

**Beginning Teachers' Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An
Exploratory Photovoice Study**

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Date: 19 October 2023

Dear Sultan Kozhamberdiyev,

This letter now confirms that your research project titled:

Beginning Teachers' Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An Exploratory Photovoice Study

has been approved by the Graduate School of Education Ethics Committee of Nazarbayev University.

You may proceed with contacting your preferred research site and commencing your participant recruitment strategy and data collection.

Yours sincerely,

Janet Helmer
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Sincerely,

Sultan Kozhamberdiyev

ABSTRACT

Beginning Teachers' Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An Exploratory Photovoice Study

The world of education places numerous demands on beginning teachers in rural schools. They must navigate many challenges, including classroom management, lesson planning, extracurricular activities, parent communication, and support for students with special needs. Moreover, the experience of beginning teachers in rural areas differs notably from that of their urban counterparts, primarily due to the unique characteristics of rural regions, such as their sparse population, isolation, economic dependency on single-resource industries, and strong community values, as evidenced by the close connections between schools and their localities. The literature reveals that while their experiences in rural schools worldwide have been extensively documented, there is a noticeable lack of empirical studies within the context of Kazakhstan. The purpose of this study was to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice. The primary research question of the thesis was: How do beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools? The study involved the participation of 8 beginning teachers from rural schools in the Kostanay and Karagandy regions. Photographs taken by the teachers, as well as data from their written narratives and semi-structured interviews, were used to identify key themes such as support, workload, resource constraints, sense of belonging, school atmosphere, and classroom experiences. The findings underscore the need for tailored support measures for beginning teachers in rural schools to ensure a more equitable and effective education system in these rural regions and improve the high teacher turnover that many of these schools experience.

Keywords: beginning teachers, rural areas, rural schools, experiences, photovoice, support measures

Аңдатпа

Қазақстанның Ауыл Мектептеріндегі Жас Мұғалімдердің Тәжірибесі: Фото

Дауыспен Зерттеу

Қазақстанның ауылдық жерлерінде жаңадан бастаған мұғалімдер жұмысқа қанағаттануына, стресс деңгейіне және кәсіпте қалуына әсер ететін бірқатар күрделі проблемаларға тап болады. Әдебиеттерге шолу олардың ресурстарға қол жетімділігі шектеулі, қаржыландырудың жеткіліксіздігі, кәсіби қолдаудың болмауы және оқушылардың ынтасын сақтаудағы қиындықтарға тап болғанын көрсетеді.

Қолданыстағы әдебиеттерге шолу айтарлықтай олқылықты көрсетеді: дүние жүзіндегі ауылдық мектептердің жас мұғалімдердің алдында тұрған проблемалар кеңінен құжатталғанымен, Қазақстан контекстінде эмпирикалық зерттеулердің жетіспеушілігі байқалады. Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты - өнерге және қоғамдастықтың қатысуына негізделген зерттеу әдісі - фотодауысты пайдалана отырып, Қазақстанның ауылдық мектептеріндегі жас мұғалімдер тәжірибесінің айрықша ерекшеліктерін зерделеу.

Зерттеудің негізгі сұрағы мынадай: жаңадан бастаған мұғалімдер Қазақстанның ауылдық мектептеріндегі өз тәжірибелерін қалай сипаттайды? Зерттеуге Қостанай және Қарағанды облыстарының ауылдық мектептерінен 8 жас мұғалім қатысады.

Мұғалімдер түсірген фотосуреттер, сондай-ақ жазбаша әңгімелер мен жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттардан алынған мәліметтер қолдау, жұмыс жүктемесі, ресурстарға шектеулер, тиесілілік сезімі және мектептегі атмосфера сияқты негізгі тақырыптарды анықтады. Нәтижелер осы аймақтарда әділ және тиімді білім беру жүйесін қамтамасыз ету үшін ауыл мектептеріндегі жаңадан бастаған мұғалімдерге арнайы қолдау шараларының қажеттілігін көрсетеді.

Түйінді сөздер: жас мұғалімдер, ауылдық жерлер, ауылдық мектептер, тәжірибе, фотодауыс, қолдау шаралары.

Аннотация

Опыт Начинающих Учителей в Сельских Школах Казахстана: Исследование Методом Фотоголос

Начинающим учителям сельских школ предъявляются многочисленные требования в сфере образования. Им приходится решать множество задач, включая управление классом, планирование уроков, организацию внеклассных мероприятий, общение с родителями и поддержку учащихся с особыми потребностями. Кроме того, их опыт в сельской местности существенно отличается от опыта их городских коллег, в первую очередь из-за уникальных характеристик сельских регионов, таких как их малонаселенность, изоляция, экономическая зависимость от отраслей с единственным ресурсом и тесными связями между школами и их местным сообществом. Литература показывает, что, хотя их опыт работы в сельских школах по всему миру широко документирован, наблюдается заметная нехватка эмпирических исследований в контексте Казахстана. Целью данного исследования было изучение особого опыта начинающих учителей сельских школ Казахстана, используя основанный на искусстве и участии сообщества исследовательский подход – фотоголос. Исследовательским вопросом тезиса был: как начинающие учителя описывают свой опыт работы в сельских школах Казахстана? В исследовании приняли участие 8 начинающих учителей сельских школ Костанайской и Карагандинской областей. Фотографии, сделанные учителями, а также данные их письменных рассказов и полуструктурированных интервью были использованы для определения ключевых тем, таких как профессиональная поддержка, рабочая нагрузка, ограниченность ресурсов, чувство принадлежности, школьная атмосфера и впечатления в классе. Результаты подчеркивают необходимость принятия индивидуальных мер поддержки начинающих учителей в сельских школах, чтобы обеспечить более справедливую и эффективную

систему образования в этих сельских регионах и уменьшить высокую текучесть кадров, с которой сталкиваются многие из этих школ.

Ключевые слова: начинающие учителя, сельская местность, сельские школы, опыт, фотоголос, меры поддержки.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The world of education places numerous demands on beginning teachers in rural schools. They must navigate the practical aspects of school life, apply their theoretical knowledge in the classroom, and strengthen their commitment to teaching. Additionally, they face many challenges, including classroom management, lesson planning, extracurricular activities, parent communication, and support for students with special educational needs (Hancock & Scherff, 2010; Fry, 2007; Kono, 2012; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Shamatov, 2006; Syzdykbayeva, 2021). While a solid educational background is valuable, it cannot fully compensate for the limited experience that beginning teachers possess (Beck & Kosnik, 2012; Dias-Lacy & Guirguis, 2017; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). Moreover, the experience of beginning teachers in rural areas differs significantly from that of their urban counterparts, primarily due to the unique characteristics of rural areas. For example, these regions, in spite of being sparsely populated, isolated, and often economically dependent on industries focused on a single resource, are characterized by strong community values that are evident in the strong connections between schools and their localities (Barter, 2008).

This introductory chapter presents the contextual and background details regarding the current research. Subsequently, it introduces the problem, outlines the research purpose, and poses the central question directing the study. Following this, the significance of the research is presented, and key terms are defined. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis.

1.1. Background of the Study

The unique aspects and challenges of rural living are particularly relevant in Kazakhstan, where about 80% of schools are located in rural regions, serving roughly half of the student population (Mussina, 2018). In this context, rural areas are characterized by small populations, a reliance on traditional agriculture, strong community ties, and a close

connection between schools and their localities. However, alongside these positive aspects, rural schools in Kazakhstan face common challenges, including restricted availability of high-quality learning opportunities, resource shortages, and teacher retention issues (Showalter et al., 2017).

Moreover, nearly 45% of these rural schools in Kazakhstan operate as ungraded institutions, meaning they lack the necessary enrollment to allocate separate classes for each grade level. This results in instructing students from various grade levels in one classroom (MoES, 2018, as cited in Amankulova, 2018). Research has indicated that to effectively address these challenges and provide quality education in rural Kazakhstan, beginning teachers must not only understand and embrace the unique aspects of rural living but also find innovative solutions for resource shortages, given the significant role rural schools play in the country's educational landscape (Cody, 2013; Shikalepo, 2020; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Nevertheless, beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan and worldwide face numerous difficulties, particularly in isolated settings where limited personal and professional connections hinder their transition (Fry & Anderson, 2011; Kono, 2012). In this context, engaging with the local community and building professional networks are essential for overcoming challenges and integrating into the rural educational setting (Barley, 2009; Baker, 2012; Farrell, 2016).

Scholars have extensively documented that recruiting and retaining qualified teachers in rural schools presents significant challenges (Hammer et al., 2005; Malloy & Allen, 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2015; Simmons, 2005). Various factors, such as isolated and remote locations, long commutes, low teacher salaries, and demanding working conditions, act as barriers to attracting and retaining teachers (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007; Lawless, 2009; Tajik et al., 2021). Nevertheless, rural education offers unique advantages, such as a strong sense of

community, personalized learning experiences, and a low student-teacher ratio (Anderson, 2008; Monk, 2007; Mollenkopf, 2009). In addition, research has shown that homegrown teachers who have roots in rural communities are more likely to stay and contribute to the community due to their deep connection and understanding of rural practice and local culture (Harris et al., 2005; Nurbayev, 2021).

The experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools present various challenges related to professional socialization, skills mismatch, classroom diversity, classroom management, intensification, and the school environment. Due to ungraded schools, rural teachers often teach multiple subjects and various grade levels within a single classroom (Barley, 2009; Gimranova et al., 2021; Nurbayev, 2021). Consequently, this situation can be overwhelming, as educators need to manage students with different academic needs in one setting. Furthermore, rural communities consist of diverse student populations with various ethnicities, languages, and cultural backgrounds, making it imperative for teachers to adopt culturally responsive teaching strategies to create inclusive and supportive learning environments (Barter, 2008; Malloy & Allen, 2007). Consequently, providing focused assistance, mentorship, and opportunities for professional growth networks is crucial for nurturing beginning teachers' professional advancement and retention in rural schools (Cody, 2013). Moreover, establishing partnerships between universities, schools, and the community can strengthen the support system for pre-service teachers during their field experiences, ultimately preparing them to thrive in rural teaching environments (Fry, 2007; Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018).

By understanding and addressing these issues, rural schools can foster a supportive and engaging educational environment, ensuring access to quality education for students in these regions. Consequently, distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools

remain crucial for further research and require targeted strategies to address the unique challenges rural settings pose (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2015).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

According to the TALIS-2018 international study (OECD, 2019), the level of job satisfaction among beginning teachers in Kazakhstan is considerably low. Educators have reported experiencing high levels of stress and a strong tendency to switch schools frequently. This trend is illustrated by the fact that 66% of teachers under the age of 30 in Kazakhstan express a lack of interest in pursuing a long-term teaching career (OECD, 2019, as cited in Irsaliyev et al., 2019). This situation is especially pronounced among teachers in rural schools (IAC, 2014). Due to the unique characteristics of rural areas, beginning teachers face distinct challenges compared to their urban counterparts (Barter, 2008; Bridges, 2014; Tajik et al., 2021). These combined factors underscore the urgent need to deeply explore the experiences of beginning teachers, specifically in rural schools of the country. A review of the existing literature reveals a notable gap; while challenges faced by beginning teachers in rural schools worldwide have been extensively documented, there is a noticeable lack of empirical studies within Kazakhstan.

1.3. Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice. The primary research question of the thesis is: How do beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools?

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study focuses on the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan, intending to provide valuable contextual knowledge about the country's educational landscape. Such insights can inform targeted interventions and strategies tailored

to the unique needs of rural teachers. This contributes to the broader field of education by revealing factors that influence educational inequality in rural settings through collaborative efforts by educators and policymakers (Bray & Thomas, 1995). Furthermore, by conducting comprehensive data analysis and synthesizing existing literature, practical solutions may be discovered to tackle this issue and offer valuable insights to enhance support systems for beginning teachers. Ultimately, this research could contribute to fostering a more equitable and efficient education system in rural parts of Kazakhstan.

1.5. Definition of Key Terms

Beginning Teacher – an individual with pedagogical or relevant professional education who teaches and nurtures students or pupils, provides methodological support, organizes educational activities, and has less than 3 years of teaching experience (MoES, 2019).

Rural school – refers to educational institutions located in sparsely populated areas outside major urban centers (Bridges, 2014).

Ungraded school – is an educational institution that “does not have enough pupils to give each year group its own class and so teach students of different age groups in one class” (MoES, 2018, as cited in Amankulova, 2018, p. 10).

Teacher Experience – refers to the progressive development of a teacher’s cognitive processes, wise judgment, and authentic workplace learning, centered around nurturing the teacher-student relationship, overcoming challenges, gaining new perspectives, and continuously improving professional skills to enhance the quality of education (Moore et al., 2015).

1.6. Summary

This introductory chapter lays the necessary groundwork for the research by presenting the fundamental motivations behind exploring the diverse encounters of beginning

teachers in rural schools. Additionally, it brings attention to the distinctive characteristics of rural settings. By establishing this context, the chapter demonstrates the base for research that addresses the existing gap in theory and practice. It identifies a central problem, emphasizes the importance of investigating this issue, and underscores its relevance and potential to advance the field of education within the rural context of Kazakhstan.

1.7. Outline of the Thesis

The thesis consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the problem, places it in existing literature, explains the purpose, justifies its significance, and presents the research question. The second chapter presents a literature review that supports the research question, discusses previous studies on the topic, identifies gaps in knowledge, and introduces the study's theoretical framework. The third chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the research and validates the chosen research design, while the fourth chapter outlines the procedures used for analyzing the data and presents the emerging themes. In the subsequent Discussion and Conclusion chapters, the findings are interpreted in the context of prior research and presented, along with a discussion of the study's practical applications, the researcher's personal reflection, and implications for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The literature review section of this thesis provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities faced by beginning teachers from rural schools in Kazakhstan and worldwide. Topics covered include the unique characteristics of rural living, common challenges in rural schools, teacher recruitment and retention issues, induction programs, and experiences of beginning teachers. The review also explores the theoretical frameworks of empowerment education and transformative learning employed to guide this research.

2.2. Becoming a Rural School Teacher

Becoming a teacher at a rural school entails understanding and embracing the distinctive aspects and challenges of rural living (Cody, 2013; Shikalepo, 2020; Theobald & Wood, 2010). According to Barter (2008), rural areas are characterized by their modest population sizes, reliance on industries focused on a solitary resource, a strong feeling of community and connection, and a unique interrelationship between schools and the surrounding localities they cater to. Rural schools worldwide consistently face common challenges, including inadequate allocation of resources, difficulties in retaining teachers, and a lack of early childhood services (Camp & Thompson, 2006; Showalter et al., 2017).

The rural context in Kazakhstan is further characterized by a significant dependence on traditional agricultural practices, coupled with limited access to modern technologies and resources, resulting in disparities in living standards when compared to urban areas (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Gimranova et al., 2021; Kurmangaliyev, 2021; Nurbayev, 2021). Bridges and Sagintayeva (2014) point out that this situation has led to declining academic achievements and restricted access to high-quality education. Therefore, teachers must comprehend the effects of socioeconomic gaps in rural areas to adjust their teaching approaches to meet the varied needs of their students (Johnson, 2017; Showalter et al., 2017).

In rural educational settings, educators often grapple with the formidable challenge of instructing multiple subjects and handling diverse grade levels within a single classroom, as highlighted by Barley (2009). A comparable situation is evident in the rural ungraded schools of Kazakhstan, echoing the findings of Nurbayev's study (2021). These schools, characterized by a lack of distinct classes for different grades and relatively small student populations, frequently amalgamate multiple grades into one class. This circumstance poses a significant challenge for novice teachers who must navigate simultaneous instruction across various courses and curricula while managing diverse students with varying academic needs within the same classroom setting.

Additionally, recognizing the diverse student populations that encompass various ethnicities, languages, and cultural backgrounds in rural communities, it becomes crucial for teachers to possess culturally responsive teaching strategies to establish inclusive and supportive learning environments (Barter, 2008; Malloy & Allen, 2007). As Mehisto et al. (2014) demonstrated, language-related challenges are prevalent in rural schools in Kazakhstan. For instance, in many rural areas, students may speak multiple languages, which can create difficulties if the instruction medium differs from their first language.

