

Notes on the Round Table held in Almaty (Hotel Kazzhol) on Monday June 13, 2016

This session was hosted at the hotel Kazzhol.

Those present:

9 stakeholders from the region including: representatives of non-governmental and public organizations, Ministry of Education and Science, schools and university. Dr. Carole Faucher, Dr. Daniel Torrano, Dr. Anna CohenMiller of the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University (NUGSE) and Dr. Liz Winter of the Faculty of Education at University of Cambridge (FoEUCam) conducted the session. Aray Saniyazova, Madina Tynybayeva, Aizhan Temerbayeva, PhD students from Nazarbayev University also attended and provided translation.

Introduction and presentation:

The meeting started with Dr. Carole Faucher (NUGSE) thanking and welcoming the participants to the round table and introducing the purpose of the round table and the objectives of the project funded by Newton-Al Farabi Foundation. She has explained the format of the round table and presentations. It was not seen as outsiders attempting to dictate or advise on students' wellbeing but to present the preliminary results of findings and constructs of wellbeing as seen in the research NUGSE and FoEUCam were currently conducting around Kazakhstan. This was followed by a short PowerPoint presentation of the current project's findings to date by Dr. Daniel Torrano (NUGSE).

Participants' presentations pertaining to school students' well-being and engagement:

With regards to the overarching topic of wellbeing of youth, one of the main issues raised in this particular round table was the engagement of public and non-governmental organizations in provision of psychological support to students and their collaboration with schools in developing the wellbeing of students.

The first speaker was Mr. Vladimir Stebulanko, the founder of the Association of Psychologists of Kazakhstan which has 439 members all over the country. Also, he established the Center for Medical and Psychological Problems in 2000. The Center was contracted by the Juvenile Court of Almaty to provide consultancy services on child-parent and parental relationships for parents and children. The speaker raised the topic of cooperation of psychological services at public schools with private psychological support systems. In particular, he emphasized on the support and education of parents as a factor for the wellbeing of children, which are often overlooked or is beyond the scope of schools' competencies. For that matter, they could be carried out by private psychological services.

In the continuation of the previous presentation, Ms. Anastasiya Steblyanko shared the issues that they have encountered concerning children's wellbeing. She highlighted the psychological unpreparedness of children to schooling which is often overlooked as opposed to intellectual readiness, misconceptions about attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and parents' unfamiliarity with critical periods of child development. All of these factors negatively affect children's wellbeing. She suggested that the Center could provide the diagnostics of mental and cognitive processes of children that school psychologists could use in their work and also train school psychologists and parents on children's psychological development.

The following presentation was given by Nelli Kulikovskih from the Public Association "Independent Generation of Kazakhstan" who explained that the main objective of the organization is to provide support to vulnerable youth. She introduced a wide range of manuals published by the association and the number of projects that they are currently managing including career choice for youth. Each year they work with five

schools and two orphanages where they provide a ten-step technology of career path program. The steps include various trainings, excursions, consultancy services and many others. As most of their projects are based on the school settings, they directly collaborate with school psychologists.

The fourth speaker, Ms. Margarita Uskembayeva, represented the Institute of Equal Rights and Responsibilities of Kazakhstan. Within the frame of children's wellbeing, the Institute provides support services for and psychological expert evaluation of children who are in difficult life situations (suicide, youth crime, various forms of child abuse). There is no standard for providing child support; as such they want to promote the development of social-legal support to students. Although the organization provides support to children, their parents and guardians, there is little legislative basis for their work as the Institute is a non-profit civic organization. They collaborate closely with the Department of Education of Almaty and school psychologists. The Institute's research on social and psychological help within educational institutions identified the lack of standards and regulations for provision of such services in schools as well.

Further, the discussion on the wellbeing of students was continued by Ms. Ardak Madykhanova from the Ministry of Education and Science. She elaborated on the role of schools in ensuring the wellbeing of learners. Students' wellbeing is a collaborative effort at schools and the role of the psychologist is to coordinate the whole project. However, at the moment school psychologists are expected to carry the whole project by themselves. Hence, there is a need for schools to reassess their regulations. She also touched upon the subject of inclusive education and comfortable environment for all children in schools. To ease the work of the school psychologists and to evaluate the psychological wellbeing of students, the Ministry introduced medical and pedagogical psychological consultations for children. However, she emphasized that parents avoid medical and psychological consultation due to the stigma that children face as a result of having such records.

