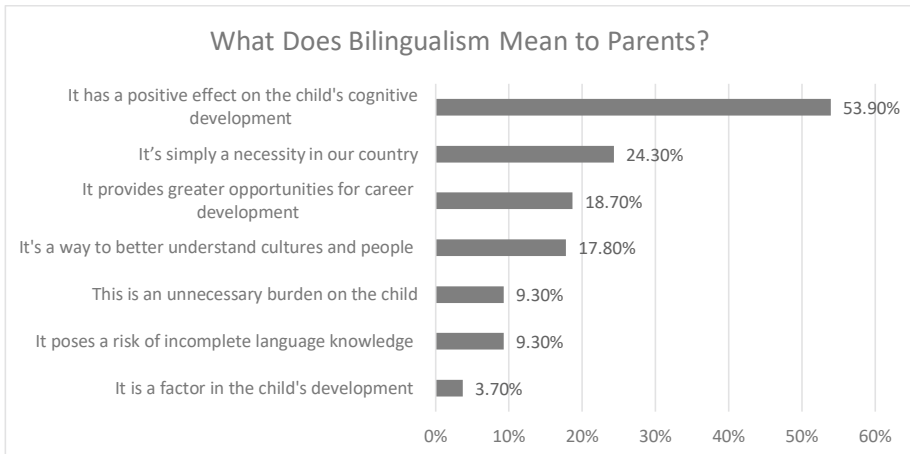
Other reasons included personal preferences, like:

- "The child is interested in the language."

Additionally, some respondents pointed out that Kazakh is not spoken in many Russian-speaking families.

A key question in the study explored how parents perceive their children's bilingualism (Figure 1).

Figure 1. What Does Bilingualism Mean to Parents? (N = 107, Average Number of Selections: 1.42)

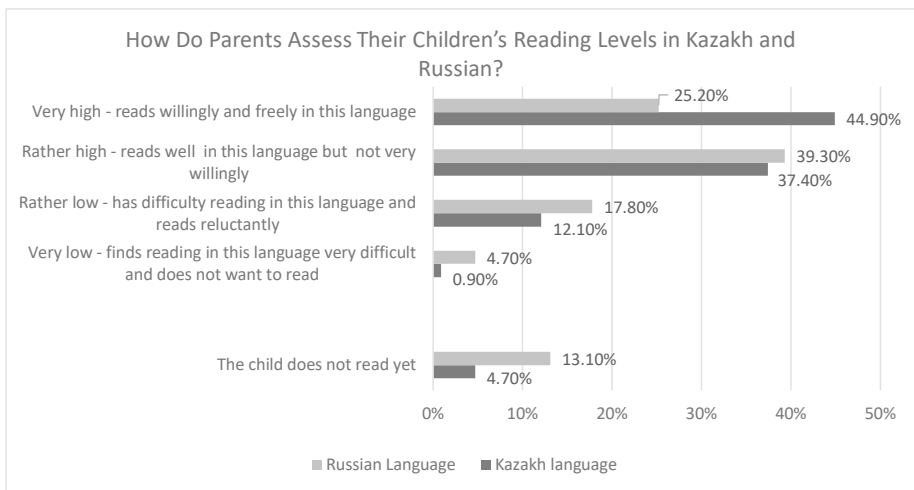


Own source.

Parents predominantly see bilingualism as a positive influence: 53.9% believe that it positively influences cognitive development, with an additional 3.7% noting it benefits overall child development. Moreover, 18.7% associate bilingualism with greater career opportunities, while 17.8% link it to better understanding of cultures and people. For one-quarter of parents, bilingualism is simply a necessity in a country like Kazakhstan. Only 9.3% consider bilingualism an unnecessary burden for their child, and the same percentage views it as a risk for incomplete language proficiency.

The next set of questions focused on assessing children's reading proficiency in both languages (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Parents' Assessment of Their Children's Reading Proficiency in Kazakh and Russian (N = 107)



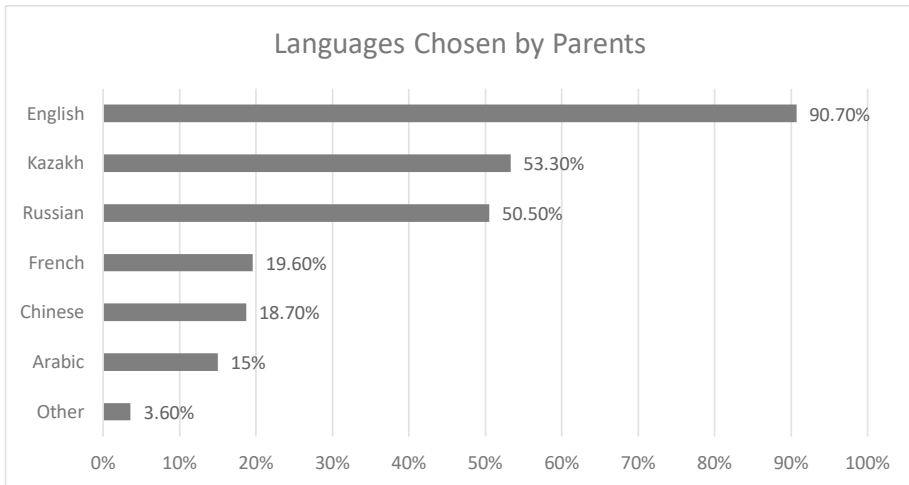
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When evaluating their children's reading skills in Kazakh, parents predominantly rated them as very high (44.9%) and rather high (37.4%), totaling an impressive 82.3%. In comparison, reading proficiency in Russian received slightly lower, yet still substantial, high ratings: 25.2% very high and 39.3% rather high, totaling 64.5%. Reading with reluctance and/or difficulty was reported for 22.5% of children in Russian and 13% in Kazakh (Figure 3).