Monk (2007) points out that to be an effective rural teacher, it is crucial to immerse oneself in the local culture, values, and traditions to establish meaningful connections with students and their families. Moreover, culturally relevant teaching practices validate students' experiences, enhancing academic performance (Moffa & McHenry-Sorber, 2018; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011)

The studies above shed light on educators' typical difficulties when starting their careers in rural schools, particularly in isolated settings. These challenges can also vary significantly and may be exacerbated by the lack of personal and professional connections with other colleagues in the new environment (Fry & Anderson, 2011). This viewpoint is

further reinforced by Kono (2012), who shares that the sparser population and remote nature of such regions contribute to teachers' reluctance to relocate to rural areas (Plunkett & Dyson, 2011).

Studies point out the need for beginning educators in rural schools to actively engage with the local community, build professional networks to overcome the challenges of isolation and establish connections with colleagues and community members for valuable support that could help them integrate into the rural educational setting (Barley, 2009; Baker, 2012; Farrell, 2016).

2.2.1. Recruitment and Retention of Teachers in Rural Schools

Rural schools encounter significant difficulties in recruiting and keeping qualified educators, as noted by various researchers (Barley, 2009; Hammer et al., 2005; Hayes, 2009; Malloy & Allen, 2007). As highlighted by Rosenberg et al. (2015), the primary concern is these schools' isolated and restricted locations. Teachers frequently face significant challenges related to extended commutes to and from school, mainly stemming from the isolated nature of rural areas. This factor ranked as a primary barrier to recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools (Rosenberg et al., 2015).

Insufficient salaries of teachers, as highlighted by Frost et al. (2014) and Rosenberg et al. (2014), were recognized as a significant obstacle in attracting and retaining beginning educators. This financial factor could impact the motivation and morale of teachers and consequently affect the quality of education provided in these areas (Imazeki, 2005).

In rural education, the study by Hammer et al. (2005) revealed the demanding working conditions experienced by teachers, particularly the requirement to teach multiple subject areas. For instance, due to limited staffing and resources, some rural educators instruct core subjects like mathematics and science and additional disciplines like art or music. This diverse teaching load can put considerable strain on teachers, necessitating a

need for highly qualified educators with certifications in various subjects to manage these responsibilities effectively. Such challenges in rural schools can significantly impact educators' workload and teaching practices, influencing the overall educational experience for teachers and students alike (Hammer et al., 2005).

Teachers' scarcity of professional development opportunities is also a significant obstacle in rural settings (Lawless, 2009). This lack of career growth prospects and other challenges create a competitive disadvantage for rural schools in attracting and retaining well-qualified educators (Tajik et al., 2021). As a result, many highly qualified teachers may be hesitant to work in rural schools due to the limited scope for career progression, which can have implications for the overall quality of education in these areas (Hayes, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2005; Lowe, 2006; McClure & Reeves, 2004; Tyler et al., 2003).

Studies in Kazakhstan show that the inadequate provision of essential infrastructure in rural areas poses significant challenges in attracting and retaining qualified teachers (Tajik et al., 2021; Nurbayev, 2021). Additionally, insufficient Internet availability in these areas makes recruiting skilled educators more difficult (Fimyar et al., 2014; Nurbayev, 2021; Tastanbekova, 2020).

Burton and Johnson (2010) stress the importance of conducting more research to comprehensively understand the recruitment and retention of teachers in rural regions. They suggest that rural education should be viewed as a chance to engage with communities, foster significant connections, and shape fresh, professional identities rather than being approached from a deficit perspective. This perspective is substantial for rural school districts when considering staffing strategies (Hammer et al., 2005; Harris et al., 2005; Simmons, 2005).

Rural education holds the potential to foster a strong sense of community and personalized learning experiences, resulting in improved teacher retention. Mollenkopf (2009) and Anderson (2008) emphasize that rural education presents unique advantages and

offers distinct opportunities for embracing a close-knit community, personalized learning experiences, and a deeper connection with nature and the local environment, which urban and suburban schools may not fully harness. Additionally, instructing in a rural school presents a range of advantageous aspects, such as a lower student-teacher ratio, fewer behavior-related challenges, increased independence, and a more significant role in shaping school regulations (Monk, 2007). Beginning teachers in rural areas should recognize the chance to develop strong connections with students and the community, understanding that these relationships significantly impact students' lives, as emphasized by Malloy and Allen (2007) and Monk (2007).

Another advantage is that large school districts in rural areas generally experience low teacher turnover rates (Barley, 2009). Moreover, the presence of homegrown teachers with a deep understanding and appreciation for rural life and community increases the likelihood of them staying and teaching in or near their hometowns (Harris et al., 2005; Nurbayev, 2021). Their deep connection to the community, familial ties, and understanding of rural practice and culture make them valuable assets (Howley & Howley, 2005).

Based on Huysman's (2007) study, teachers who are native to the area hold a favorable belief that there exists a balanced distribution of power within the district. This balance tends to benefit teachers who have worked there before, as they are given more significant opportunities and elevated esteem due to their deep understanding of the local community. On the other hand, rural teachers not originally from rural areas felt that power and influence were often granted based on relationships rather than merit, leading to dissatisfaction and a reduced sense of contribution within the school (Huysman, 2007). Consequently, rural schools are more prone to experiencing the departure of teachers from urban areas through voluntary means, regardless of their qualifications or performance,

worsening the challenge of teacher retention (Hayes, 2009; Howley & Howley, 2005; Lowe, 2006; McClure & Reeves, 2004).

Kazakhstan's state program supports beginning teachers in rural schools: "With a Diploma - to the Village." The program requires teachers to commit to working in their relevant specialty within rural communities for at least three years. Successful applicants are eligible for a living allowance as a financial incentive, and social support is also available to purchase or construct housing (Nurbay, 2019). According to Nurbayev (2021), the program has seen an almost doubling increase, with the number of young specialists increasing from 3,300 to 6,000 people annually. Notably, the regions that have benefitted the most from this program are Turkestan (6,703), Almaty (6,253), and West Kazakhstan (5,184). Despite these positive outcomes, some areas in Kazakhstan, such as Kostanay, Pavlodar, and North Kazakhstan, continue to face labor shortages regardless of the program's incentives (Nurbayev, 2021).

The issue of retaining teachers in rural schools involves various factors. Evidence from Fry (2007), Kono (2012), Rosenberg et al. (2014), and Showalter et al. (2017) indicate that the existence of teacher induction programs significantly influences retention rates. Kono (2012) suggests that well-designed induction programs have been proven to decrease the probability of teachers leaving the profession. Moreover, mentoring initiatives have also been recognized as beneficial in addressing teacher attrition and fostering retention.

2.3. Teacher Induction and Mentorship

Teacher induction serves as a policy mechanism aimed at aiding beginning teachers in adapting to the challenges and dynamics of the teaching field by providing guidance and instructional preparation (Çobanoğlu & Ayvaz-Tuncel, 2018). These programs aim to increase teacher retention rates by delivering beginning teachers the assistance they need to

hone their craft and improve their performance (Ingersoll, 2012). To understand the success of these teacher programs, one needs to examine the parts of the programs themselves.

2.3.1. Elements of Effective Induction Programs

Programs of teacher induction, comprised of various components, were created to aid beginning teachers as they start their careers and to address the pervasive issue of teacher shortages. Horn et al. (2002) provide a comprehensive framework, identifying nine crucial components that effective teacher induction programs should encompass. These elements include orientation, mentoring, adjustment to working conditions, release time, professional development opportunities, teacher assessment, program evaluation, and follow-up into the second year. Furthermore, Espinoza et al. (2018) highlight crucial aspects of successful induction programs. These include beginning teachers accessing an external teacher network, being guided by a mentor with a comparable teaching background, regular engagement with experienced mentors, and subject-aligned planning with fellow teachers. While the assistance provided in these programs may differ, mentorship is vital as beginning teachers develop and execute curriculum plans (Espinoza et al., 2018).

Mentorship

Mentorship is typical in most teacher induction programs (Portner, 2008), often involving a personalized connection with an experienced colleague within the school community. In this setup, the mentor takes on the role of guiding and supporting the beginning teacher. As Kelley (2004) suggests, mentors are chosen based on policy criteria, considering their demonstrated teaching excellence, willingness to collaborate, and commitment to personal and professional growth, as outlined in the policy guidelines. In more ideal and practical policy-driven scenarios, mentors are relieved of some of their regular teaching duties to focus on the specific needs of beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith Washington, 2024). Beginning educators who received mentoring within the same

subject area and participated in professional development alongside their peers demonstrated significantly reduced attrition rates during their first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

In Kazakhstan, the “On Teacher Status” law (MoES, 2019) outlines a mentorship process involving assessments, personalized action plans, and lesson observations for beginning teachers. However, Syzdykbayeva (2021) observes disparities, particularly in rural schools where mentor availability may be limited, leading to mismatches in subject qualifications between mentors and mentees. Moreover, Irsaliyev et al. (2019) and Syzdykbayeva (2021) highlight a trend toward more formal mentorship structures within Kazakhstan’s education system.

Formal mentorship typically entails structured and documented processes for mentoring, often with predefined goals and assessments. This contrasts with informal mentoring, which may be more flexible and based on personal relationships and experiences. The shift towards formal mentorship suggests a move towards standardized practices, possibly at the expense of personalized support.

The connection between formal mentorship and the TALIS data lies in prioritizing administrative tasks over informal mentorship activities. TALIS-2018 data indicates that schools prioritize administrative duties, potentially neglecting activities like collaborative planning, teacher practice, and research, which are vital for effective mentorship and professional development (OECD, 2019). This suggests a mismatch between policy intentions, as outlined in the Law on Teacher Status, and the actual practices observed in schools.

2.3.2. Teacher Induction Programs’ Impact

Research indicates that well-structured teacher induction programs can significantly reduce teacher attrition rates (Kono, 2012). This observation aligns with the research by DeAngelis et al. (2013), suggesting that the adoption of impactful policies for teacher

induction programs not only addresses retention challenges but also contributes to improving teacher professional development. Multiple research studies have confirmed a robust link between meticulously designed induction programs that foster a positive and productive environment and teacher retention (Kelley, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Moreover, as noted by Stanulis et al. (2012), these programs have been shown to positively influence teaching quality, consequently leading to improved student achievement. The success of teacher induction programs is rooted in their holistic approach, addressing not only the professional needs of educators but also nurturing a positive and collaborative culture within the school community.

2.3.3. Challenges in Induction Programs

Although multiple researchers confirm induction programs as an effective policy for beginning teachers' adaptation and support, several problems must be addressed. For instance, research by Darling-Hammond and Sykes (1999) suggests that the challenge of catering to diverse skill levels among beginning teachers still exists in contemporary induction programs. The study emphasizes the need for personalized support structures, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all model may not effectively address the unique needs of each teacher. Similarly, Kang and Berliner (2012) indicate that while there have been improvements in the content of induction programs, many still struggle to provide in-depth and tailored support, relying on generic workshops and orientations. On the contrary, recent work by Bowden and Portis-Woodson (2017) suggests increasing acknowledgment of the beneficial effect of induction programs on teacher retention rates. However, challenges persist regarding these programs' organizational structure and consistency. Many induction initiatives, as highlighted by Podolsky et al. (2016), still lack a well-organized and consistent approach, hindering their effectiveness. In rural areas, providing an individualized approach is challenging.

Bowden and Portis-Woodson's (2017) observation that induction programs may not significantly influence teacher retention rates is echoed in recent studies. Research by Kearney (2021) suggests that while induction programs have evolved, they often place additional responsibilities on beginning teachers without providing adequate support. This finding aligns with the notion that induction programs can sometimes add to the workload rather than alleviate the challenges beginning educators face.

Interestingly, there is a lack of established policies related to induction programs in Kazakhstan (Syzdykbayeva, 2021). This highlights an ongoing gap in policy development that could contribute to the challenges faced by beginning teachers in the country.

2.4. Professional Socialization and Skills Mismatch in Beginning Teachers

Teacher training programs are specifically crafted to provide aspiring teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and methodologies essential for their careers in teaching. Nonetheless, there appears to be a conspicuous lack of specific programs designed to assist in supporting beginning teachers in rural schools after completing their studies (Miles & Knipe, 2018). As a result, the challenges of transitioning faced by beginning teachers in rural settings could potentially diverge from those encountered by their urban counterparts. Regrettably, many beginning teachers in Kazakhstan face challenges when confronted with the demands of rural school settings (Tajik et al., 2021).

One of the primary challenges that beginning teachers often encounter is the process of professional socialization, which involves navigating intricate dynamics within their work environments (Shamatov, 2006). They frequently face a disconnect between the knowledge and skills acquired as beginning teachers during university practice teaching placements and the reality of those demanded in the workplace (Irsaliyev et al., 2019; Rysbekkyzy, 2014). Beginning teachers may feel overwhelmed as they grapple with unfamiliar aspects of their job, leading to a sense of unpreparedness (Farrell, 2016). As a result, crucial competencies

like collaborative teamwork with peers, delivering constructive feedback to students, and engaging in self-assessment for professional development might be deficient. This mismatch can hinder the professional socialization process of beginning teachers and contribute to stress and anxiety (Shamatov, 2006).

A study by Farrell (2016) found that numerous beginning teachers excel in their university studies and eagerly anticipate embarking on their careers as qualified educators. However, during their initial years of employment, new hires often leave the profession due to the discrepancy in required skills and the actual reality of the job. Interestingly, the primary reason for their departure is not related to challenges with students but rather stems from the absence of structured programs intended to aid beginning teachers in transitioning from academia to the workplace (Mandel, 2006). The findings of these studies indicate that the quality of teaching support provided during the first year plays a pivotal role in retaining beginning teachers within the profession, highlighting the significance of support beyond tertiary education.

Both Shamatov's (2006) and Kennedy's (2016) study a decade later ascertain that even though beginning teachers possess a strong passion for their profession, they encounter difficulties in managing the professional expectations associated with their role. Consequently, school principals or assigned mentors must prioritize personal and professional assistance during the transition to alleviate beginning educators' transitional challenges.

2.4.1. Diverse Education Experiences

Teaching in rural schools offers beginning teachers valuable opportunities to work with diverse student populations, enabling them to profoundly understand various learning needs and develop culturally responsive teaching approaches (Ewing & Smith, 2003).

Moreover, the resource constraints present in rural schools also push beginning teachers to be

innovative and creative in their instructional methods (Miller & Hellstein, 2017). Beginning teachers in rural schools must engage students and deliver effective instruction using alternative ways due to limited materials and technology, as noted by White (2019). Consequently, this necessity fosters the development of unique teaching strategies tailored to rural communities' specific needs and contexts (Shikalepo, 2020), which can enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and expand their repertoire of instructional techniques.

Nevertheless, beginning teachers face a significant barrier in coping with classroom diversity despite the positive aspects outlined in the literature (McGhie-Richmond, 2013; Miles & Knipe, 2018). McGhie-Richmond (2013) asserts that many beginning teachers complete their training without an adequate understanding of inclusive education and its associated policies, leaving them ill-equipped to teach in classrooms with diverse student populations. This lack of preparation can lead to initial struggles when faced with learners with diverse needs, cultural backgrounds, and financial situations, as beginning teachers may erroneously view all students as homogeneous (Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Howley, 2009). Consequently, they feel uncertain about effectively addressing the varying needs of their students in such diverse classrooms. To effectively address the challenges linked to various classes, McGhie-Richmond et al. (2013) highlights the importance of teachers gaining knowledge about inclusive education policies and acquiring the necessary competencies to apply these policies in practice, particularly in rural schools, where student diversity can be more pronounced.

2.4.2. Leadership and Community Engagement

In addition to the diverse teaching experience opportunities, teaching in rural areas also offers promising prospects for beginning educators to take on leadership roles within their schools and communities (Darling-Hammond, 2003). As smaller school settings are conducive to more active participation in extracurricular activities, mentorship of other

teachers, and community development projects, beginning teachers can contribute significantly to the overall growth and improvement of the school and community.