The next speaker, Aigul Kadirova, presented the results of the UNICEF project on prevention of suicide among youth (secondary schools and vocational colleges) which included a large scale research and consecutive measures aimed at identifying and supporting youth at suicide risk. The pool of respondents included the students of 9th, 10th, 11th grades of secondary schools and 1st year students at technical and vocational colleges. Based on the results of the suicide risk assessment, parents of the vulnerable children are recommended to attend psychological centers. UNICEF provided training to psychologists on suicide assessment and prevention. They are planning to provide trainings for operators of the suicide call line.

Shavket Umarov, principal of school #153, reported on the implementation of multilingual education and its results on the wellbeing of the students. The presentation raised the question of how the school ensured students' psychological wellbeing and resilience to stress as children were under much pressure to perform well academically under the new requirements of multilingual education.

Zaru Kulsharipova introduced the project that was recently launched entitled System of Family Guiding in School Education. The premise of the system is to develop an efficacious instrument of wide-scale involvement of parents in the interaction of schools and families. It also aims to establish a common resource medium which would contribute to the development of social-psychological, ethical- spiritual, linguistic-cultural competencies of family members.

Darya Alpysbayeva, the principal of KazNU profession-oriented school, stated that studying student's wellbeing at school and in family environment is very important. However, research studies do not always reflect the reality. She also claimed that teachers always carry the burden of any failures and challenges that students have and schools are held accountable for anything that happens to a student. It is important that schools and parents cooperate closely in order to ensure the wellbeing of children. For instance, they do not

hold parental meetings at the school, but rather organize round tables involving parents, students and teachers. Also, students who apply to this school take specific test that determines their academic aptitudes for maths and humanities. However, students' parents can take a decisive role in choosing academic major and career orientation. *She offered to create a database of children at suicide risk that can be accessed by other school leaders or a general database for troubled youth?*

Zukhra Berdigozhina of school 32 in Almaty, highlighted three most important notions that she derived from this roundtable: students' wellbeing, their motivation and engagement. She presented her understanding of wellbeing through providing examples of parents' advice to teachers about their child's wellbeing and their awareness about the emotional balance of their children. In order to ensure the wellbeing of children, it is important to occupy them with extracurricular activities as it will help build character and social skills. She also introduced the school museum, a project she created in order to engage students in the school life. The purpose of the museum is to maintain the 60-year history of the school. The school also has a 13-year partnership with republic newspaper "Friendly children (Druzhnye rebyata)", and many students of the school chose to pursue professional journalism thanks to this project. Based on these many various extracurricular activities that engage students, motivate them to success and provide healthy life choices, the school ensures the wellbeing of the children.

Open discussions by topic:

Once all participants presented their roles and engagement in ensuring the wellbeing of students, they were asked to discuss their understanding and conceptualization of wellbeing. Dr. Liz Winter continued that two topics, i.e. wellbeing and school engagement, emerged from the presentations of the participants. She asked if there are any suggestions **how to manage wellbeing and school engagement**. Also, one of the presenters commented **that high-performing students are at high risk of suicide** and this question was also raised for discussion.

According to the participants, wellbeing is ensuring sustainable future for children by helping make smart decisions on completing school, enrolling in appropriate field of study in higher education institution and further employment. One of the participants countered that there was too much emphasis on success measured by academic performance, talent and other extraordinary achievements, and such perceptions about wellbeing should be reassessed as any form of success does not determine wellbeing. In continuation of the topic, another principal claimed that parental involvement and communication in all aspects of the educational process is important. Participation in extracurricular activities, clubs and social circles also contribute to the personality development and wellbeing. Although university admissions and UNT scores are indeed important for graduating students, it is important that schools provide professional orientation and career advice as a step for warranting further wellbeing.

It was also pointed out that the wellbeing should be concerned with students' present environment and state of mind, including adequate self-esteem, positive outlook on life, emotional balance and social interactions of the child. Social wellbeing of a child includes presence of hobbies, motivation, interest in gaining knowledge and others. As such, those difference components build up the overall wellbeing of the young people.

When talking about wellbeing in the context of school, wellbeing can be assessed in terms of cooperation and trust that can be cultivated into a skill that students should have. Trust and cooperation will be enough for their wellbeing. When it comes to the issue of students at suicide risk, one of the participants claimed that most of the pressure comes from households. It is the parents who put pressure and expectations that a child tries to achieve.

Parents decide what is necessary for children, so parents' choice is also important in this process. There should be a harmony between parental choice and children's' desires and skills. There should be a harmony of choice between parents and children. There is a variety of choices that government provides to future students, so it is about choosing the right path for the children.

How can we put our efforts together to continue the conversation?

