

Notes on the round table held in Atyrau on 20th April 2016

This session was kindly hosted by school #3 at the request of the Atyrau City educational authority.

Those present:

11 stakeholders from the region including: school principals, school psychologists, curators, and two representatives of one NGO. Dr Carole Faucher and Dr Anna CohenMiller from the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University (NUGSE), Dr Eva Brown Hajdukova of the Faculty of Education at University of Cambridge (FoEUCam) conducted the session. Arailym Soltanbekova and Laura Karabassova, PhD students from Nazarbayev University also attended and provided translation.

Introduction and presentation:

The meeting started with Dr Carole Faucher (NUGSE) thanking the participants for coming and provided a short explanation of the purpose of the round table as an opportunity for discussion and networking. It was noted that it could also be used as a venue to exchange on issues and concerns specifically relevant to the wellbeing of students from Atyrau region. This was followed by a short PowerPoint presentation of the research process and findings to date by Dr Eva Brown Hajdukova (FoEUCam) along with details of the funding organisations.

Participants' questions pertaining to the presentation:

Question: Are there differences across the country, for example between urban and rural areas in terms of problems and of mentality?

Response: It varies according to the school and the particular Oblast. For example, in the Atyrau and Oskemen regions, health and wellbeing can be linked to pollution. There are also some differences between Urban and Rural areas in aspects relating to competition for best results. In rural areas there seem to be a sense of lagging behind due to the lack of opportunities and hope for the future. However, the community cohesion and support seem stronger in rural areas. The last version of the survey included questions relating to who had the strongest influence on students' choices.

Question: What is the main aim of this research project? For whom is the instrument for?

Response: There are multiple aims to the project. The first one is to support school psychologists with new culturally and locally appropriate instruments. The project also aims to help develop awareness of the role of the school psychologist across Kazakhstan and to the need for a school psychologists association. We have noticed a relatively low understanding of the school psychologists' role. School psychologists devoted a lot of time to paperwork and to the administering of surveys that are not adapted locally and are difficult to analyze. They do not have enough time to help the students. We have noticed in certain schools a very low understanding of the role of the psychologist and fear from students to be stigmatized if they seek emotional or psychological support. That understanding varies widely among the different types of school. The 'student voice' is also very important. Within the research we have to grasp what is important to them and from their own perspective. During the last phase of the project

we intend to find venues and ways to disseminate the findings of our research in the Kazakh language.

Comments from the participants:

One vice-principal acknowledged that the topic was very important. She pointed out that there was a great discrepancy among schools in terms of existing conditions to foster wellbeing among students.

Question to participants:

What are the most important factors that are impeding the wellbeing of students in the region? How is it possible to improve the wellbeing of students? What is the role of your organisation or how do you cope yourself with these issues?

Training of school psychologists

According to the participant school psychologists, there is a need to work with what the psychologists are already doing instead of only providing pre-training as it is the case now. It is imperative to engage the psychological field, to create an organization that can provide a platform for exchanging knowledge. There should be an organization that focuses on providing ongoing help to the psychologists, with continuous support and proper books, as the books that are used now do not relate to the Kazakhstani context. To support the wellbeing of students, psychologists need themselves to receive better training and support. At the moment there is no standardized training. NIS provides training and support for its own psychologists but in mainstream schools there are no special department to coordinate their work. There is also a wide gap between the job description and the actual job expectations in mainstream schools.

Access to facilities for extracurricular activities

There is not enough access to sport centers and other facilities for extracurricular activities in the Atyrau region. The government provides some funding for the facilities but students from outside the city cannot access them. The transport is very costly and during the break the parents have to pay for their children to use the facilities. Furthermore, most of the activities focus only on sports training.

Access to Vocational training

In the Atyrau region, other sources of funding - such as from oil and gas companies - are made available for students' vocational training. With the support of psychologists, students can thus receive training but there is still a lack of physical facilities. One such program is the 'labour room' where boys can learn to use a hammer. The problem is that the schools do not provide the necessary space for such activities.

How do we define 'vulnerable populations'

The participants raised concerns about the large economic discrepancy between rural and urban areas. They also pointed out that in rural areas students do not get the same opportunities as in urban schools. At the moment vulnerable children are represented by orphans, however, such

categorisation should also take into consideration material, financial and emotional aspects (such as children lacking one parent).

One participant, Kulikova Nelli Alimzhanovna, from the Youth Public Association 'Independent Generation of Kazakhstan' gave a short Powerpoint presentation on her organisation. Through the center for educational research training funded by Chevron oil, vulnerable students (from orphanages and low income households) are provided with vocational training in construction, agriculture, manufacturing, oil industry, safety training, bakery, wood cutting, arts and crafts. The NGO employs psychologists who help students to identify their skills and capabilities.

Participants suggestions for collaboration

- Create a platform for practioners to exchange ideas and experiences
- Be more involved in the practical side of training by providing handouts, discussing the instrument with practioners, and asking for direct input in the research.