Furthermore, engaging in such leadership opportunities enables them to establish a solid professional network and gain recognition for their efforts (White, 2019).

Studies indicate that teaching in rural schools extends beyond mere academic instruction, enabling educators to forge enduring connections with students and community members, thereby offering them the opportunity to significantly impact the lives of young people (Lowe, 2006; Manwa et al., 2019; Miller, 2012). Teachers may integrate themselves as essential community members to cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose (Castro et al., 2010). Consequently, many educators find joy in teaching in rural schools as they appreciate the authentic engagement with the curriculum, introducing students to new ideas, authors, and places, and building meaningful connections with their learners (Petroni & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021). Additionally, feeling valued and accepted by the community is crucial for teachers' overall well-being and sense of belonging (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2018).

2.4.3. Classroom Management

Beginning teachers express significant concerns about classroom management (Shoulders & Krei, 2015). They highlight various issues such as learner misbehavior, excessive talking during lessons, learners not following instructions, and a lack of respect, all of which make it challenging for them to establish a well-organized learning environment and effectively manage their classrooms. Moreover, as Cucchiara et al. (2015) point out, beginning teachers in rural schools often encounter added hurdles, such as a perceived lack of control over the classroom setting and the stress of assessments.

These factors can significantly impact beginning teachers' teaching experience and professional development in rural educational settings. As per Miles and Knipe's (2018) research findings, beginning teachers pinpointed classroom management and student

behavior issues as the most daunting obstacles. They desired more time to acclimate to their teaching roles before being assigned administrative responsibilities for managing classrooms (Shikalepo, 2020). A recent study within a rural school district found that numerous new teachers faced challenges in establishing efficient classroom management techniques. This difficulty frequently disrupted the learning atmosphere, causing heightened stress for both students and educators, as observed by Kingsford-Smith et al. (2023)

2.4.4. Intensification

Intensification refers to the scenario where teachers increase the extent of their workload in reaction to external pressures or internal motivations. This idea has garnered significant attention in education due to the mounting pressures teachers face and the potential impacts on their job satisfaction and overall welfare (Ballet et al., 2006; Hargreaves, 1994).

As noted by several researchers, beginning teachers often face an overwhelming workload during their first year of teaching, which can significantly deplete their energy and enthusiasm and contribute to the significant attrition rate among them. They must handle various responsibilities, including classroom management, discipline, test preparation, and lesson planning. Moreover, school administrators might anticipate beginning teachers performing similarly to experienced educators, even without adequate induction or support. These high expectations often lead to disillusionment, ultimately resulting in the premature departure of beginning teachers from the profession (Erawan 2019; Farrel, 2016; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

According to Gimranova et al. (2021), in Kazakhstan, a teacher's salary in a mainstream school is based on the Soviet Stavka System, where workload and subsequent compensation are measured in teaching hours. There is no minimum workload, but a 27-hour cap (1.5 stavkas) exists, extendable to two stavkas in case of shortages. Beginning teachers

often get fewer hours, resulting in lower pay, as more hours are assigned to senior teachers. This leaves beginning teachers with less than one stavka, with an additional burden of uncompensated tasks like organizing activities, providing remedial support, participating in events, and paperwork, further lowering the income and job appeal (OECD, 2014).

2.4.5. School Environment

Conflicts are common in rural schools, often resulting in communication breakdown among colleagues. This hostile school environment impedes beginning teachers' growth and development (Shamatov, 2006). In such circumstances, beginning teachers may be entangled in power struggles without knowing how to navigate these complex situations (Simon & Johnson, 2013).

An investigation conducted by Allensworth et al. (2009) reveals that whether a beginning teacher persists in their profession or departs prematurely is significantly shaped by the school environment and the support they receive. To foster the enduring commitment of beginning teachers to the profession, seasoned mentors, expert educators, and school management should extend their support in managing administrative duties as these new educators adapt to their roles (Anderson, 2008; Hobarat & Schafft, 2009). Supporting beginning teachers leads to short-term improvements in student performance, fosters the beginning teacher's confidence development, and contributes to higher professional retention rates (Boyd et al., 2011).

Acknowledged as critical figures in fostering effective school functioning, school principals are crucial in nurturing a positive school environment and implementing strategies such as induction programs to assist in integrating beginning teachers into the educational environment (Huber & Muijs, 2010). Creating an empowering and supportive school environment positively impacts learners' academic outcomes (Jorissen, 2002). It is recommended that principals proactively connect with newly appointed teachers, develop a

personal understanding of them, and enlist fellow members of the school's teaching team to provide academic support (Huber & Muijs, 2010). However, a significant obstacle encountered in rural school settings is the scarcity of seasoned educators, primarily attributed to their transfer from rural to urban schools once they get a bit of experience, as highlighted by Lowe (2006) and White et al. (2009).

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the theoretical framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, which is influenced by the foundational ideas of Freire (1970). Freire's notion of empowerment education for critical consciousness underscores the significance of individual and communal involvement in attaining social justice (Carlson et al., 2006). This approach, often linked with emancipatory community development strategies, advocates for collaborative dialogue to foster critical comprehension and proactive measures (Freire, 1970).

Through this framework, the research seeks to empower educators to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-educational landscape and enable them to address challenges within their context effectively. This framework also aided in shaping the research question, designing the study, and interpreting findings and discussion. It provided a theoretical foundation for understanding the importance of critical dialogue and community involvement in exploring beginning teachers' experiences in Kazakhstan's rural schools.

2.6. Summary

The literature review comprehensively explores the challenges and opportunities faced by beginning rural teachers, covering topics such as rural living characteristics, common school challenges, teacher preparation and support strategies, and recruitment and retention issues. It highlights specific challenges these teachers encounter, including managing classroom diversity, classroom management, professional socialization, skills mismatch, and the impact of the school environment on teacher retention. Additionally, the

review acknowledges positive experiences that rural beginning teachers may have, such as close-knit communities and solid teacher-student relationships. Implementing supportive strategies, including mentorship and induction programs, is emphasized.

While the experiences of beginning rural teachers are well-documented worldwide, there is a shortage of relevant studies in Kazakhstan. This study thereby aims to shed light on the challenges and positive aspects, guided by the theoretical framework of empowerment education. The subsequent chapter will describe the research design, data collection, and analysis procedures and conclude with an acknowledgment of ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis methods used to explore the unique experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan. The rationale behind adopting a qualitative research approach and selecting the photovoice method for data collection will be discussed. Furthermore, an overview of the research site and sample will be provided, including the recruitment strategy for participants. The ethical considerations regarding informed consent and confidentiality will also be addressed. Lastly, the data analysis process will be outlined, highlighting the steps taken to derive themes and insights from the collected photovoice data. This chapter aims to clearly describe the methodology employed in this study to gain comprehensive insights into the experiences of beginning teachers in rural Kazakhstani schools.

3.2. Research Question

Since this study aims to explore the unique experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice, the primary research question is: How do beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools?

This question is entirely consistent with the principles of qualitative research. Creswell and Guetterman (2019) emphasize that when conducting qualitative research, it is essential for the question to encompass and revolve around the central concept under investigation. In this case, the question focuses on beginning teachers' experiences in rural Kazakhstani schools. Moreover, it appeals to the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each individual and clarifies the unique challenges and opportunities identified by beginning teachers in Kazakhstan's rural, ungraded schools. This is in alignment with Merriam and Tisdell (2015), who point out that "in qualitative research, questions often identify areas of

inquiry for what to observe in a field observation” (p.78). Additionally, the question is specific enough to guide the study toward a meaningful conclusion.

3.3. Research Design

Choosing a research design begins with recognizing the problem and the fundamental concept that directs the study (Mey, 2022). According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative research involves delving into and comprehending the significance of individuals or groups concerning a social or human matter. This research method encompasses developing inquiries and methodologies, collecting data typically within participants’ natural settings, employing inductive data analysis to uncover recurring themes from observations, and ultimately facilitating the researcher’s interpretation of the data’s significance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Given that this study aims to explore the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan from their perspectives, a qualitative research design is the most appropriate choice.

3.4. Method

This research employed photovoice, an art-based, qualitative method utilized in community-based participatory research (Cook & Quigley, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice empowers community participants to employ photography, accompanied by narratives about their images, to portray and to effectively elucidate issues of significance to them. The underlying principles of critical consciousness, feminism, and documentary photography form the theoretical basis of this research approach, which, in turn, fosters opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

In essence, photovoice is a powerful tool for generating data that enriches our comprehension of people’s experiences (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Integrating visual and narrative components into exploratory inquiry yields additional layers of insight, facilitating a deeper understanding of the community and its unique perspective (Goodhart et al., 2006).

The process involves capturing images as a compelling medium to convey their community's stories, offering a rich and vivid portrayal of their realities (Wang & Burris, 1997). Through their involvement in the study, participants assume the roles of both researchers and agents for driving change within their communities (Kordanova & CohenMiller, 2022).

In this research, the photovoice method is employed to explore and gain insights into the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan. To achieve this objective, participating teachers utilized their smartphones to visually document the various situations and instances of growth they encountered in and around their rural school settings. The study seeks to create a platform for these beginning teachers in rural schools, enabling them to discuss their experiences and identify their specific needs.

3.5. Research Site and Sample

To understand the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools, I selected 6 ungraded mainstream schools in the rural districts of Kostanay and Karagandy regions. These regions are ideal because of the significant concentration of ungraded schools, where students from multiple grades are combined into one class. Additionally, these schools encounter challenges such as recruiting and retaining teachers, inadequate materials and technical resources (including ICT equipment and internet access), infrastructure issues, and isolation from urban centers (Nurbayev, 2021). The investigation of these beginning teachers' experiences holds immense importance and interest due to their unique circumstances.

On average, these schools have a student population ranging from 200 to 500 students, with around 50 subject-specialist teachers with diverse educational backgrounds, including vocational and higher education. Additionally, these schools offer instruction in both Kazakh and Russian languages.

By exploring the experiences of beginning teachers in these ungraded schools, valuable insights can be uncovered to address challenges and identify potential areas for

improvement in rural education. This research has the potential to inform policy decisions and educational reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and providing better support for educators in these regions (Nikiforuk et al., 2011).

Wang and Burris (1997) propose a recommended sample size of 6-10 participants for qualitative photovoice studies. The research design employed in this study involved closely collaborating with 8 beginning teachers from rural schools, each with up to 5 years of teaching experience. This targeted approach aligns with the principles of purposive sampling, where participants are deliberately chosen for their specific characteristics pertinent to the research question.

Purposive sampling, presented by Creswell (2013) as a common strategy in qualitative research to ensure participants offer diverse and rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation, will also be pertinent to this study. In this context, the chosen group of beginning teachers from rural schools with limited teaching experience is uniquely positioned to provide valuable perspectives on their own experiences and challenges.

Additionally, as Leavy (2017) suggests, convenience sampling further streamlined recruitment. Utilizing a multi-pronged recruitment approach, including the promotion of study invitation letters (see Appendix B), the study aimed to ensure the accessibility and availability of participants. This aligns with convenience sampling, wherein participants are chosen based on accessibility and availability.

3.6. Data Collection

After participants had been recruited for the study, they received comprehensive information about the research goals and procedures. Initially, participants attended an online individual photovoice training session, acquainting themselves with the arts-based, community-based participatory research approach and learning how to conduct the method effectively. Proper education of participants on conducting a photovoice study and collecting

data was crucial for ensuring the credibility of research findings and empowering participants to express their perspectives effectively (Latz, 2017). During the individual session, they learned how to use photovoice to adequately convey their rural school experiences. They were also briefed on the guiding principles for completing the photovoice task and provided with an understanding of their role as co-researchers.

Each participant received handouts about the research overview and photovoice methodology during the online session. Also, handouts included consent letters, preliminary schedules, and sample photographs and narratives to acquaint participants with the method. All session materials were provided to participants at no cost other than their time.

Participants were asked to capture images using their smartphones that depicted their experiences in rural schools as part of the data collection process. They submitted 6 photographs and written themes and narratives for discussion during the semi-structured interviews. The researcher's laptop is secured with password protection and touch ID to ensure the security of all stored data. It is important to note that images containing children, people's faces, or identifiable objects were blurred to protect the subjects' identities. However, it was recommended that participants avoid including people in their photos or to only photograph them from the back.

Photovoice has been demonstrated as a meaningful method for conducting semi-structured interviews, empowering voices, and fostering inclusive dialogues (Liebenberg, 2018). Therefore, participants were interviewed individually to discuss their captured images and the accompanying narratives about the research question. Participants articulated themes from their daily teaching experiences during interviews. As the facilitator, I encouraged participants to explore and deepen their responses on a personal level. The participants were familiarized with the SHOWED approach, inspired by Wan and Burren (1997), where each letter in the acronym denotes a particular question. This process guided the interviews (see

Appendix C), encouraging participants to address the following points concerning their photos and the situations they captured. The questions utilized were: What do you See here? What is **H**appening here? How does this relate to **O**ur lives? **W**hy does this concern/situation/strength exist? How can we become **E**ducated/**E**mpowered through our new understanding? Moreover, what can you **D**o? (Wan & Burris, 1997). Following the interviews, participants provided insights regarding their involvement in the photovoice research. This adaptation aligns with Creswell's approach, as he highlights the suitability of qualitative methods based on the research goals and context (Creswell, 2013).

3.7. Data Analysis

Data for this study was gathered through photovoice submissions from participants, including photographs accompanied by written narratives and audio recordings made during the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D). Descriptive coding and thematic analysis techniques were employed to identify and categorize visual and written themes. This analysis followed the photovoice analysis method outlined by Wang and Burris (1997).

The three steps Wang and Burris (1997) outlined were as follows. First, the participants selected photographs representing their experiences, strengths, and challenges. These photographs were used later in the study's data analysis stage. Next, participants provided context to their chosen images by offering detailed explanations and interpretations through written narratives and interviews, articulating their experiences, and identifying recurring themes. Lastly, the researcher used descriptive coding and thematic analysis to identify and sort themes and phrases that represent the participants' experiences.

Table 1*Steps for Data Analysis*


Step	Procedure	Participants' Task	Researcher's Task
1.	Collect Photographs	Select photographs Representing their experience, strengths, and challenges.	Gather the photographs Selected by the participants for later analysis.
2.	Contextualization	Provide explanations and interpretations of the selected photographs through written narratives and interviews	Observe and analyze the narratives, enabling participants to express their experiences.
3.	Codifying	Identify, sort, and categorize the data.	Utilize descriptive coding and thematic analysis to extract themes and phrases from the data.

It is essential to highlight that photographs were also regarded as a data source in my study and incorporated into the analysis process. Thus, it was the responsibility of research participants to attribute meaning and provide analysis through their stories.

I did two coding cycles for the codifying step since most researchers rarely execute code well on their first try (Saldana, 2013). These codes were then thoughtfully organized into a detailed summary table (see Table 2), providing a structured view of the interview content and relevant quotes. Moving forward, I connected the dots between these codes to unearth themes, offering a comprehensive understanding of the participant's unique experiences. Overall, this process allowed for a systematic and insightful data exploration.

Table 2

Sample of Data Analysis

Photo	Coding (First Cycle and Second Cycle)	Notes of a researcher	Themes
<p>Figure 11</p> <p><i>It was simply a catastrophe</i></p> 	<p>“The absence of a mentor is the first and foremost problem I faced when starting this job in a rural school. While the law on the teacher’s status does specify mandatory support for young professionals in their first year, in the school where I got hired, the most suitable person, the director, had this role, and as is well known, directors are not assigned mentorship responsibilities. It was a catastrophe for me, as all the necessary documentation was entirely new, and I had to navigate it alone.”</p>	<p>The lack of mentorship, despite expectations, left the teacher disappointed and unsupported. The unclear organizational structure regarding assigning mentors and mentoring responsibilities exacerbates the problem, leaving her alone to solve her tasks.</p>	<p><i>Absence of Mentorship</i></p> <p><i>Lack of Qualified Mentors</i></p>

The analysis of the photovoice data underwent a thorough process, allowing the researcher to understand the perspectives and experiences of the participants systematically and creatively (Liebenberg, 2018).

