

Notes on the Round Table held in Oskemen at school #39 on 13th April 2016

This session was kindly hosted by School #39 at the request of the Oskemen City educational authority.

Those present:

23 stakeholders from the region including: school principals, vice principals, curators, social educators, school psychologists and directors of three NGOs. Dr. Kairat Kurakbayev of the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University (NUGSE), Dr Liz Winter and Dr Eva Brown Hajdukova of the Faculty of Education at University of Cambridge (FoEUCam) conducted the session. Xeniya Tursunbayeva, PhD students from Nazarbayev University and Kamila Mukhamejanova also attended and provided translation.

Introduction and presentation:

The meeting started with Dr. Kairat Kurakbayev (NUGSE) thanking the participants for coming and an explanation of the purpose of the round table as a forum for discussion and local networking. 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 research process and findings to date by Dr Liz Winter (FoEUCam) along with details of the funding organisations.

Participants' comments pertaining to the presentation:

One school psychologist expressed that having a culturally validated instrument which brings together wider aspects of wellbeing as well as elements of school engagement and motivations is beneficial. They explained that each year school psychologists are under enormous pressure as they have to administer a large number of instruments (over 70) to a large sample of students in mostly transition years to indicate 'adaption' (e.g. students starting in first grades and students transitioning from primary to secondary settings). The need for culturally validated instruments was also underlined as the majority of instruments/assessments currently administered in the school settings have not been appropriately piloted and culturally validated in the Kazakhstan context. More importantly, the majority of the instruments have not been translated into the Kazakh language.

Questions in response to the presentation:

Question: When will school by school results of those involved in the research be available? Will recommendations for schools be produced?

Response: The aim of this research project is to create validated models of wellbeing and school engagement. The main focus of the work is to develop culturally sensitive measures that are related to and work in line with various extant or new theories pertaining to wellbeing and engagement. Once assured of the model's performance, further work by others would allow some of the validated survey items to be used to seek out comparisons. However, providing specific recommendation tailored to a specific school is not within the aims of this research project. It was also emphasised that this project is not funded by the Ministry of Education in Kazakhstan but by external agencies with a focus on academic research and sustainable grounded models of wellbeing and school engagement that can be taken forwards by others.

Question: How can school psychologists in Kazakhstan gain access to the instrument?

Response: The instrument is still under development and its final, validated version will be published in an internationally peer reviewed journal.

Question: Will the instrument be adapted to children with disabilities?

Response: Unfortunately it is not within the scope of this study to adapt the instrument. It was emphasised that this work does not aim to produce an instrument as much as insight and understanding of factors that contribute to school students' wellbeing and school engagement in Kazakhstan.

Discussion questions:

What are the issues with students' school engagement that deserve most attention?

Improving access and the experiences for children with disabilities:

In general, schools were described as not willing to accept children with disabilities, although some schools were and this was to be applauded. Barriers to inclusion included: a school's test results as a primary interest, parents' of non-disabled children negative attitudes towards inclusion, unpreparedness of mainstream teachers to provide specialised instruction as inclusive and special education is still not included as a part of coherent pre-service and in-service trainings.

The role of school psychologists:

Progress has been made in this area recently with at least every school now having a psychologist in place. However, the professional development of psychologists is under resourced and a lot is put on them as individuals. Many psychologists have a large number of children under their care (in some schools up to 3000 students per one school psychologist) and a lot of work to do so they are often unable to foster close relationships with students and thus rely on help from their class teachers. The status of the profession is also low and their role is often misunderstood by the school principals.

Improving the wellbeing of teachers:

Teachers often feel overloaded and frustrated due to many innovations from the Ministry of Education as the professional support, time, resources and preparation seem to be not sufficient in the implementation of these changes. Heavy reporting and extensive curriculum is also perceived as a major concern as it demands a great deal of additional effort and time from teachers in their daily routine, potentially affecting the learning ecology in classrooms. Teachers also felt pressured and often blamed for students' low achievement which can result in conflicts between schools and parents. The lack of highly qualified teachers was also expressed, further highlighting the issues of teachers' potentially insufficient professional development.

The audience put forward the following as indicators of students' wellbeing?

- Academic achievement
- Openness
- Being sociable
- Showing enthusiasm to learn
- Ability to deal with challenges

Recommendations for improvements:

Removing multiple shifts and the option to start school in the morning should be available for all students. This would also have a positive effect on teachers' wellbeing.

The health status of Kazakhstan's population is negatively affected by the unfavourable environmental situation, emissions in general and technogenic hotspots. Air-pollution-related health effects can be reduced through policies that curb emissions, therefore more attention needs to be

devoted to resolving environmental issues as air and water pollution in Oskemen often reaches critical levels.

The economic crisis is perceived to have a greater impact on women, more specifically on single mothers who are often the primary care givers of children with disabilities as the men seem to be unprepared to deal with challenges pertaining to raising a child with disabilities. The issue of single parenting seems to be prevalent in Kazakhstan. However, many participants expressed that a child is likely to experience sufficient levels of wellbeing if there is at least one parent (usually the mother) who provides sufficient emotional support.

Informal discussions among attendees followed the round table over refreshments. This encouraged local networking and facilitated individuals' comments to presenters.