The survey also explored parents' expectations regarding the languages their children will speak in the future (Figure 3). Interestingly, the percentage of parents who anticipate proficiency in Kazakh and Russian is marginally higher than their assessment of their children's current language skills. This discrepancy may suggest that the number of Kazakh selections might be underreported compared to earlier responses, possibly due to some parents interpreting the question as referring to additional languages beyond

the current ones. On average, parents made 2.5 selections, indicating that most desire their children to be fluent in two or three languages.

Figure 3. Parents' Expectations About Which Languages Their Child Will Speak in the Future (N = 107, Average Number of Selection 2.5).



Own source.

Despite the recent political changes, Russian remains a valued choice, with 50.5% of parents recognizing its utility, even as there is a growing emphasis on cultivating the Kazakh language. However, English is the clear favorite, with 90.7% of parents wanting their children to learn it. English is seen as a language of opportunity, career advancement, and global connection, as well as a counterbalance to Russian cultural influence. Although the small sample size limits the generalizability of the study, the findings suggest that parents envision not just bilingualism, but trilingualism for their children, despite the current level of English proficiency among children being relatively low.

Discussion

The findings show a complex picture of the language status of the students as described by their parents. Although the vast majority, some 73.8%, of the children surveyed encounter Kazakh as the language used at home and the primary language in school, only about half (49.2%) speak exclusively Kazakh. A slightly smaller percentage of children are bilingual, with proficiency in both Kazakh and Russian, likely influenced by the Russian language exposure at home before the national language gained wider use.

The type of media that children consume also plays an important role. According to the parents, Russian media (29.5%) is more appealing to children than Kazakh media (16.4%), with about half of the children using both. This likely exposes more children to the Russian language beyond what they encounter at home or school. Only a small percentage of children (1.6%) use English-language programs and media, which contrasts sharply with the aspirations of their parents – 90.7% of whom expect their children to be proficient in English in the future.

Parents generally rate their children's reading abilities in both languages highly, though these assessments may be inflated in light of the PISA results (Nurbaev, 2020; OECD, 2023). Without better benchmarks, parents might be overestimating their children's capabilities. Furthermore, the proportion of children who read reluctantly and/or with pronounced difficulties (around 13% in Kazakh and 22.5% in Russian) is considerable, so it is worth investigating the underlying causes (only half of these children have diagnosed special educational needs). Bilingualism is not thought of as a potential risk by most parents; only 9.3% consider it a concern, while the majority view it as purely beneficial.

Conclusions

Parents in Kazakhstan generally perceive bilingualism as a positive factor in their children's development, with overwhelming majority considering it to be beneficial in its own. However, while proficiency in multiple languages is undoubtedly a valuable asset, bilingualism can also pose challenges for some children's development and potentially lead to insufficient achievement in both languages. The OECD PISA findings show that many Kazakh students have difficulties in reading, which suggests that the issue may have deeper roots than previously believed. Education in a multilingual country requires a carefully crafted strategy that addresses not only cultural and political aspects but also psycholinguistic factors. There is also a need for a system that diagnoses and supports students for whom bilingualism may be hindering development, as well as those with linguistic talents who clearly benefit from learning multiple languages. These are also tasks of inclusive education.

The scope the study was insufficient to establish a direct link between low reading scores and difficulties arising from bilingualism. However, it would be beneficial to systematically monitor students' proficiency in both languages, along with an objective assessment of their reading performance, to better understand the magnitude of this problem. This should be treated as a hypothesis requiring further investigation, particularly in the context of identifying factors that can improve the language and reading competencies of Kazakhstani students.

These students face another daunting challenge: the transition from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. While this change is important and justified for the country, it may further complicate the linguistic and reading experiences of Kazakh- and Russian-speaking

students, as well as those of their parents, who were “raised on Cyrillic.” This transition requires the careful attention of teachers and the entire educational system in Kazakhstan as they develop an inclusive education model that acknowledges the complexities of bilingualism.

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