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical principles were strictly adhered to, ensuring the integrity of the study. Informed consent (see Appendix E) was obtained from each participant, the fundamental code of research ethics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each teacher who voluntarily participated in the study was fully informed about the potential advantages and risks. They received all the essential information to make a well-informed decision about their involvement. Moreover, participants were notified that they could opt out of the study without encountering negative consequences, and any photographs they contributed would be erased.

Careful consideration was given when selecting the methods and techniques for conducting the individual semi-structured interviews, enabling the collection and analysis of reliable data, ultimately leading to a well-founded study. To safeguard the confidentiality of the teachers and their families, photographs featuring identifiable faces or information were blurred. Moreover, participants were encouraged to choose pseudonyms that could be used throughout the research. The entirety of the data was stored on the researcher's laptop, which was secured with password and touch ID protection.

3.9. Summary

This chapter discussed the research method aimed at studying the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan. It examined the strategies for conducting this research using photovoice and analyzing the collected data. Information about the data collection procedure within the information-gathering framework was also detailed. The

following chapter will discuss critical findings explored through photos, written narratives, and semi-structured interviews of the participants.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Introduction

The primary goal of this chapter is to elucidate the data analysis process and communicate the outcomes derived from the research. The chapter's structure is crafted to address the overarching research question: How do beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools? I present the findings for each participant individually, illustrated through shared photos, as this enables a more distinct exploration of their experiences in rural schools. In addition, analysis of the participants' stories intricately integrates Freire's (1970) theoretical framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, enriching the exploration of their experiences. Subsequently, in the Discussion chapter, I analyze the similarities and differences in the stories of the 8 participants concerning the six major themes identified through thematic analysis, connecting this to the literature and theoretical framework. The six key themes identified are 1) guidance and support experiences; 2) workload and intensification; 3) lack of resources; 4) sense of belonging; 5) school climate; and 6) classroom experiences.

4.2. Aisulu

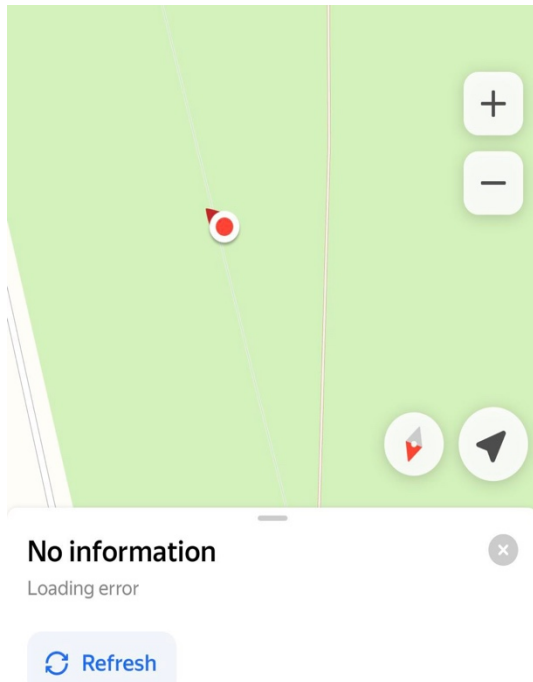
Aisulu is a biology teacher at a rural school with 5 months of work experience. Initially feeling isolated and uncertain in her new environment, she gains confidence through exploration and adaptation, rediscovering and developing her teaching philosophy, emphasizing flexibility over strict rules, and allowing students to explore their interests, aligning closely with Freire's (1970) framework of education as a tool for liberation and empowerment.

Aisulu's story unfolds as a means of self-discovery and purpose among the challenges of her role as a biology teacher in a rural school. Despite being physically and emotionally

distant from familiar places and loved ones, Aisulu found comfort in the depth and purpose that challenges brought to her life (Figure 1):

Figure 1

No information



The map represents my current location as ‘no information.’ I sometimes wonder what I am doing here. I wonder if I would be more useful somewhere else. In another school? And would I be happier living in a city with a more developed infrastructure, a cinema, a fitness center, and a favorite hangout spot? Recently, I found the answer. ‘No.’ Happiness is more of a state of the soul, and external factors do not have as much influence as internal ones. What makes me happy is that every day, I become better, and every day throws challenges at me that I must overcome. Sometimes I succeed, and occasionally I don’t. If it weren’t for the feeling that I was doing something that made this world and myself better, neither the cinema, the fitness center, nor the favorite hangout spot would save me.

The isolated setting, marked as ‘no information’ on the map, made her question the purpose of her presence in this new environment. However, Aisulu realized that happiness stems from personal growth and overcoming challenges rather than external factors.

Aisulu further expanded her experience related to the move to the new place. The move to a new place triggered fear due to Aisulu’s vulnerability in an unfamiliar environment. Over time, thanks to actively exploring the surroundings and getting accustomed to new conditions, Aisulu can enjoy evening walks again. In the interview, Aisulu noted that this experience underscores the importance of adaptation and overcoming fears through gradual familiarization with new situations (Figure 2):

Figure 2

I love evening walks.



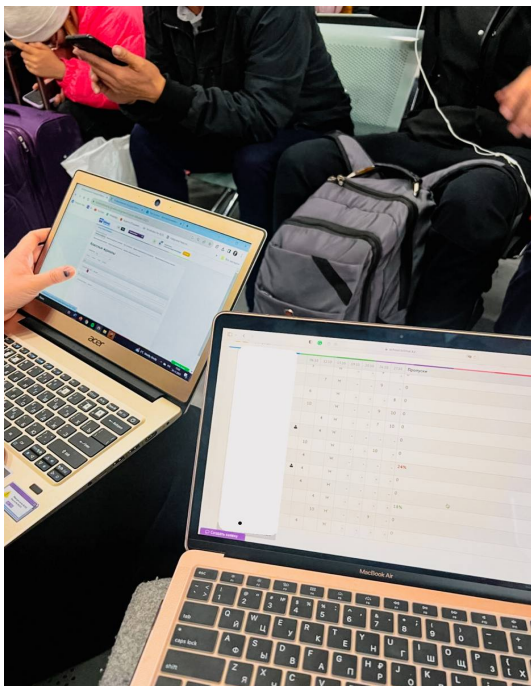
I love evening walks. This habit formed during my undergraduate studies, walking in the evening after finishing all tasks and deadlines. Walking during the day isn’t enjoyable, as thoughts are constantly spinning around like ‘this needs to be done, what’s urgent, and so on.’ With the move to this place, I had to give up this habit

because walking in the evening in an unfamiliar place seemed very scary. It's not that the place is dangerous, or people are mean, nothing like that. It's the unknown that is frightening. Plus, there isn't lighting everywhere. It took me two months to love and make friends in this new place. Now, it's familiar to me. Evening walks are with me again.

Due to the village's remoteness, Aisulu and her colleagues travel to conferences in another city for professional development. However, this was accompanied by difficulties at work. A crucial moment at a conference exemplifies the unpredictable nature of a teacher's professional life in a rural school. The need to adapt to unexpected tasks and changes becomes a constant companion, highlighting the high level of readiness and responsibility demanded from educators in rural schools, even beyond the school walls, as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Unexpected Tasks



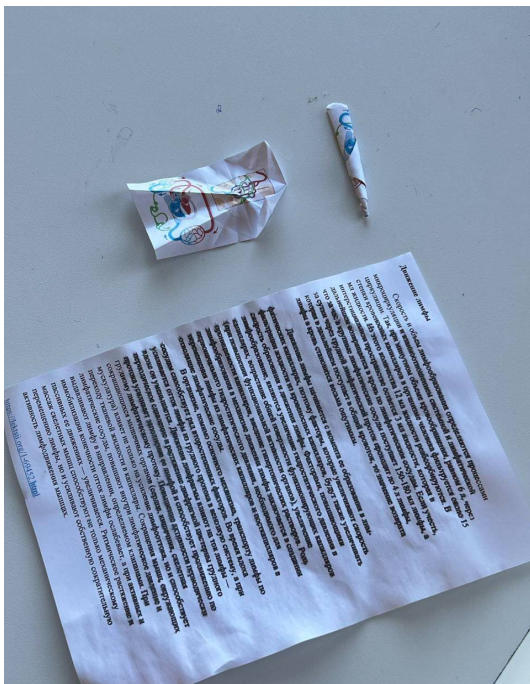
During fall break, a colleague and I attended a teachers' professional development conference in another city. After the conference we were waiting for a delayed train.

The delay was fortunate as my colleague urgently needed to make changes to the school reports.

A significant aspect of Aisulu's struggle becomes apparent as she grapples with the physical and emotional strain of motivating students, especially when faced with deliberate mistreatment of carefully prepared materials. In an interview, Aisulu noted that working with rural children requires more effort to encourage them. The disheartening nature of this experience underscores the challenges teachers face in capturing students' attention. Despite her dedication, Aisulu encounters resistance and intentional disrespect toward the educational resources she provides, emphasizing the uphill battle teachers often face in fostering a positive and engaging learning environment (Figure 4).

Figure 4

How to motivate these guys to study?



The most disheartening part is when students deliberately mistreat carefully prepared materials, showing disinterest and defiance. The challenge is how to motivate these

students to study, and unfortunately, I haven't found the answer yet. Despite being tired, I gather the crumpled pieces of my materials around the classroom after lessons.

However, the narrative then introduces a pivotal shift in Aisulu's approach to teaching. Aisulu shares a profound insight with the phrase "Learn to love stupid things," which strongly influences her teaching philosophy. In the interview, she highlights the significance of avoiding strict rules and opting for a more observant and open-minded approach towards children. Aisulu expresses her commitment to not restricting students excessively, stating, "Instead of enforcing strict rules, I tried not to restrict children too much and just observe their actions." Despite the inherent challenges, she advocates a creative and flexible method, allowing students to showcase their individuality and explore topics that interest them.

4.3. Saltanat

Saltanat, a beginning mathematics teacher with 6 months of work experience, sees her relocation to the village as a transformative experience requiring adaptability, resilience, and a willingness to tackle the unique challenges of rural education. She also notes that in rural schools, the connections between teachers and students extend beyond classroom lessons, allowing teachers to pay more attention to each child and establish closer relationships - a principle resonant with Freire (1970) frameworks' advocacy for education that nurtures communal empowerment.

The story of the beginning teacher, Saltanat, describes her move to the village and highlights it as a pivotal moment in her life. During the interview, she reflects a sense of unfamiliarity and alienation. However, she later acknowledges it as a significant stage in her professional and personal development, requiring flexibility, patience, and openness to new experiences and challenges inherent in rural schoolwork (Figure 5):

Figure 5*Silence*

The day I moved to the village, I marked a significant change in my life. Everything felt unfamiliar and strange when I stepped out for my first walk around the town. At that moment, silence wasn't just the absence of noise; it signified the beginning of a new chapter in my life. It reminded me that my new address would require significant adaptation.

Saltanat encounters unexpected challenges and difficulties of rural life, shattering her idealized notions and confronting her with the harsh reality of daily life. This realization leads to deep introspection about returning to the city. However, the water shortage in the village also opens new possibilities, helping her better understand and interact with the community she now lives and works in (Figure 6):

Figure 6*Water Bottle*

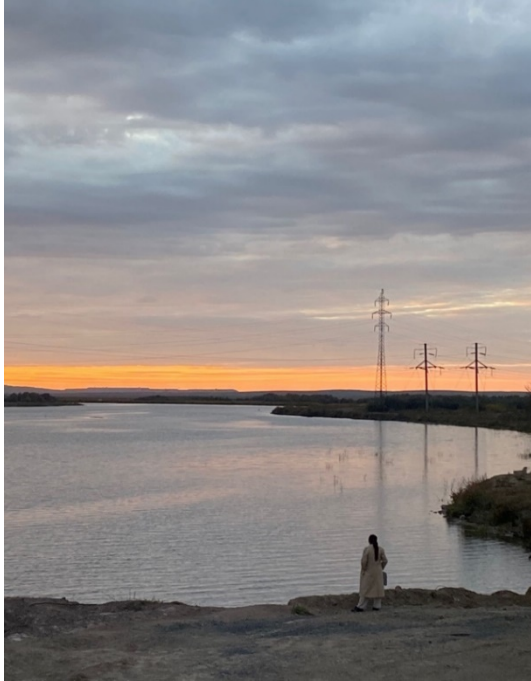
The moment I realized that my perception of village life was overly idealized from movies, and moving there brought a stark reality. Now, I need to gather five 5-liter water bottles and stifle a yawn, not wanting to risk running out of water for five days. I contemplate returning to the city, grappling with the fact that I have all the comforts there. In my daily routine, water suddenly becomes invaluable, once taken for granted. What's intriguing is that during those five days without water, we began interacting more intimately with the villagers. Without the water shortage, we wouldn't have felt the need to integrate so deeply into daily life.

Moments of fatigue from work become opportunities for Saltanat to question and self-reflect. An essential aspect of her story is the appreciation of nature's beauty and the calming effect of natural phenomena such as sunrise and sunset. These moments of observing nature inspire and give insight into her thoughts and feelings. This entire process serves as a path to

self-understanding and inner growth in her professional development in the rural school environment (Figure 7):

Figure 7

Sunrise and Sunset



The stage of adaptation. Moments of fatigue from work, a place where we come to reflect. I don't know how, but I'll find answers to all my questions when I come here. I've just realized that sunrise and sunset are such beautiful spectacles. In other words, it's impossible to convey the beauty of the moment when the sky by the riverbank takes on rich hues of various colors. It's as if it speaks of the silence, the sunset, and the irreversibility of fleeting days.

Saltanat emphasizes that the connections between teachers and students extend beyond classroom lessons in a rural school. She notes that the small teacher-to-student ratio allows teachers to pay more attention to each child and establish closer relationships with them. The following example provided by Saltanat illustrates the importance of relationships in the rural school environment (Figure 8):

Figure 8*Essence of my Work*

During the last lesson of the second quarter, our usual practice of summarizing the quarter's achievements was replaced by New Year's celebrations. We wrote goals, warm wishes, and memories from the past year. Each sticker represented a little story. I was surprised to find that many memories weren't about lessons but rather about our extracurricular activities. Working in the village, relationships extend beyond the classroom. When we spent time together outside of class, decorating the Christmas tree, playing soccer, or simply chatting, I realized how precious those memories were for the children. While the memory sticker symbolizes a milestone in the past, the goal sticker represents the light of new possibilities, instilling a greater sense of confidence in the essence of my work.

Close relationships with students in rural schools also reflect moments of joy and pride when students successfully grasp the material, accompanied by moments of doubt and worry when they struggle. Saltanat notes that in this narrative, the patience and perseverance of the teacher are evident; she encounters various challenges in the rural school but continues to strive to help each student succeed. Saltanat provides an example in Figure 9.

Figure 9*One After the Other*

I remember the moment when I was left alone with their notebooks after the loud noise following classes with fifth graders. As I checked one notebook, I felt proud of my student, but as I checked the next one, I worried because the student didn't understand the topic. And so on, one after the other. Every time I check each notebook page, it seems endless, much like the passing workdays in a rural school.

Saltanat highlights the first day at school as a moment of tears of joy and realization of the meaning of her work. Her participation in the first large-scale event, spending time with the students from morning till night, allows her to see them from a new and deeper perspective (Figure 10):

Figure 10*Tears of Joy*

The first time at school when I cried tears of joy. The first large-scale event was spending time with the students from morning till night, getting to know them from a new perspective. At the closing ceremony of the photo camp party, we shared warm wishes, tying threads around our wrists as a symbol. I was surprised when, one after another, students came up and simply thanked me for coming to the school. It was the moment I understood my work's essence that it genuinely belonged to me.

This moment is crucial in understanding the essence of her work, as she realizes that this work truly belongs to her and that she has become a part of the life and heart of the school community.

4.4. Christina

Christina, a beginning mathematics teacher with 1.6 years of experience, faces difficulties due to a lack of a mentor, highlighting the challenges newcomers in the teaching

field encounter. She emphasizes the importance of mentorship in sharing expertise and aiding in skill development. Additionally, Christina encounters problems with classroom equipment and access to educational materials, which hinders student learning and affects her comfort and motivation — a poignant reflection of the barriers to effective teaching in resource-constrained environments (Freire, 1970).