Participants suggested that they would continue networking on this topic. They would likely apply for joint grants and develop collaborative projects. Moreover, participants were willing to share their expertise with each other through coaching, professional development programs and trainings.

What suggestions do you have for collaboration and dissemination on this topic inside of Kazakhstan?

It is important to move away from theory to practice. It is suggested to establish joint projects on wellbeing with NU leadership. NU can provide resources, research base, project management and technology to run this project.

Secondly, it is important to establish permanent crisis centres for youth. Crisis centres are usually established for short-term projects based on the government contract and are dispersed quickly. Crisis centres are government funded as such there is little political freedom and autonomy for their operation. As such, it is important to ensure such freedom. At the moment, there are temporary crisis centres for youth between ages 14 and 29. The crisis centre in Atyrau uses specific methodology and theoretical resources acquired from abroad. Such resources could be shared online among crisis centres and school counsellors if a specific online platform was to be created. Moreover, NIS and NU could spearhead the establishment of the network of professionals in psychology and counselling as they have better resources and access.

Furthermore, it is necessary to separate medical psychology and pedagogical psychology. Medical psychologists could take the primary role in consultation and diagnostics, and school psychologists would be providing additional support.

Information could be disseminated through media, social networks, NIS, CEP, ИПК, etc. Also, the group mentioned participation in conferences, conducting collaborative research and writing and publishing research results and other articles in national journals. KERA was introduced as an example of collaborative association for psychologists. Although NU would perhaps help launch such society of school psychologists, operation of the association should be maintained collaboratively.

There is a need to adapt your projects instead of just testing them/or translating. i.e. Moreover, to develop the conversation further, it is necessary to conceptualize the terms as there is a methodological gap in understanding of various terms and of wellbeing in particular. For example, when a medical psychologist considers suicide, their perspective is on treating a disease, but for a school psychologist it is about providing a preventive care.

Another issue that the team put forward is to reassess their attitudes toward discussion of wellbeing. When stakeholders talk about well-being, they focus on vulnerable families from low-income families or people with disabilities. They mainly concentrate on the negative side of the issue, but they should also discuss good practices. There are a lot of positive aspects of well-being, so it is important to also discuss these good subjects.

How to reach out and maintain the connection with practitioners?

The following steps were suggested:

- to conduct collaborative trainings and professional development courses
- to organize of conferences and publishing the conference proceedings, not only in scientific journals but in journals for practitioners, too
- to transfer the experiences of schools (other than NIS) to mainstream schools
- to conduct a SWOT analysis in schools in order to discover the strength and weaknesses of schools in terms of well-being in various schools
- to disseminate information through Facebook.

Based on the UNICEF Suicide Prevention project in schools, a certain model of information dissemination was developed in Kyzylorda. They've prepared a group of psychologists who would act as trainers. Each trainer (master trainer) has a number of school psychologists attached to him or her. If there are new methods or innovations, they again train the master trainers and master trainers then disseminate what they learned to their group of psychologists. It was a useful model that built trust and confidence between the participants within this model.

Creation of the association of school psychologists could be very beneficial. Different schools use different methods and measures in provision of psychological services at schools. There is a need for regulating their work. There are indeed different protocols for psychological services (medical, social, legal) that cannot be really united. However, there is a need for standards for school psychologists. For instance, there is a protocol for working with students who have oncology diseases. However, that is a unique case. So, there is a need for promoting the standards for school psychologists. One of the important issues is that schools are asked to do something but they don't have resources. At the moment, the issue of school psychologists is not a priority. Hence, it is important for School Psychologists to unite independently and promote their interests in order to be noticed by the MoE. There have been some attempts to create an association of SP, but there are no legal documents in Kazakhstan that could validate the process of establishment of such association. Without particular legal foundation and support from the MoE it will not be possible.

School Psychologists can be the agent of change who would apply new methods and bring a new thinking about school psychology. There is a need for well-respected and authoritative figure. However, they are often limited in their scope of activity. *Moreover, if something happens at school, the SP often are first blamed and investigated.* One of the most significant problems that school psychologists have is that they are often investigated by the prosecutor's office. In addition, there are standardized duties and responsibilities of school psychologists, but once again there is no framework for protection of school psychologists and their rights. It all came back to the idea of establishing an association of school psychologists that could deal with many of these issues.

Closing remarks from participants:

Participants affirmed that they had a good discussion today. *However, the focus was only on school psychologists. As the further step, should other actors be invited in this discussion?* Students themselves should be informed about the concept of wellbeing. Students have different perspectives on wellbeing and their understanding of what constitutes wellbeing might be different.