

**COPING WITH EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND CHALLENGES IN RURAL  
SOUTH KAZAKHSTAN: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF A SMALL RURAL  
SCHOOL IN SHYMKENT OBLAST**

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**Introduction.** This qualitative study explores some of the current issues that small rural schools of South Kazakhstan have to face nowadays, especially in relation to the on-going implementation of educational reforms.

**Methodology.** The focus is placed on one particular school located in Shymkent Oblast where the author used to teach in the 80s. She returned to the community after almost 30 years, using critical ethnography to investigate the students, teachers and community members' ways of coping with the challenges generated by the reforms.

**Results and discussion.** Part of the problem she observed was the potential danger of the school losing the role it had traditionally played in unifying the community. The small community together with its local school built an entirely new school building using the old tradition, mutual help system, proving that old Kazakh traditions are still an essential element in daily community life; in coping with the challenges of rural life and solving educational issues, community members and school teachers still rely on the old Kazakh mode of being *kanagat*, to be satisfied, therefore, traditional values remain core and aid in their general existence; and the community school is a spiritual sanctuary for students' *kazakhsha tarbieley*, an upbringing in the traditional Kazakh way. Two important concepts rooted in Kazakh culture, namely *asar* and *kanagat*, have been instrumental in helping to maintain the relationship between school and community. This study contributes to rural education in Kazakhstan, a field devoid of the attention and investigation of local academics. The study findings should be of great interest to policy makers, educators, teachers - particular rural teachers - and students alike.

**Conclusions.** This study has revealed the need to rethink and reanalyze major assumptions on rural education in the south of Kazakhstan.