Christina faced a significant challenge due to the absence of a mentor, highlighting the everyday struggle of beginning teachers who often lack experience in handling various pedagogical tasks. In the interview, she underscored mentors' pivotal role in sharing expertise, cautioning against mistakes, and aiding in developing necessary skills. Christina emphasized the stress of the early stages of a teaching career. She stressed the importance of mentor support in coping with stress, navigating anxiety-inducing situations, and providing emotional support. She shared her hardship in dealing with the absence of mentorship, particularly when faced with unfamiliar documentation (Figure 11).

Figure 11

It was simply a catastrophe.



The absence of a mentor is the first and foremost problem I faced when starting this job in a rural school. While the law on the teacher's status does specify mandatory support for young professionals in their first year, in the school where I got hired, the

most suitable person, the director, had this role, and as is well known, directors are not assigned mentorship responsibilities. It was a catastrophe for me, as all the necessary documentation was entirely new, and I had to navigate it alone.

Additionally, Christina encountered a significant hurdle related to the lack of essential technological resources in her classroom, such as computers, projectors, and interactive boards. She pointed out how this absence can significantly limit students' educational opportunities, hindering the effective implementation of ICT in the curriculum (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Chalk and a Blackboard



The national curriculum demands the implementation of ICT from us; however, the school has not provided us with the necessary equipment. It is challenging to engage children when you have only chalk, a blackboard, and handout materials as visual aids.

Expanding on this issue, Christina highlighted the impact of an uncomfortable workspace on a teacher's overall comfort and job satisfaction, influencing motivation and the perception of the profession (Figure 13).

Figure 13*The Ambivalence of my Routine*

When I started working, I dreamed of having my own office, which I would equip with everything I needed. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough room for an office for me. The teacher's room in our school is also not equipped; sometimes, during breaks, I must check notebooks right on the windowsill. It adds ambivalence to my routine.

Furthermore, insufficient teaching resources, mainly textbooks, emerged as another obstacle for Christina. She emphasized the scarcity of books for students and teachers, compounded by outdated literature in school libraries in her rural school (Figure 14).

Figure 14*Soviet Books*

In our school, there is often a shortage of textbooks, even for students, not to mention teachers. There are undoubtedly electronic textbooks, but many children cannot access computers and phones in rural areas, especially those far from the city. It is very disappointing that school libraries have outdated literature on their shelves.

This deficit of modern resources hampers students' access to diverse and relevant information and challenges teachers in designing comprehensive and engaging lesson plans. Therefore, Christina believes addressing this issue is crucial for promoting effective teaching and achieving educational outcomes in rural educational institutions. As noted by the research participant, she is tackling this problem by creating illustrations, worksheets, and teaching aids.

4.5. Arsen

Arsen is a physics teacher with 2 years of experience facing challenges due to the lack of resources in a rural school. He acknowledges the benefit of small classes in rural schools for personalized learning but notes limitations in educational opportunities. Arsen advocates for a more flexible and creative approach to the issues in rural schools and emphasizes the importance of support from the rural community. Through the lens of Freire's (1970) framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, support from the rural community—a crucial pillar in surmounting the obstacles and nurturing a conducive learning environment for all students.

Arsen conveyed his enthusiasm for the equipment he received for the physics classroom in his interview and accompanying written text. However, he expressed deep disappointment as the school was unprepared to accommodate the equipment, reflecting a common challenge in small rural schools—either the absence of equipment or the inability to use it due to technical limitations (Figure 15).

Figure 15

Until better times...



This equipment has nowhere to be connected, and it is forced to gather dust on the shelves until better times. This is often the case in small rural schools, where there is either no equipment or no possibility to use it.

Arsen acknowledged the positive aspect of the small class size in his school, finding it easier to track the needs of each student and adapt lessons to their understanding. While smaller classes can foster friendly relationships and collaboration, Arsen noted that it may restrict the variety of educational opportunities and lesson formats (Figure 16).

Figure 16

Very Typical Class



Arsen advocated for a more flexible and creative approach to the challenges of working in a rural school. He emphasized that limited resources require creativity, allowing students to enjoy unique learning experiences. Arsen fulfilled a long-time dream by acquiring his telescope, turning a warm evening into a positive gathering where children showed interest in observing stars (Figure 17).

Figure 17*Observing the Stars*

Since childhood, I dreamed of having my telescope... fulfill my dream and acquire one for myself... the children became interested and asked if they could join in observing the stars... on one of the warm evenings, the children gathered at the specified location at the specified time. The emotions and admiration of everyone who joined were only positive.

Arsen highlighted the importance of creativity in teaching, leveraging personal interests to enrich the educational experience, especially in resource-constrained rural settings. He emphasized the creative essence of teachers, as reflected in this photo (Figure 18):

Figure 18*Teacher - a Creative Personality*

This photo perfectly reflects the interests of the young teacher... there is always room for creativity, art, and discoveries... In rural schools, there is often a lack of resources to engage children beyond their direct school-related duties. Many children immediately showed interest in the instrument after deciding to bring his guitar to school one day. Children are always curious about anything new, so many gladly come after classes to learn to play the guitar. Many parents started buying guitars for their children, adding to our modest musical inventory. Though small, the rural school is full of talented students inspired by their achievements in lessons and in expressing themselves through creativity.

Arsen's narrative emphasized close relationships between teachers and students in rural schools. He highlighted the significance of community attention and support, noting that parents are purchasing guitars for their children after his initiative showcased the importance of such support.

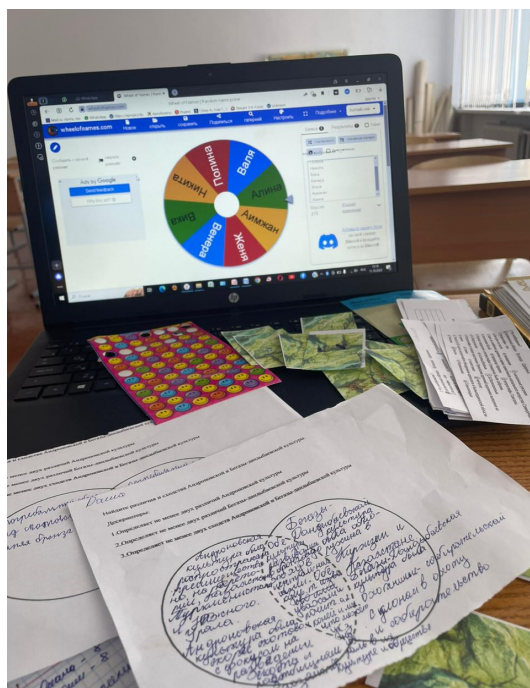
4.6. Gulnara

Gulnara is a history teacher with 5 months of experience working in a rural school. She actively applies creative teaching methods and strives to develop analytical thinking skills in her students. Despite the lack of technological support and challenges in balancing work and personal life, she remains dedicated to her profession and aims to provide high-quality education. Gulnara’s dedication to nurturing analytical thinking aligns with Freire’s (1970) empowerment education, fostering critical consciousness among community.

Gulnara focuses on fifth graders and brings a unique and creative approach to education. However, Gulnara, like other participants, emphasizes the lack of technological infrastructure and resources in her rural school as a hindrance to effective teaching, stating, “My classroom has no interactive board, which is a significant drawback, so I bring my laptop every day so that students can perceive information visually” (Figure 19).

Figure 19

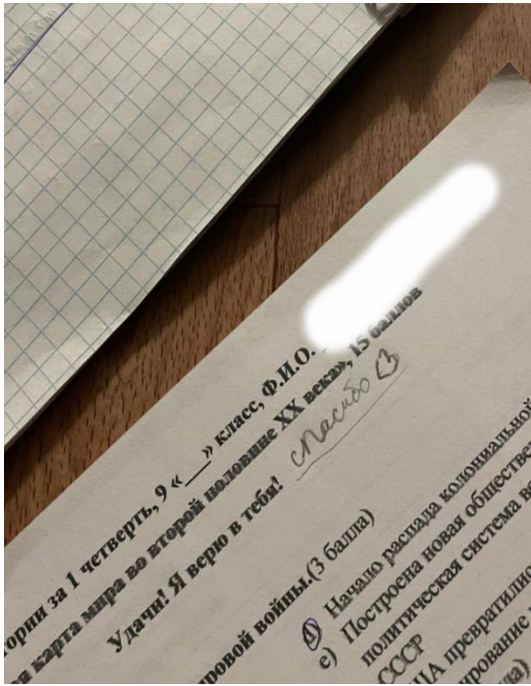
Significant Drawback



Despite the challenges, Gulnara aims to make lessons interactive, fostering analytical, critical thinking, and independent skills in her students. She seeks to ignite a genuine interest in history, ensuring a unique and inspiring learning experience. See Figure 20.

Figure 20

Joy to the Kids



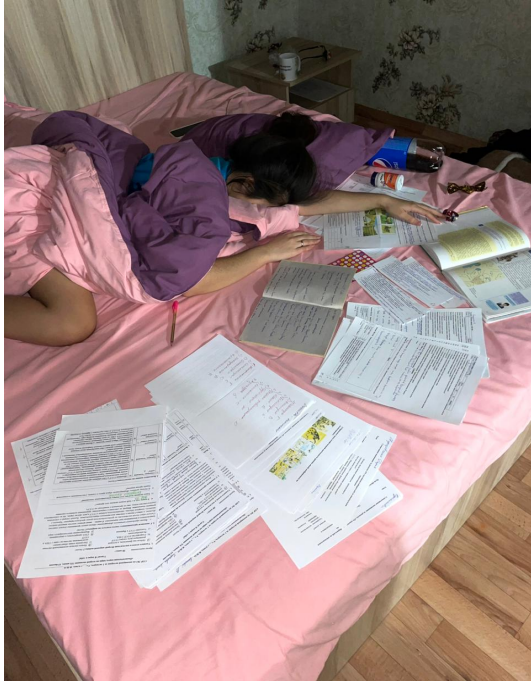
The best way to solidify learning new material is when the student desires it. I try to cultivate that desire in my students. Using various cards, drawings, tables, games, and interactive lessons makes information more accessible to comprehend. In assessments, I consistently try to encourage the children. It takes a minute of my time, but it brings joy to the kids.

Gulnara's narrative unveils her innovative teaching methods and the challenges she encounters professionally. Despite her passion for creating engaging lessons, she faces a lack of support from some colleagues and a shortage of mentorship in her school. Her struggles

with work-life balance become evident as she invests substantial time in lesson preparation and grading, which occasionally leads to sleep deprivation (Figure 21).

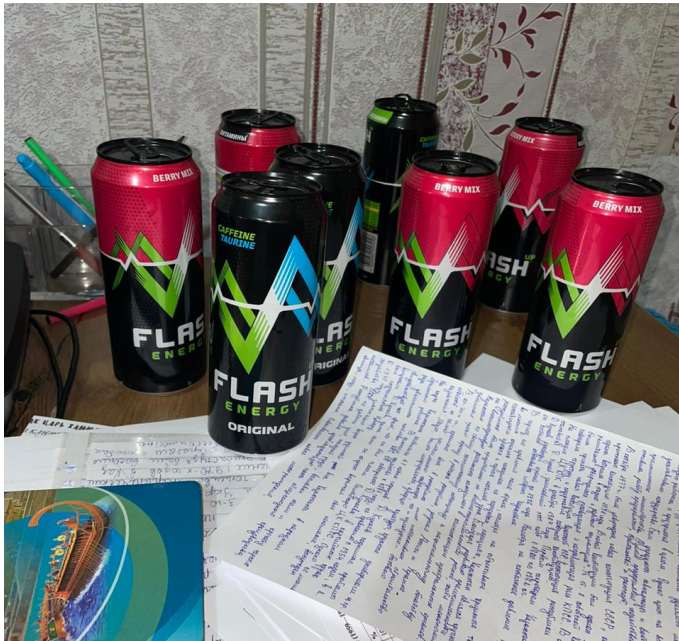
Figure 21

Responsibility



Every day, I check my students' assignments, which takes time. Sometimes, I sacrifice sleep and doze off right in the middle of grading. This particular moment is captured in this photo. Of course, I wish I could close my eyes to everything and just go to sleep, but the responsibility makes itself known.

Balancing professional responsibilities with domestic duties poses additional challenges for Gulnara, impacting order at home (Figure 22).

Figure 22*Stay Awake*

This is classic situation; I drink energy drinks daily just to stay awake. It is that simple. I know it really harms my health, but there's no other way. Lesson preparation takes me no less than 6 hours a day. Mostly, I start working closer to the evening because household chores await me.

Despite concerns about her health, she persists, driven by a deep sense of responsibility to her profession and students.

4.7. Aliya

Aliya is a homeroom teacher and counselor with 3 years of experience. She grew up and spent her entire life in the village where she works since graduating from university in Kostanay city. She is actively involved in improving education in her community and feels a deep attachment to the village she considers home. Her unique experience and profound connection to the place give her particular motivation and responsibility as a rural teacher. Her active involvement in its educational improvement efforts exemplify Freire's (1970) framework principle, empowering individuals to enact positive change from within.

Aliya underscores the impact of the limited population on the educational environment, emphasizing the advantages and challenges of a small class size. While she appreciates the individualized approach afforded by smaller classes, she acknowledges the potential limitation in the diversity of learning situations due to the small student number. She notes, “A small class implies that an individual approach to each student becomes inevitable but can also evoke a sense of limitation in the diversity of learning situations” (Figure 23).

Figure 23

Small Class



Like other participants, Aliya draws attention to limited educational resources and technical infrastructure constraints. The condition of the classrooms and the need for substantial repairs further hamper the teaching process in rural schools, as depicted in Figure 24.

Figure 24*The Persistent Coolness*

The classrooms, devoid of warmth and tinged with sadness, highlight a noticeable lack of educational resources and technical support, casting a shadow over the learning experience. The building itself, where classes take place, requires substantial repairs. The persistent coolness in the rooms adds to the challenge of creating a genuinely comfortable learning environment.

Aliya introduces a unique perspective by addressing the remoteness of rural areas from the city. She emphasizes that this geographical distance exacerbates challenges, fostering a sense of isolation for both students and educators. Aliya candidly shares her experience of loneliness and expresses sadness witnessing the decline of her village. She believes this isolation can detrimentally impact motivation and interest in education for both students and teachers, contributing a social and emotional dimension to the challenges faced in rural educational settings (Figure 25).

Figure 25*We Feel Abandoned*

We feel abandoned; it's disheartening to see the village fading away. The remoteness of the city exacerbates the situation. Students and educators may experience isolation and a lack of access to cultural events, which can impact overall motivation and interest in education.

Aliya's distinction lies in being a homegrown teacher intimately connected to the village where she grew up. This unique perspective adds depth to her narrative, as she expresses a profound sense of belonging and pride in contributing to rural education (Figure 26).

Figure 26*Homegrown Teacher*

I was born and spent my entire conscious life in this village. I attended the local school and returned to it after completing university. Despite these challenges, I strive to create an inspiring and supportive educational environment. I take pride in contributing to the development of rural education.

Her connection to the village fuels her special responsibility and passion for addressing rural education issues. Aliya believes that her unique background and history amplify the significance of her efforts, providing a valuable context to her commitment to improving education in her community.

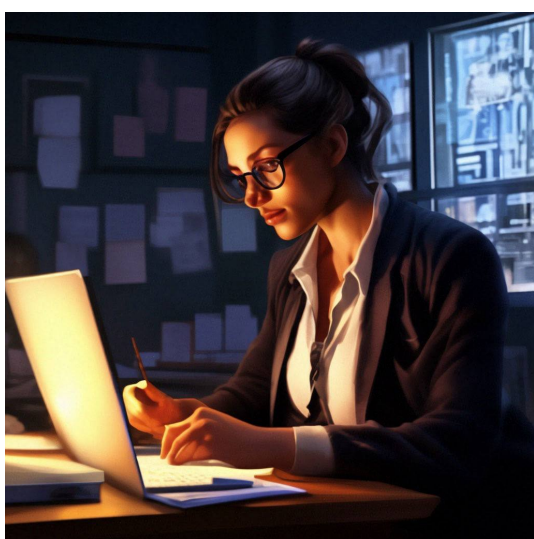
4.8. Alina

Alina is a beginning English teacher in a rural school with 3 years of experience. In her practice, she faces the challenges of being a homeroom teacher, having difficulties teaching with limited resources, and having complex relationships with the administration and colleagues. In analyzing Alina's experiences through the lens of Freire's (1970) theoretical framework, it is evident that her challenges highlight the systemic barriers to creating a truly empowering learning environment in a resource-constrained rural setting.

