

## STEPPING STONES: RECORDING THE VOICES OF THE PAST

Editor-in-chief: A.Sagintayeva<sup>1</sup>;

Editors and support team: PDP faculty and staff<sup>2</sup>;

Authors: students of the PDP (Professional Development Program)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan; [asagintayeva@nu.edu.kz](mailto:asagintayeva@nu.edu.kz)

<sup>2</sup>Professional Development Program, Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan;

### INTRODUCTION.

Oral History is a society's transmitter of values, of collective ideas, a reflection of cultural ideas and not only a recording of significant events. Portelli (1997) said that oral history refers to what the source of the information (the interviewee) and the interviewer do together at the moment of their encounter in the interview. If one imagines this relationship as a neural synapse, then the interview itself is the synapse, that is, history is made at the moment of that synaptic communication.

Education in Kazakhstan is rushing forward into the future, devoting all its energy to the “-ations” (transformation, modernization, westernization, internationalization). But this needs to be balanced with ongoing discussion about preserving cultural values, contextual ambience, historical *mores* and grassroots needs and perspectives. Herein lies the belief that a nation can plot its future only if it has a good understanding of its present; but that a nation can only understand its present if it has a good understanding of its past.



*H.E. State President Nursultan Nazarbayev's school desk at Abay Boarding School, Kaskelen town (circa 1958)*

### METHODS.

While participating in a 6-month in-service professional development program studying in the Graduate School of Education's, the 65 participating school teachers and trainers were trained in (a) oral history as a research method, (b) preparing for an interview, (c) interview technique, and (d) presenting and analyzing oral data. During their 4-week *practicum* at schools in diverse parts of Kazakhstan, and, with the benefit of video recording instrumentation, they interviewed their grandparents and/or senior citizens with regard to the interviewees' education experiences in Soviet times. The participants then created a website ([nupdp.weebly.com](http://nupdp.weebly.com)) and uploaded the documentation from the interviews, the video- and audio-recordings

with English sub-titles, transcripts of the interview language (Kazakh or Russian) and the English translations thereof, plus photographs illustrative of Kazakhstan's education past.

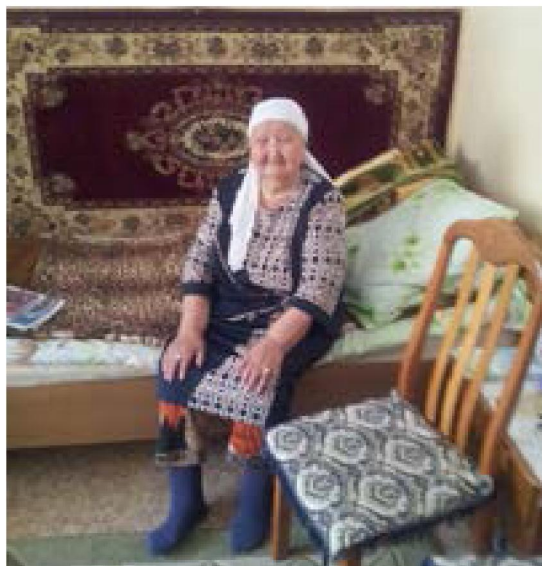
This done, faculty, staff and students collaborated in producing an ISBN-registered monograph, featuring the transcripts of original interviews which were then reconstructed as narrative text along with selected supporting photographs and other graphic material.

### GOALS.

We intended that our oral history project would:

- assemble valuable recollections and impressions about life, education and schooling in Kazakhstan in the not-so-distant past;
- assist in preserving expressed cultural values and norms in digital and hardcopy form;
- make a significant contribution to the cultural and historical content and background to education development in this country;

- allow our teachers to become intrinsically connected to authentic oral history research that impacts on the cultural and educational *status quo* of the nation;
- involve participants in a “living theory” approach to hands-on action research;
- afford candidates personal investment in the development of their English skills through translations of their Kazakh and Russia sources;
- enable our teachers to take into account their seniors’ views of education when making choices in their own situation in education in the Kazakhstan of the 21st century.



*Aykamis Iskakova tries to forget the war years that bereft her of her parents and her chance of schooling (cf. video: mupdp.weebly.com)*

#### DISCUSSION.

In the sometimes simple, sometimes sad, sometimes profound, themes that emanate from the narratives, it becomes clear how the Soviet regime, in the post-1917 era, tried to acculturate, but also to accommodate to, local communities through education provision within the colonizing parameters of a Soviet Raj. With this came the need to foster Russian as a *lingua franca* - and we found frequent, recurring references throughout the project to the struggle encountered by the learners of that time to learn, and to cope with, Russian as a hegemonic language of learning and formal schooling.

The recounts also showed an educational system that remained under-developed and under-funded. We learn first-hand how it was rigidly bureaucratized, top-down, authoritarian, and integrally based on an economistic conception of how society functions through centralized planning to ensure a stable, literate, productive workforce, going so far as to utilize learners of education institutions to work in labor camps.

But the story that comes to us quite clearly was that Soviet and post-Soviet education was successful in its own way, for its own time. The period left the region a viable educational legacy, creating widespread, though basic, opportunities for literacy and numeracy, with the intention (though not always achieving) free, secular, and comprehensive coeducation for all.

#### CONCLUSION.

Kazakhstan’s education currently responds to a matrix of past, present and impending imperatives. The challenge for the new regime is to drive forward reform that takes these imperatives into account in new, coherent, and sustainable ways. Each of our interviewees talked of the confidence and steadfastness that should nourish all those who would march forward into a brave new world. But the message they leave us is clear: No matter how smooth or rocky the path might be that lies ahead, it is only through knowledge, noble action, hard work, perseverance - and the search for excellence - that we can change.

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