In her initial year of teaching, Alina confronted the unexpected responsibility of a homeroom teacher without adequate preparation, facing challenges exacerbated by a difficult class. She observed a misconception among rural parents, placing undue responsibility on educators and straining the teacher-parent relationship. The overarching concern for Alina, however, revolved around the demand for constant availability and responsibility (Figure 27).

Figure 27

24/7



This picture is generated by AI. No one ever mentioned that for 10,000 tenge (in addition to conducting my regular lessons), I would have to be online 24/7, fill out a bunch of reports, organize events, and also be responsible for all the misdeeds and actions of my students, even if the cause of the situation is beyond my control. In all problems related to the class from all sides, I was the one held accountable—both by the administration and by the parents.

Alina's struggles extended to her role as an educator in an ungraded school with limited resources, where she faced challenges in maintaining a suitable pace in her mixed-graded class. Despite these obstacles, she successfully built trusting relationships with her students (Figure 28):

Figure 28*Live Calmly*

Unfortunately, I could not become a complete educator for them. However, providing psychological support and giving them information from the outside, something relevant to the city, was possible. We got along very well, and I had no conflicts with any of the children. I managed to build trusting relationships with them. Rural children are interested in competing with urban ones but do not believe they can compete. With rare exceptions, rural children have ambitions—as if they are taught to live calmly and not stand out.

Post-university, Alina aspired to introduce innovative teaching methodologies, only to be met with resistance from the administration and colleagues, causing a sense of loneliness and isolation (Figure 29):

Figure 29

I wanted to move mountains.



I felt a lot of loneliness; after university, I wanted to move mountains—to provide students with such diverse experiences in class and show that learning can be approached in various ways. However, my aspirations were immediately shattered by the harsh reality – the administration of rural schools does not accept non-traditional lessons; everything should be strictly according to the template, and it’s considered good if it resembles Soviet practices.

Alina also highlighted strained relationships with colleagues, facing conflicts and a lack of support, which contributed to a pervasive atmosphere of avoidance rather than collaboration. She pointed out a specific incident where her approach diverged from the traditional narrative, resulting in being ostracized by her colleagues (Figure 30):

Figure 30

Identity of Teacher



Relationships with colleagues and administration are a separate issue. When you bring it to their attention, rural teachers and administration often cross boundaries without realizing it. They attempt to dictate the interests of teachers and students, imposing and promoting their views as authentic, and criticize those who do not fit into their life’s narrative. In the photo, the calendar prescribed to me the ‘identity’ of a teacher. The reputation game in a rural school is as intense as in some medieval settings. They shamed my students for their interests, which was one of the first steps towards me not renewing my contract. Colleagues ignored me for some time after that. In a city school with a similar situation, it would be a normal conversation—a shared one. No student was ever marginalized.

The photograph of Alina in the school museum highlights the absence of classrooms in her school, indicative of a shortage of educational resources and inadequate class space (Figure 31):

Figure 31*In the Museum*

In this photo, I am wearing a jacket and boots in the school museum. There were no more classrooms. All the students were in jackets; the school eventually ran out of coal, and the education department delayed the delivery. As a result, we economized for a month— many children and teachers took sick leave.

Alina notes that this situation, compounded by issues with coal supply, leads to heating problems, which not only hampers comfortable learning but poses health risks for students and teachers.

4.9. Alan

Alan is a beginning biology teacher with 3 years of experience in a rural school. He creates unique 3D models for lessons, aiming to enhance education despite limited resources. According to Alan, independence brings freedom, but rural schools' lack of support and competition poses challenges. His story reflects the struggle for independence and innovation

in the face of scarce support and competitive pressures, aligning with Paulo Freire's (1970) framework.

Alan, in both his written accounts and interviews, highlighted several challenges regarding the resources available in rural schools. These include insufficient availability of personal computers for students, inadequate interactive equipment and software rendering the current interactive whiteboards ineffective, and often left unused due to the absence of essential accompanying tools. Furthermore, a scarcity of classrooms, notably a deficiency in biology laboratories, restricts opportunities for practical laboratory work and utilization of visual teaching aids. Additionally, the absence of internet connectivity in rural schools significantly hampers educational opportunities, particularly in areas such as computer science, and limits access to emerging educational resources and innovative technologies.

Alan then introduces the coping mechanisms he adopts. One compelling example is Alan's ingenuity in crafting models using makeshift materials (Figure 32):

Figure 32

Forced Creativity



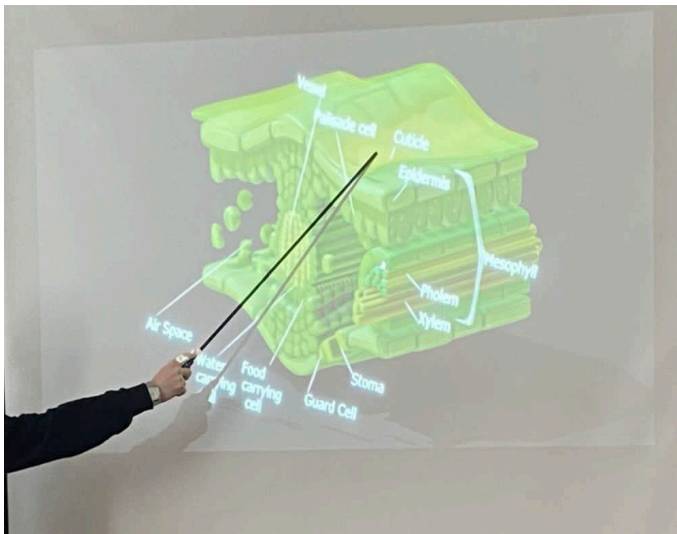
Not having a dedicated biology classroom hits home for me. It means we lack essential resources for hands-on lab work and everyday teaching with visual aids. This shortage forces me to get creative, crafting models from whatever materials I can find

and storing them all in one cramped classroom. It's a constant reminder of our challenges and the need to adapt and make the most of what we have.

In a rural school, educator Alan accepted the challenge of modernizing education by solving the issue of access to software for biology lessons (Figure 33):

Figure 33

My Dream

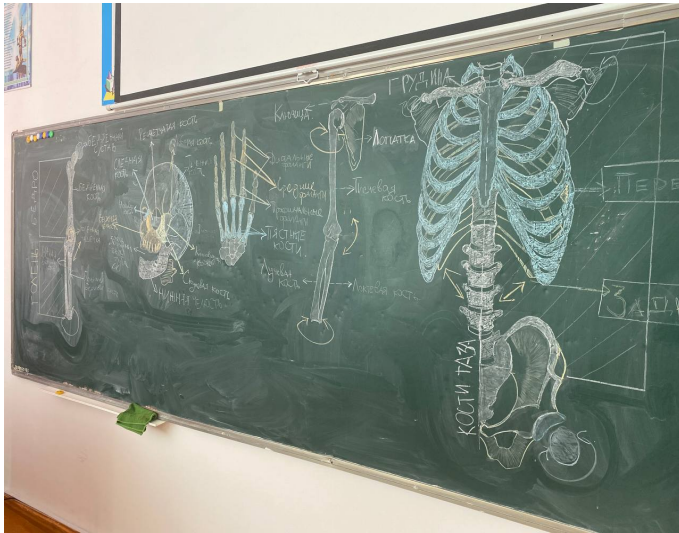


My project explores the effectiveness of implementing 3D technologies in biology lessons. The primary aim of my project is to assess how beneficial the 3D technologies I crafted can be used during classes, especially given that other options are commercial products requiring payment or restricted access. My dream is to develop my unique 3D models tailored for biology lessons and establish a comprehensive, free-of-charge database of 3D models accessible to teachers nationwide, including those in rural areas.

According to Alan, for a beginning teacher working in a rural school, independence can be both a blessing and a challenge (Figure 34):

Figure 34

Will I last long?



The photograph expresses my independence and creative approach to solving problems with limited resources. Will I last long? In working in rural areas, I value the opportunity for independent decision-making, but the lack of support from administration and colleagues requires us to be independent and strive for self-improvement. Beginning educators encounter this and seek to develop, but the lack of competition prompts them to pursue other growth opportunities.

On the one hand, Alan believes he is able to develop independently, make his own decisions, and master various aspects of work without direct support or control from the administration or colleagues. On the other hand, the lack of support and a competitive environment can be a negative factor. Without the opportunity to exchange experiences with more experienced colleagues or receive feedback and support from the administration, a beginning teacher may feel isolated and insecure.

4.10. Summary

The purpose of the findings chapter was to present the photovoice research results derived from data created by beginning teachers in Kazakhstan's rural schools, including their photos and stories. As a result, six key themes were identified: 1) experiences of guidance and support; 2) workload and intensification; 3) lack of resources; 4) sense of belonging; 5) school climate; and 6) classroom experiences. The findings presented in this chapter will be further elaborated upon in the subsequent Discussion chapter, offering deeper insights and analysis.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice. The previous chapter presented the findings of this research and provided photos and stories from the experiences of these teachers. The primary research question this study aimed to answer is how beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools. The question and design of the study were shaped through the framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, drawing inspiration from the seminal work of Freire (1970) and providing a theoretical foundation for understanding the importance of critical dialogue and community involvement in exploring the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan. Hence, this chapter aims to encapsulate the key themes and provide a comprehensive discussion of the research findings within the context of the literature reviewed earlier. These will be connected to the emergent themes, facilitating a deeper understanding of the research outcomes.

5.2. Theoretical Framework Revisited

The lens of empowerment education for critical consciousness, rooted in the seminal work of Freire (1970), provides a robust theoretical framework to interpret the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan. This theoretical perspective underscores the importance of individual and community engagement in achieving social equity, emphasizing collective dialogue to promote critical understanding and action. As Freire (1970) conceptualized, critical consciousness involves raising awareness of socio-political, cultural, and economic forces shaping individuals' experiences. Drawing on Freire's ideas, the study cultivated crucial consciousness in the beginning teachers, helping them identify and analyze power dynamics and systemic challenges in their educational context, for

example, guidance and support experiences, workload and intensification, and lack of resources, additionally emphasizing the importance of transformative experiences for personal and professional growth. Utilizing theory, the research created reflective processes that challenge the assumptions and beliefs of beginning teachers, aiming to facilitate transformative learning experiences. The creative approach addresses issues such as the lack of resources, the need for independence in decision-making without guidance and support from mentors and school administrators, and the implementation of personalized approaches to students in mixed-grade classrooms.

Exploring the six key themes identified in the findings—guidance and support experiences, workload and intensification, lack of resources, sense of belonging, school climate, and classroom experiences—through this framework, the research empowered educators to understand the socio-educational landscape better, enabling them to effectively address challenges within their context.

5.3. Guidance and Support Experiences

One of the crucial points raised by participants in the study is the significant issue of lacking mentorship support, which affects their professional development. Participants expressed concerns about the shortage of support from experienced colleagues or mentors, creating substantial challenges in adapting to the teaching profession and enhancing their professional competence. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area emphasizing the importance of mentorship programs in assisting beginning teachers to adjust and grow professionally, ultimately improving student learning outcomes (Çobanoğlu & Ayvaz-Tuncel, 2018; Ingersoll, 2012; Kono, 2012).

As noted by one participant, Christina, Kazakhstan's law mandates providing a mentor for beginning teachers. As the legislation "On Teacher Status" (MoES, 2019) outlines, the mentorship procedure includes evaluating beginning teachers, developing

tailored action plans, and performing classroom observations. However, she highlighted that the only mathematics teacher in the school besides herself is the school's director, thus rendering her unable to serve as a mentor due to her busy schedule. Similarly, other participants underscored the scarcity of specialists matching the qualifications required for mentorship in their rural schools, with some mentioning they were the sole specialists in their subjects in their respective schools. These results reflect those of Syzdykbayeva (2021), who also observes inequalities, particularly in rural schools, where mentor availability may be scarce, leading to mismatches in subject qualifications between mentors and mentees.

Moreover, participant Aliya noted in her interview that while mentorship support was provided, it was not focused on specialization in her field and only addressed documentation issues. This reflects the shift towards a less teaching-focused mentorship within Kazakhstan's education system, as Irsaliyev et al. (2019) and Syzdykbayeva (2021) emphasized. The TALIS-2018 survey also indicates that schools prioritize administrative tasks over teaching activities like collaborative planning, teacher practice, and research (OECD, 2019). These findings underscore the necessity for a robust mentorship framework aligned with the needs of beginning teachers and the realities of rural school contexts.

In discussing the results through the framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, rooted in Freire's work (1970), it becomes evident that mentorship programs should not only address immediate professional development needs but also aim to cultivate a deeper understanding of systemic inequalities and power dynamics within the education system. This approach encourages beginning teachers to critically reflect on their roles within these structures and empowers them to advocate for change toward more equitable educational practices.

5.4. Workload and Intensification

Examining workload and intensification in rural Kazakhstani schools through an empowerment education (Freire, 1970) lens reveals systemic issues of under-resourced support structures and bureaucratic accountability pressures. In rural schools of Kazakhstan, beginning teachers face many challenges that can significantly impede their growth, particularly in terms of workload and intensification. Firstly, as noted by all participants, the absence of experienced mentors is a prevalent issue, leaving novices without the necessary support and guidance to adapt to the unique demands of their context. This lack of mentorship exacerbates the difficulties, compounded by limited resources typical of rural areas, such as shortages of educational materials, equipment, and internet access, further complicating instructional organization and requiring extensive planning time. Another challenge arises from mixed-grade classrooms, where students from different grades or age groups are grouped, necessitating differentiated teaching approaches. These challenges increase the *workload* and present additional hurdles for beginning teachers.

Additionally, 5 of the 8 participants highlighted the overwhelming documentation requirements faced by beginning teachers in rural schools. This includes student progress reports, grading, lesson plans, and other administrative tasks contributing to the intensification of their work. Furthermore, participants expressed that the high workload and intensity demands constant effort and strain, particularly for those starting their careers in education.

These results align with existing literature on the phenomenon of intensification, where teachers respond to external pressures or internal motivation by increasing the intensity of their work (Ballet et al., 2006; Hargreaves, 1994). As exemplified by participant Gulnara, who sacrifices sleep and relies on energy drinks to cope with the demands of balancing

professional responsibilities with domestic duties, intensification takes a toll on teachers' overall well-being and job satisfaction.

5.5. Lack of Resources

The rural context in Kazakhstan presents significant challenges characterized by a reliance on traditional agricultural practices alongside limited access to modern technologies and resources, resulting in disparities in living standards compared to urban areas (Chankseliani et al., 2020; Gimranova et al., 2021; Kurmangaliyev, 2021; Nurbayev, 2021). This situation has been associated with declining academic achievements and restricted access to quality education, as highlighted by Bridges and Sagintayeva (2014). These difficulties align with the framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), as they highlight systemic inequities perpetuated by socioeconomic factors.

Consistent with the literature, this research found that participants emphasized the nature of the lack of resources in rural schools, ranging from insufficient learning materials and equipment to limited funding, which affects various aspects of the educational process.

These challenges, corroborated by previous studies (Barley, 2009; Hammer et al., 2005; Hayes, 2009; Malloy & Allen, 2007), contribute to difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified teachers, mainly due to the isolated and restrictive locations of rural schools (Rosenberg et al., 2015; Miles & Knipe, 2008). Studies in Kazakhstan further underscore the impact of inadequate infrastructure and Internet availability on teacher recruitment and retention (Tajik et al., 2021; Nurbayev, 2021; Fimyar et al., 2014; Tastanbekova, 2020).

The lack of resources severely hampers teachers' experiences, creating numerous challenges and obstacles in delivering quality education. My research participants highlighted constraints in teaching materials and equipment, which limit their ability to create engaging lessons and individualize instruction, echoing the sentiments of scholars emphasizing the

importance of addressing socioeconomic disparities in rural education (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Showalter et al., 2017).

Looking at this positively, teaching in rural schools allows beginning educators to understand diverse student needs and develop innovative teaching methods due to resource constraints (Ewing & Smith, 2003; Hellstein et al., 2011; White, 2019). This fosters the creation of unique strategies tailored to rural communities, enhancing pedagogical skills (Shikalepo, 2020). There are also similarities expressed by participants of the study demonstrating resilience and innovation in addressing resource deficiencies, utilizing available resources both within and outside the school to meet students' academic goals and curriculum standards. These experiences echo the tenets of empowerment education for critical consciousness, as teachers underscore the necessity of responsive pedagogy in diverse socioeconomic contexts (Freire, 1970). For instance, teachers like Alan, Arsen, Gulnara, and Christina creatively addressed resource limitations by developing applications, using improvised teaching aids, and adapting instructional methods to cater to their students' needs. Alan created a 3D modeling application and crafted biology cell models using improvised materials; Arsen purchased a telescope to stargaze with students at night; Gulnara designed engaging cards and games for lessons without relying on projectors while also carrying a personal laptop for additional resources; Aisulu encouraged student autonomy by offering them freedom of choice in activities; Christina designed personalized worksheets and visuals for her students. This study supports evidence from previous observations stating educators' need to adapt their instructional approaches to the diverse socioeconomic contexts of rural areas (Burton & Johnson, 2010; Showalter et al., 2017).

5.6. Sense of Belonging

The data provided by beginning teachers in rural schools in this study frequently underscored the positive influence of a sense of belonging to the local community and close

relationships with students. These results are in agreement with the perspectives of Mollenkopf (2009) and Anderson (2008), who emphasize the unique advantages of rural education in fostering community ties, personalized learning experiences, and a deeper connection with nature and the local environment. All participants noted feeling a part of the rural community, where everyone knows each other, fostering a sense of interaction and support. They actively engage with residents within and outside the school, communicating and showing interest in community life. These results support the idea of beginning educators in rural areas to recognize the opportunity to cultivate close connections with students and the community, acknowledging their significant impact on students' lives (Malloy & Allen, 2007; Monk, 2007).

Close relationships with students are a crucial aspect of this experience, allowing teachers to better understand each student's needs, interests, and challenges. All research participants acknowledged that teachers could dedicate more time to each student in such an environment, facilitating effective personalized learning and development. For example, physics teacher Arsen introduced a guitar to the school and inspired his students to play it. He highlighted the importance of community attention and support, noting that parents are now purchasing guitars for their children after his initiative showcased the importance of such support. Additionally, all participants indicated that close ties foster emotional support and trust between teachers and students. Teachers become both a source of knowledge and essential adults with whom students can share their thoughts and experiences, contributing to forming closer and more productive classroom relationships.

As highlighted by 3 of the 8 participants, teachers in rural schools may find it easier to manage the classroom and provide more personalized instruction, given the smaller student-teacher ratio. This allows them to work more effectively on the development of each student, contributing to overall student success. These results corroborate the ideas of Monk (2007),

who observes that instructing in a rural school presents advantageous aspects such as fewer behavior-related challenges and increased independence.

Aliya is the sole research participant who returned to her rural community school after finishing university. She notes that her connection to the village fuels her special responsibility and passion for addressing rural education issues. This aligns with the findings of Harris et al. (2005), who suggest that homegrown teachers with a deep understanding and appreciation for rural life are more likely to stay and teach in or near their home villages. Their deep connection to the community and knowledge of rural practice and culture make them valuable assets (Howley & Howley, 2005). This also is in congruence with observations by Huysman (2007), confirming that teachers native to the area tend to believe that there is a balanced distribution of power within the district, benefiting teachers who have lived there before due to their deep understanding of the local community.

In interpreting the results through the study's framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, the sense of belonging experienced by beginning teachers in rural schools aligns closely with principles of community empowerment and socio-cultural contextualization (Freire, 1970). Their immersion in the local community not only fosters personal fulfillment but also empowers them to recognize their role as agents of change within their communities. Close relationships with students reflect a pedagogy rooted in mutual respect and empathy, essential components for fostering critical consciousness and collective action. As teachers embrace their identity as integral members of the community, they are better equipped to address systemic challenges and enact meaningful transformations in both educational and societal spheres.

Overall, the sense of belonging to the community and close relationships with students creates a favorable environment, as indicated by all beginning teachers in rural schools. They feel like integral members of the community and can significantly influence

their students' lives, making this experience meaningful and inspiring for their professional growth.

5.7. School Climate

Some participants identified challenges related to the school atmosphere, encompassing interactions with school administration, colleagues, and parents. These results match those observed by Allensworth et al. (2009) and indicate that in rural school settings, where communication breakdowns among colleagues, conflicts with administration and parents, and power struggles are prevalent, beginning teachers often find themselves trapped in a complex challenge, ultimately hindering their professional growth and development within the hostile environment.

The study's results further support the idea that a lack of support from the school administration has become a significant obstacle to beginning teachers' adaptation and professional growth, which is also aligns closely with the study's framework of empowerment education (Freire, 1970). For instance, as noted by English teacher Alina, this may manifest in inadequate professional development opportunities and unclear expectations and roles, complicating task execution and problem-solving. It aligns with Smith and Ingersoll (2004), who note that insufficient backing from the school administration has emerged as a notable hindrance to beginning teachers' adjustment and professional development.

Furthermore, a lack of collaboration with more experienced colleagues has also been identified as a problem for beginning teachers. Due to the limited number of teachers, finding suitable mentors or work partners in rural schools may be challenging, leading to feelings of isolation and lack of support in the adaptation process. Research participants Gulnara and Alan highlighted misunderstandings with senior colleagues regarding innovative methods they apply in their practice, as older colleagues are more accustomed to teaching using

traditional Soviet teaching methodologies. It aligns with Hellsten et al. (2011), beginning teachers struggle to collaborate with experienced colleagues in rural schools due to staffing shortages, thus leading to isolation.

The third issue is related to interactions with students' parents. In rural communities, cultural peculiarities and expectations may differ from those familiar to teachers, leading to misunderstandings or disagreements on parenting and educational issues. As Alina noted in her interview, parents place too many expectations and demands on the school, relying on teachers for child rearing, without any willingness to collaborate. This, in turn, creates a tense atmosphere and hinders practical cooperation or a working partnership between teachers and parents. This finding is consistent with that of Shamatov (2006), who noted that teachers in rural areas face difficulties when interacting with students' parents because of cultural disparities and differing expectations.

Following the present results, an investigation conducted by Allensworth et al. (2009) reveals that whether a beginning teacher persists in their profession or departs is significantly shaped by the school environment and the support they receive. To foster the enduring commitment of beginning teachers to the profession, seasoned mentors, expert educators, and school management should extend their support in managing administrative duties as these new educators adapt to their roles. Supporting beginning teachers improves student performance, fosters the beginning teacher's professional confidence development, and contributes to higher retention rates (Allensworth et al., 2009).

5.8. Classroom Experiences

The teaching experience of beginning teachers in rural schools can be positive and challenging. Firstly, as noted by all research participants in their photos, written narratives, and interviews, they bring their natural enthusiasm and motivation to teaching, finding joy in their students' successes and deriving satisfaction from the teaching process. Due to the tight-

knit community characteristic of rural areas, they can more easily connect with students, their families, and colleagues. Additionally, beginning teachers often have more flexibility in organizing lessons and choosing teaching methods, fostering their creative approach to teaching. These results are consistent with those of Mollenkopf (2009) and Anderson (2008), who underscore that rural education offers unique advantages, such as close community bonds, personalized learning experiences, and a deeper connection with nature and the local environment.

However, as highlighted by research participants, there are also some drawbacks. The diversity of students in terms of academic levels and special educational needs poses additional challenges for teachers, necessitating differentiated teaching approaches. These results are consistent with McGhie-Richmond et al. (2013) asserting that many beginning teachers graduate without understanding inclusive education and its policies, leaving them unprepared to teach diverse student populations. This lack of preparation can result in initial difficulties when confronted with learners with diverse needs, cultural backgrounds, and financial situations, as beginning teachers may mistakenly perceive all students as the same.

In rural educational settings, educators often face the daunting task of teaching multiple subjects and handling diverse grade levels within a single classroom, as emphasized by Barley (2009) and echoed in Nurbayev's study (2021) on rural ungraded schools in Kazakhstan. These schools, characterized by a lack of distinct classes for different grades and relatively small student populations, often combine multiple grades into one class. This situation presents a significant challenge for beginning teachers who must manage simultaneous instruction across various grades and curricula while addressing the needs of a diverse group of students within the same classroom setting. Consistent with the literature, this research found that the existence of mixed-graded classes further complicates the practice of research participants. They encounter difficulty managing multigrade classrooms, where

incompatible grade levels require adjustments in teaching routines. Often lacking initial preparation and specialist guidance, they develop strategies to ensure effective learning outcomes.

Despite these challenges, all participants noted that the experience of beginning teachers in rural schools is valuable and allows them to grow as professionals. Each challenging moment becomes an opportunity for growth and skill enhancement in education.

Through the empowerment education framework (Freire, 1970), the results reveal a dynamic balance between the opportunities and challenges encountered by beginning teachers in rural classrooms. Their enthusiasm and creativity foster community bonds and personalized learning, while systemic hurdles like diverse student needs and mixed-grade classrooms underscore the need for comprehensive support. Despite challenges, beginning teachers view their experiences as valuable for growth, showcasing resilience in navigating complex rural contexts.

5.9. Summary

The Discussion chapter interprets the photovoice study findings regarding beginning teachers' experiences in Kazakhstan's rural schools. Several critical themes from the findings were summarized, including guidance and support experiences, workload and intensification, lack of resources, sense of belonging, school climate, and classroom experiences. These themes, viewed through the theoretical framework of empowerment education for critical consciousness, provided valuable insights into the experiences faced by these teachers. These are also discussed in the context of existing literature. The study findings will be consolidated in the next chapter, followed by implications and recommendations. Subsequently, personal reflections on the study will be offered, detailing how the research has shaped and expanded my viewpoints.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will summarize the study's results on the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan's Kostanay and Karagandy regions. This chapter is divided into four sections: an overview of the study, recommendations for potential stakeholders and policymakers, implications for future research, strengths and limitations of the given study, and concluding thoughts.

6.2. Summary of the Study

The TALIS-2018 international study revealed that beginning teachers in Kazakhstan faced low job satisfaction, high stress levels, and regularly switched schools (OECD, 2019). This was even more pronounced in rural areas, where challenges differed from urban settings (Barter, 2008; Bridges, 2014; IAC, 2014; Tajik et al., 2021). Furthermore, the lack of empirical studies in Kazakhstan highlighted the urgent need to understand the experiences of beginning teachers, especially in rural schools. Despite extensive global literature on rural school challenges, there is a gap in research specific to Kazakhstan. Therefore, the study explored their experiences in rural schools in Kazakhstan's Kostanay and Karagandy regions using the innovative arts-based participatory research approach – photovoice. The primary research question of the thesis was: How do beginning teachers describe their experiences in Kazakhstani rural schools?

In the literature review, a thorough examination was conducted of the challenges and opportunities confronting beginning teachers in rural settings. Various aspects were covered, including the characteristics of rural living, common challenges encountered in schools, and issues related to recruitment and retention. Specific obstacles faced by these teachers were delineated, encompassing aspects like managing classroom diversity, establishing effective classroom management techniques, undergoing professional socialization, addressing skills

mismatches, and grappling with the influence of the school environment on teacher retention. Moreover, the review acknowledged the potential positive experiences rural beginning teachers might encounter, such as the tight-knit nature of rural communities and the establishment of strong teacher-student relationships. The importance of implementing supportive measures, including induction and mentorship programs, was underscored.

To study teacher experiences, I asked 8 beginning teachers with up to 3 years of working experience in rural schools in Kazakhstan's Kostanay and Karagandy regions to take and caption photographs and provide written narratives for each photo. These photos and narratives were then used to guide a semi-structured interview about their experiences working in rural schools. The data underwent descriptive coding and thematic analysis, during which themes reflecting the participants' experiences were identified and organized into categories. Integrating visual and narrative components with semi-structured interviews enables obtaining additional levels of understanding of the teachers' experiences in rural schools and their unique perspectives.

After an in-depth analysis of the selected photos and stories of participants, I identified 6 key themes: 1) experiences of guidance and support; 2) workload and intensification; 3) lack of resources; 4) sense of belonging; 5) school climate; and 6) classroom experiences. The findings of my study are in accordance with other international and Kazakhstani research, which has been highlighted in the previous chapter.

This study explored the experiences of these teachers in rural schools to inform tailored interventions. Through comprehensive analysis and literature synthesis, practical solutions were sought to enhance support systems for beginning teachers, ultimately contributing to a more equitable education system in rural Kazakhstan.

6.3. Recommendations

Based on the current research findings, several recommendations can be made for policymakers, school leaders, NGOs, and educators to improve the conditions for beginning teachers and enhance the quality of education in rural areas.

6.3.1. Policy

These findings suggest four courses of action for policymakers. First, policymakers should prioritize developing and implementing robust induction programs tailored to the needs of beginning teachers in rural schools. They should ensure that experienced mentors are available and matched appropriately with mentees who can provide ongoing support focusing on teaching practices and professional growth rather than solely on administrative tasks. Additionally, resources should be allocated to address rural schools' lack of educational materials, equipment, and infrastructure. A third course of action could be to prioritize inclusive education practices and provide training and support for beginning teachers to meet the diverse needs of students in rural classrooms effectively. Finally, policymakers should recognize rural educators' unique challenges and contributions and provide targeted support and incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers in rural areas.

6.3.2. Practice

The findings of this study have certain implications for future practice. First, school leaders should acknowledge the workload challenges beginning teachers face in rural schools and take steps to alleviate them. Some of these steps could be: 1) involvement in streamlining administrative processes; 2) providing additional support staff where possible; and 3) offering professional development opportunities emphasizing time management in multigrade classrooms.

Additionally, school leaders and community organizations should work to create a supportive and inclusive school climate that fosters a sense of belonging for beginning

teachers. For instance, this could involve encouraging community involvement in schools, providing professional collaboration and development opportunities, and promoting positive relationships between teachers, administrators, students, parents, and the community. Thirdly, school leaders should prioritize effective communication and collaboration among staff, administrators, parents, and community members.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, school leaders, and civil society can collaborate to create a more supportive and conducive environment for beginning teachers in rural schools, ultimately improving educational outcomes for students in these communities.

6.4. Implications for Further Research

For future research, a comparison of the experiences of beginning educators in rural and urban schools is needed. This approach will provide additional insights into factors such as classroom dynamics, community engagement, support systems, resource availability, and professional development opportunities, allowing for a more robust understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by beginning teachers across different geographical and educational contexts within Kazakhstan.

Moreover, future research in rural education should investigate the long-term impact of mentoring programs on professional development and the retention rates of beginning teachers in rural schools. It could examine how effective mentoring strategies influence teacher satisfaction.

Additionally, future studies are needed to understand the intersection of challenges facing beginning teachers in rural areas, such as the interaction between workload intensification, resource scarcity, school climate, job satisfaction, and teacher retention. Also, research can explore innovative approaches to inclusive education and community engagement in rural schools, helping to identify effective strategies for supporting diverse

student groups and fostering a sense of belonging among teachers and students. Expanding the scope of research in these directions will not only enhance our understanding of the complexities of rural education but also provide the information for developing targeted interventions and policies to address the unique needs of rural teachers and students.

6.5. Limitations of the Study

While the study provided valuable insights into beginning teachers' unique challenges and the positive aspects of teaching in rural settings, it has specific limitations that must be acknowledged. One limitation is the relatively small sample size, which restricts how much the findings can be generalized to Kazakhstan's larger population of rural teachers. Drawing on the insights of Creswell and Poth (2016), a smaller number of participants in a qualitative study may also limit the depth of understanding, potentially compromising the study's robustness and transferability.

Despite this, the study offers meaningful insights into the experiences of beginning teachers in Kazakhstan's rural schools, guiding further research and potentially informing necessary improvements in teacher support and development programs for rural education.

6.6. Final Reflection

I come from the rural expanses of Kazakhstan, where I spent my childhood attending a cozy village school. The bonds forged in those early days remain strong: to this day, I am deeply connected to my rural community. After completing my university education, I felt an urgent need to return to my roots, fueled by a sincere desire to play my part in the progress and improvement of my community. I started working at my rural school, and my rose-tinted glasses shattered in the first year. In my first year at the rural school, I faced many challenges, from managing classrooms and documentation to supporting students with special needs—the unique aspects of rural life, like isolation, limited resources, and poor infrastructure, added to

the complexity. Yet, I witnessed the strength of the ties between schools and local communities, highlighting shared values amidst difficulties.

This research emerged from my need to shed light on the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan. In the early stages of this research, I remember being engulfed in emotions. Witnessing the authenticity and willingness of participants to share their experiences, even in a virtual environment, was incredibly significant and provided me with the insight and connection I had long sought. I felt immense excitement while interacting with teachers from rural schools in Kazakhstan and at the prospect of shedding light on their experiences, especially in rural education and the educational inequality that continues to exist in the country.

During this study, I experienced many emotions alongside the wonderful research participants. Their photos and stories often represented a range of emotions from sadness, anger, and betrayal to excitement, pride, kindness, admiration, and enthusiasm. After each photovoice discussion with the participants, I often revisited my experience working in a rural school.

This research has contributed significantly to both my personal and professional development. Confronting my biases has led me to cultivate empathy, understanding, and humility. Engaging directly with participants' stories and emotions has strengthened my dedication to studying rural education in Kazakhstan and advocating for educational equity in the future. This transformative experience has emphasized the role of research in instigating social change, highlighting the significance of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

Ultimately, I am incredibly proud to have developed and conducted such a personal research project, which has allowed me to see and hear the often-overlooked experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan by their administration, senior colleagues,

and sometimes policymakers. Hearing the positive reactions from participants regarding their involvement in the research process further affirmed the significance of this study and the work that remains to be done. Through exploring the experiences of beginning teachers in Kazakhstan, I hope readers will see the importance, meaning, and power within these teacher voices to transform the Kazakhstani education system.

6.7. Summary

This chapter concludes the study on beginning teachers' experiences in rural Kazakhstani schools. The research, employing photovoice, uncovered six key themes. Recommendations urge policymakers to prioritize mentorship programs, resource allocation, and school leaders to support beginning teachers with streamlined tasks, training, and inclusive environments. Future research should expand geographical coverage and explore long-term impacts. The chapter also reflects on the study's significance for educational equity in Kazakhstan, acknowledging its limitations and offering the researcher's insights.

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Appendices

Appendix A



Thesis Title: Beginning Teachers' Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An Exploratory Photovoice Study

Appendix A – Declaration of the Use of Generative AI

I hereby declare that I have read and understood NUGSE's policy concerning appropriate use of AI and composed this work independently (please check one):

- with the use of artificial intelligence tools, or
 without the use of artificial intelligence tools.

During the preparation of this thesis, I used Chat GPT to paraphrase and ask for tips to improve coherence.

I also declare that I

- am aware of the capabilities and limitations of AI tool(s),
 have verified that the content generated by AI systems and adopted by me is factually correct,
 am aware that as the author of this thesis I bear full responsibility for the statements and assertions made in it,
 have submitted complete and accurate information about my use of AI tools in this work, and
 acknowledge that there may be disciplinary consequences if I have not followed NUGSE's guidelines regarding AI appropriate use.

Name: Sultan Kozhamberdiyev
Date: April 19, 2024

Signature: *Sultan Kozhamberdiyev*

Appendix B



NAZARBAYEV
UNIVERSITY

INVITATION LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear participant,

I hope this letter finds you well. I invite you to participate in an exciting research study titled “Beginning Teachers’ Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An Exploratory Photovoice Study.” My name is Sultan Kozhamberdiyev, and I am a graduate student of MSc in Educational Leadership at the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University.

Introduction: The purpose of this study is to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice. This method lets you use your smartphone camera to capture moments and aspects of your daily teaching experiences. You can share your stories and insights associated with these photographs through this method.

Participation Requirements: If you choose to participate, you will be asked to attend a one-hour workshop session to learn about the research and receive detailed information about the photovoice methodology. You will then be tasked with photographing your daily experiences as a teacher. Afterward, you will select 6 photographs from your collection and participate in an individual semi-structured interview where you can share the stories and insights related to your chosen images.

Time Commitment: Your participation in this study will take approximately ten hours over about one month. We will work closely with you to schedule meetings at your convenience.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse consequences.

Confidentiality: We assure you that all data and information collected from you will be kept confidential. Any data shared during interviews will be anonymized to protect your identity. We will also take measures to ensure the confidentiality of your photographs.

Potential Risks and Benefits: This research carries minimal risk, as all data and interview responses will remain confidential and accessible only to the researcher and thesis supervisor. By sharing your experiences, you will contribute valuable knowledge that can inform interventions and strategies for rural teachers and educational policymakers.

If you have any questions or require further clarification about the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at +77479186756 or via email at sultan.kozhamberdiyev@nu.edu.kz.

You may also contact my Master's Thesis Supervisor, Janet Helmer, at janet.helmer@nu.edu.kz.

Consent: By engaging in this research, you acknowledge that you have read and comprehended the information provided in this consent form. You have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw your consent at any time without facing any consequences.

We hope that you will consider joining us in this important research endeavor. Your insights and experiences are invaluable and will contribute to our understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by beginning teachers in rural Kazakhstan. Thank you for considering this invitation, and we look forward to working together on this study.

Sincerely,

Sultan Kozhamberdiyev

Appendix C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan using an arts-based, community-based participatory research approach – photovoice accompanied by a semi-structured interview. We aim to comprehensively understand your experiences and insights related to teaching in rural schools.

Interview Duration: Today’s interview is expected to last around one hour. Throughout this time, we’ll understand your experiences in rural schools, utilizing the SHOWED approach inspired by Wan and Burren (1997) to steer our discussion.

Consent for Recording: You previously indicated in the email whether I have your permission to record our conversation. Are you still comfortable with me recording (or not) our discussion today?

If yes: Great! If there’s any point where you’d like me to stop recording or keep something confidential, just let me know.

If no: Thank you for letting me know. I’ll take notes instead.

Questions and Concerns: Before we begin, do you have any questions or concerns about the interview? Feel free to discuss any queries or raise any concerns you might have.

Open Communication: Throughout this study, if you have any questions or concerns, please don’t hesitate to ask. We’re here to address any queries you may have. If there’s any question that makes you uncomfortable, feel free to skip it, and we’ll move on. If you ever feel the need to stop the interview, just inform us.

S: What do you see here?

- Please describe the content of the photograph and what it represents to you.

H: What is happening here?

- Tell me about the context and circumstances surrounding the image. What was going on when you took this photograph?

O: How does this relate to our lives?

- How does the image connect to your life as a beginning teacher in a rural school? What aspects of your experience does it highlight?

W: Why does this concern/situation/strength exist?

- Help us understand the reasons behind the situation or concern depicted in the photograph. Why is this happening in your context?

E: How can we become Educated/Empowered through our new understanding?

- Reflect on what insights or lessons can be drawn from this image. How can we use this new understanding to improve teaching experiences in rural schools?

D: Moreover, what can you Do?

- Based on your experiences and insights, what actions or changes can be implemented to address the issues or leverage the strengths depicted in the photograph?

These interviews aim to delve into and articulate themes from your daily teaching experiences, providing a deeper understanding of your perspectives and insights related to the research questions. Your input is invaluable in shedding light on beginning teachers' experiences in Kazakhstan rural schools. Thank you for your participation in this study.

Appendix D

Sample of an Interview Transcript

Researcher: If you have any questions during the interview, feel free to ask them anytime. I'm ready to answer any questions you may have. If you find any questions uncomfortable, you can skip them, and we'll move on to the next one. If you want to end the interview completely, just let me know, okay?

Participant: Sure, okay!

Researcher: Let's start by directly examining your experience with the first photo you sent. Could you please describe the content of this photo and tell us what this photo means to you?

Participant: Ah, this photo depicts the moment when you start working, and various documentation is demanded from you. Why do we face such an issue? Because in university, we weren't prepared for document management. We don't have production cases, and since there's a lot of paperwork, you don't have the time to delve into how to do it. What to do with this document, for example, how to write an analysis or format a work program. And since I didn't have a mentor, I had to figure it out on my own. I would say I superficially dealt with any documentation they required from me. There was always a need to submit things very quickly, in the shortest possible time, and I had to ask someone for guidance on how to do it. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity. Now, let's move on, if possible, to the next photo.

Researcher: Great, thanks! Please tell us about the context and circumstances related to this image. What was happening when you took this photo? What were your feelings in general, given the circumstances of this photo?

Participant: This is a photo where I wanted to show that rural schools lack technical equipment. For example, most often, I conduct lessons in this classroom, and unfortunately,

it's impossible to use any screen demonstration here so that the children can see moving figures, for example. There is a screen, yes, I can lower it, but there is no projector in this room. In general, the school doesn't have a portable projector that I could bring from another room. And I have to work with the kids, well, explaining things with gestures, just illustrating on the board myself. But you can't show a certain process, so I took this photo to draw attention to this problem. Additionally, there is no funding to equip the school with anything. Take textbooks, for example. In the school library, there are many old Soviet textbooks, but unfortunately, there's sometimes not enough for classes, especially in large ones. We have, on average, up to 15 people, but we have two large classes with 19 people each. Sometimes there are not enough textbooks not only for teachers but also for the children.

Researcher: Alright, thank you. In general, how next photo is connected to your life as a beginning teacher in a rural school? What aspects of your experience does this photo emphasize?

Participant: This photo reflects how you are perceived, probably in the first year, especially when you are a young professional entering a school. Of course, you know about the dress code, classic attire, some pants are allowed, but even to the extent of receiving comments about the color of the clothes I wore. Or, for example, the length of the pants being shorter than they should be. It sort of speaks to the fact that often, people only look at your appearance, ignoring the quality of your teaching and what you do in your duties.

Researcher: You've mentioned all the issues and opportunities you listed. Please tell us what reasons contribute to these situations and problems you depicted in your photos, and why is this happening in your context, specifically in the context of a rural school? What do you think is the cause?

Participant: Firstly, there's a large amount of documentation, various reports. Often, it's because a small rural school, with fewer specialists and fewer teachers, is required to

produce the same amount of work as an ordinary urban school with a much larger staff. Their workload is accordingly less because it's distributed among everyone. Probably less budget is allocated for equipping small schools since there are fewer students, and they are not as focused on. The school administration is made up of quite an elderly group, and they are a bit out of touch with modern times, so to speak. They don't understand many of the issues required of us now. They often try to show their power, their strictness, especially in matters such as your appearance, rather than focusing on how you teach and whether you use new teaching technologies and methodologies. Additionally, I was not provided with a mentor. No, the school administration said that since I am the only specialist in my field, which is the school director, and the school director is not allowed to be a mentor, so I was not assigned one. No one personally worked with me to explain anything.

Researcher: Based on your experience and opinions overall, what actions or changes can be taken to address these problems you mentioned?

Participant: I believe that every young professional should have a mentor. This should be strictly checked and monitored, specifically the implementation of working with a mentor. Even now, with another teacher who is also young, they assigned a mentor to him, but working with him is not conducted and not monitored. Therefore, the young professional is in a state of confusion, not understanding what to do, and there is no one to guide them. I believe that every school should have a certain number of staff, regardless of whether it has a small number of students or a large, overcrowded class. I think all the specialties present in an urban school should also be present in a rural school. This way, the extra workload won't accumulate on the same teacher, and there will be less psychological pressure, less emotional fatigue. In terms of funding, the work will be carried out as financial support for the school. For example, in our rural school, if it is small, certain positions are not counted, and that's why the school is taken care of less. And because of this, there are problems with the lighting

in the classrooms with various outlets. If a fuse blows, you can't connect anything because there's no electricity. So, I believe that funding and the number of staff in each school should be the same.

Researcher: Excellent, thank you. Think about what lessons or conclusions can be drawn from the photos and experience you presented, and how this understanding can be used to improve the teaching experience in rural schools?

Participant: Well, I think it will push young professionals because they will reflect on how to teach, for example, without using ICT if you don't have that opportunity, and to develop new products, for example, worksheets or guides on certain complex topics that are difficult to explain just on the blackboard. And be emotionally and psychologically prepared for what may await them in a small rural school.

Researcher: Excellent, thank you!

Appendix E



NAZARBAYEV
UNIVERSITY

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of the Research Study: Beginning Teachers' Experiences Working in Rural Schools in Kazakhstan: An Exploratory Photovoice Study.

Introduction: You are invited to participate in a research study focused on understanding the experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools of Kazakhstan. This research employs an art-based, community-based research – photovoice. Participation in this study is voluntary, and I aim to provide you with comprehensive information to facilitate your decision-making process.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the distinct experiences of beginning teachers in rural schools in Kazakhstan. So, I plan to achieve this by utilizing the photovoice methodology, where you will use your smartphone camera to capture aspects of your daily teaching experiences and subsequently share the stories connected to these photographs.

Participation Requirements: If you decide to participate in this study, you will be requested to undertake the following activities:

Workshop Session: Attend a one-hour workshop session where you will receive an introduction to the research and in-depth information about photovoice, including guidance on using your smartphone camera to capture relevant images.

Photovoice Task: Photographing your daily experiences as a teacher in your school. I encourage you to capture images that best encapsulate your experiences and viewpoints.

Semi-Structured Interview: Choose 6 photographs from your collection and participate in an individual semi-structured interview. I will audio-record the interview only with your explicit consent. You can narrate the stories and insights associated with the selected photographs during this interview.

Review and Confirmation: Confirm and approve the accuracy of the descriptions and narratives related to your chosen photographs, as recorded by the researcher.

Time Commitment: Your involvement in this study is expected to require around ten hours, over approximately one month. Individual meeting schedules will be arranged to accommodate your availability and preferences.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You have the freedom to choose not to take part or to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative consequences or affecting your relationship with the researcher. Any images you have already provided will be deleted.

Confidentiality: I guarantee that all information and data gathered from you will be handled with the highest level of confidentiality. Any data disclosed during interviews will be anonymized to protect your identity. Only the researcher and authorized personnel will be able to access your data. Photos containing identifiable faces, locations, or information will be blurred to ensure the confidentiality of you and your family members. Additionally, you will be encouraged to select pseudonyms that will be utilized throughout the research. All data will be stored on the researcher's laptop, which is secured with password and touch ID protection.

Potential Risks and Benefits: This research has minimal levels of risk since the data and interview responses will remain confidential and accessible only to the researcher and thesis supervisor, with no sharing involved. However, sharing your experiences will provide valuable contextual knowledge about the country's educational landscape. Such insights can

inform targeted interventions and strategies tailored to the unique needs of rural teachers and enhancement of the support system for beginning teachers. This contributes to the broader field of education by revealing factors that influence educational inequality in rural settings through collaborative efforts by educators and policymakers.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or need additional clarification regarding the study, please feel free to reach out to the researcher, Sultan Kozhamberdiyev, at +77479186756 or via email at sultan.kozhamberdiyev@nu.edu.kz. Additionally, you can contact the Master's Thesis Supervisor, Janet Helmer, who is overseeing this student's work, at janet.helmer@nu.edu.kz.

Consent: I have read and understood the information provided in this consent form. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I voluntarily agree to take part in the research, knowing that I have the option to withdraw my consent at any time without facing any negative consequences.

Printed Name of Participant:

Date:

Participant's Signature: