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Professional capabilities of rural schoolteachers in Kazakhstan

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Abstract. This paper is based on a research study that explores the professional capacities and capabilities of teachers in Kazakhstani rural schools from the perspectives of key stakeholders. By employing a mixed-methods research design, this study used both quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews to collect data on teachers' capabilities and experiences [1]. The quantitative surveys were administered to 125 teachers from 40 rural schools across Kazakhstan. Ninety qualitative interviews (41 individuals and 49 focus groups) were conducted with participants from rural schools in the outskirts of Almaty, Kyzylorda, Shymkent, Aktau, and Oskemen regions. The interview participants included school principals, vice principals, subject coordinators, teachers, students of Grades 7–11, regional and district education managers, and parents. The study's key findings revealed how rural schoolteachers are perceived by the stakeholders as well as the core issues, challenges, and dilemmas faced by these teachers. The study also makes recommendations for facilitation processes for the quality of the rural teacher profession. The UNESCO Quality Framework was used to guide the study.



Keywords: Rural schools, teachers, teacher's status, capabilities, quality of teaching



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Introduction

Ensuring that children, especially those in rural or disadvantaged areas, receive a high-quality education should be a top priority for all education stakeholders. In 1994, Kazakhstan committed to the Convention on the Rights of the Child [2] and has since implemented various measures to enhance both the accessibility and quality of education within the country. Nevertheless, research indicates significant disparities in educational quality and outcomes between rural and urban schools in Kazakhstan. Rural schools face challenges such as declining academic performance and completion rates, deteriorating school facilities, a short-

age of qualified teachers, and limited access to excellent educational resources [3]. Other contributing factors include decreasing enrollment, increasing dropout rates [4], poor results of rural school students in the Unified National Test [5], restricted internet access [6], lower salaries for school administrators and educators [7], and language-related issues [8].

Additionally, there exists an unfair allocation of educators across schools, where proficient teachers are less inclined to teach at underprivileged schools and are more inclined to transfer to institutions for gifted students that offer extra resources [9]. According to the Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development [10], Kazakhstan requires a strategy to supply suitably qualified teachers and top-notch educational materials to rural schools.

While challenges faced by rural schools are extensively documented worldwide, there is a noticeable absence of empirical research within the Kazakhstani context that explores quality-related concerns in rural schools through the eyes of teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders operating in remote villages throughout the country. It is widely acknowledged by educators and policymakers that the quality of teaching plays a pivotal role in determining students' achievements and the overall success of both schools and the nation's educational system [14]. Therefore, this study primarily centers on the capabilities and experiences

of rural teachers, as perceived by teachers themselves, school leaders, and other stakeholders in rural regions of Kazakhstan.

Theoretical framework

The notion of education quality has been a subject of debate in the wider academic discourse. The absence of a universally agreed-upon, standardized definition for education quality complicates discussions surrounding the concept [15]. Consequently, the decision was made to utilize a theoretical framework that encompasses contexts, inputs, and outputs to gain insight into how stakeholders perceive education quality and the related challenges, concerns, and gaps within rural schools in Kazakhstan. This framework draws primarily from the works of Tikley [16] and UNESCO [17].

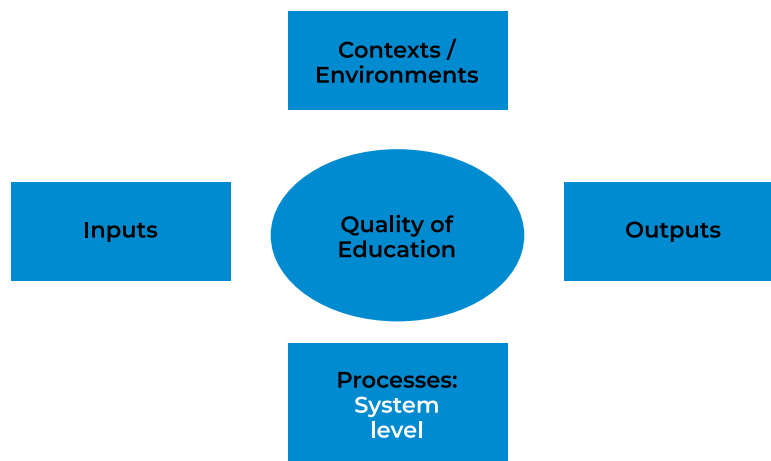


Figure 1: UNESCO Quality Framework

Research questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- What are Kazakhstani rural school administrators, teachers, students, and parents' perceptions of the quality of education?
- What kind of capacities and capabilities do rural school teachers have to have

to achieve the perceived quality of education in their schools?

- What difficulties and obstacles do rural school leaders, teachers, and students encounter while striving to attain the envisioned quality of education in their schools?
- What suggestions can be offered to improve the quality of education in rural schools in Kazakhstan?

Materials and Methods

This research employed a mixed methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, namely surveys and semi-structured interviews [1]. The quantitative survey was distributed to over 200 teachers across 40 rural schools throughout Kazakhstan, with 125 participants responding. In order to gather detailed and comprehensive data from a relatively small sample size [18], 90 qualitative interviews were conducted, comprising 41 individual interviews and 49 focus group discussions. These interviews involved various stakeholders from rural schools in the Almaty, Kyzylorda, Shymkent, Aktau, and Oskemen regions, including teachers, principals, vice principals, subject coordinators, students in Grades 7–11, regional and district education managers, and parents. The survey and interview questions were developed in alignment with the quality framework illustrated in Figure 1 and underwent pilot testing to ensure their validity and reliability [19]. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, featuring probing questions, yielded data that was rich in information and descriptive in nature [20, 21]. The interviews and discussions were conducted in either Kazakh or Russian, based on the respondents' preferences, and later transcribed and translated into English.

The data analysis process unfolded in three distinct phases. Initially, the analysis focused on the data derived from the quantitative survey questionnaires. Concurrently, ongoing analysis of the qualitative data occurred in tandem with data collection. Finally, a more comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the data took place once data collection across various regions had concluded [22, 19]. This continuous data analysis approach proved invaluable in identifying data gaps, facilitating deeper exploration during subsequent interviews, and uncovering emerging patterns and themes [23, 24, 21].

Results

Rural teacher capacity and capability: teachers' motivation

During the survey and interviews, the participants in the study highlighted several positive aspects regarding the motivation of rural teachers. These factors include incentives, certificates, and a friendly school atmosphere. Approximately 90% of survey respondents agreed that their schools offer the necessary conditions to motivate teachers, including awards, recognition, and opportunities for professional development. In focus group interviews, most stakeholders mentioned that rural teachers find motivation through various incentives and bonuses provided by the government and schools. For example, there are one-time payments known as "fair credits" (*подъёмные* in Russian) given to teachers when they join rural schools, allocated for purchasing a house. The government also runs a program called "with a diploma to the village," where young teachers who work in rural areas receive apartments. Additionally, teachers with higher qualifications receive an extra 30–50% in salary, further motivating them. Another source of motivation for rural teachers is preparing their students for subject Olympiads, which not only brings them satisfaction from their work but also some financial rewards.

During interviews, rural teachers discussed the recognition they receive from their schools and the Ministry of Education, which comes in the form of certificates awarded by school, regional, and oblast administrations, as well as letters of appreciation and merit certificates from the ministry. An education manager in the eastern region noted that rural schools in their area arrange various events and seminars, providing teachers with opportunities to share their experiences and receive bonuses. The educational official in the eastern region commented:

We conduct seminars within our district, so this person shares her experience. First of all, she demonstrates to other teachers what knowledge she received. Secondly, we also motivate teachers by regularly encouraging them for every holiday, event, and their deserved bonuses....

Many participants in the East Kazakhstan region emphasized that a welcoming en-

vironment and positive student attitudes contribute to their desire to continue working in schools and maintain enthusiasm for their profession. Additionally, respondents cited factors such as the gratitude of children, students' achievements, cultural tolerance, and effective school administration.

However, some rural teachers in the East Kazakhstan region noted that not all rural schools have a consistent policy of providing incentives and additional bonuses to teachers' salaries. One teacher from that region mentioned that when a student succeeds in a competition, their teacher is typically rewarded with incentives and salary bonuses, but unfortunately, this practice is not observed in their own school.

Other participants also reported the issues with teachers' low motivation for their work. They mentioned several reasons: (a) retirement age, teachers from the Soviet period, and (b) no appreciation from the education officials. Rural teachers who approach retirement age - 47-48 years old, those people are from the Soviet school who have worked for 20 years or more continue to work, but rather inertially. They attend professional development courses without enthusiasm. Other respondents indicated that there is no encouragement for teachers for well-done work. Several participants also mentioned the uneven distribution of salaries and incentives.

During the interviews, some rural teachers also pointed out the lack or no support from local authorities and \or ministry. The survey data also showed that 30 % of participants considered the support from the MOES and Regional Education Offices relatively effective. Teachers suggest that local authorities or the ministry of education could provide rural teachers with apartments as support.

Perceptions about teacher capacity

Stakeholders expressed their views regarding the capabilities of teachers in rural areas. Initially, they highlighted factors such as the teachers' credentials, their proficiency in the subject matter, their capacity to convey content effectively, and their skill

in motivating and engaging with students. The majority of stakeholders, approximately 80%, expressed contentment with the overall quality of rural teachers. These teachers regularly participate in professional development programs and undergo an assessment process every five (or three) years. Educational department representatives review teachers' portfolios and observe their teaching sessions. Furthermore, there exists a six-tier teacher evaluation system designed to encourage ongoing professional growth among teachers.

To ensure the quality of rural teachers, educational authorities established specific hiring criteria. The hiring process involves interviews, testing, and a three-month probationary period, followed by an additional assessment. Successful completion of this assessment leads to permanent employment. School administrators, in collaboration with educational officials, also review teachers' CVs and prior experience. To support new and young teachers, mentorship programs are organized, with experienced senior teachers serving as mentors.

In addition to their professional attributes, the majority of stakeholders noted the deep commitment of rural teachers to their schools and students, providing both financial and emotional support. These teachers also prioritize the well-being of their students, as evidenced by instances where they took action to address concerns such as inadequate clothing. For example, if a teacher noticed a student wearing inadequate footwear in cold weather, they would approach sponsors for a solution. There were also cases where teachers contributed money from their own salaries to assist specific students in need.

Students generally hold positive views of their rural teachers' capacities and capabilities. Most students believe that their teachers are dedicated to their jobs. However, they noted differences between senior and young teachers. Senior teachers were seen as effective in maintaining discipline and conducting lessons, but they were sometimes viewed as less open to students' opinions. In contrast, younger, less experienced

teachers occasionally faced challenges in delivering lessons effectively. Some teachers were also criticized for relying solely on textbooks without using supplementary materials.

The survey data showed that approximately 80% of participants believed that rural teachers possess the qualities of effective educators. Various stakeholders offered their insights into the capacities and capabilities they considered essential for an ideal teacher. According to an education manager in a Kazakhstani region, the best teacher should have subject knowledge, proficiency in three languages (Kazakh, Russian, and English), the ability to use new technologies in teaching, and strong oratory skills for effective communication. Students, on the other hand, expressed their view of an ideal teacher as someone who can engage students, present information in an engaging manner, build good relationships with students, treat everyone equally, demonstrate expertise, and lead an active lifestyle. Teachers generally agreed with these qualities but also emphasized the importance of building strong connections with students and colleagues, being adaptable and resourceful, and having the ability to thrive in diverse circumstances.

Many rural teachers voiced their worries regarding the rights and societal standing of educators. Educational authorities shared the teachers' viewpoint that teachers have fewer rights compared to parents. Parents have the privilege of lodging complaints against teachers, and students can record and upload videos of teachers' actions on the ministry website. These videos may capture instances of a teacher's aggression but often lack the full context. Furthermore, in many instances, even when parents' criticisms are unfounded, teachers are still perceived as at fault. School administrations tend to side with parents rather than supporting teachers in these matters.

The low status of teachers is attributed to insufficient protection and a lack of respect for their rights. Many teachers believe that individuals with lower academic performance tend to pursue teaching careers,

urging attention to the recruitment process for graduates. Additional factors contributing to the low teacher status include heavy workloads, extended working hours, unpaid overtime, low salaries, and negative parental attitudes toward teachers. Consequently, the teaching profession is unappealing to young individuals.

Rural teacher capacity: professional development

Numerous participants discussed the professional development of rural teachers. Most respondents, which included teachers, educational authorities, vice principals, and school principals, indicated the presence of professional development programs. These courses covered topics like updated curricula, the trilingual policy, and external training on equipment usage. Overall, teachers expressed contentment with these courses and believed they adequately enhanced their teaching abilities and student motivation.

Teachers in various rural areas of Kazakhstan noted that rural schools receive assistance from Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS) and Nazarbayev University (NU) through seminars, training sessions, and remote learning opportunities for teaching staff. Likewise, teachers participate in seminars conducted by NIS and NU, and experts from these organizations visit rural schools.

Overall, rural teachers are satisfied with the practices the organizations offer. However, some respondents confessed that there was sometimes too much theory during the seminars and wished there were more practical implementations.

Rural schools are adapted for children with special needs. Unfortunately, some special students have to study at home due to traditional practices. Teachers sometimes invite them to school to be among other children. There are conditions for children with limited mobility, such as on wheelchairs, such children can also move inside school easily. Moreover, teachers attend seminars on inclusive education. However, some participants admitted that there are some

issues concerning inclusive education, such as having not enough specialists and professional development courses for teachers on inclusive education.

Rural teacher capacities and capabilities: Workload issues

All stakeholders expressed their concern about the excessive workload placed on rural teachers, which goes beyond their primary teaching responsibilities. This additional workload includes extra hours, classroom supervision, parent-teacher meetings, publishing articles, and documentation tasks. Many teachers in the Southern and Eastern regions admitted that they sometimes have to teach in two or even three shifts due to the high number of students in rural schools. Unfortunately, these teachers do not receive any additional compensation for their extra work. However, a principal in the Southern region mentioned that their teachers are granted one day off per week, referred to as a “methodological day,” to address this issue.

Another subject discussed in the interviews is classroom supervision. According to the teachers, they typically juggle teaching responsibilities with class supervision, which entails various tasks such as organizing parent meetings, engaging with parents, visiting students’ homes, conducting inspections, monitoring student attendance, and preparing for events like New Year’s celebrations.

Paperwork is consistently identified as a significant challenge and a hindrance to teacher capacity and capability by all stakeholders. Teachers often need to complete paperwork after their regular teaching duties. Some teachers struggle to complete all required forms during their workday, leading them to stay late in the evening to catch up on paperwork. Additionally, teachers must use an electronic system called “Kundelik” to record student attendance and grades, which further reduces the time available for effective lesson preparation.

The majority of respondents reported strug-

gles in the implementation of the updated curriculum: (a) more homework, complicated content, and some assignments take more time to solve them; lack of space as the one school, for example, was built for 600 students, and now there are 1400 children; (c) too much paperwork, and for example teachers must fill out an online registrar Kundelik.kz, but every classroom needs computers and a good internet connection as teachers have to fill the registrar at home even at night; (d) teachers have to prepare materials for summative assignments which takes time and (e) teachers often purchase school materials for their own money.

Fortunately, teachers could cope with some difficulties and found positive sides of updated curriculum for themselves and their students. Most rural teachers mentioned that students benefit from the updated curriculum changes. Students have become more independent in terms of study. For instance, they search for information on their own. They develop their own logical ideas. The relationships between students and teachers have got more freedom. Previously there was a teacher-centered approach in rural schools. The students from the East Kazakhstan shared during the FGD:

The lessons are more motivating and interesting, as teachers use such methods as working in groups during the lesson, implementing of new technologies, etc. Some students also support the updated curriculum.

They reported that after the new curriculum’s incorporation, the teachers’ material and explanations were clear to them.

Sometimes when explaining, teachers conduct the experiments. Now, after we switched to a new content (*обновленка* in Russian), everything is very clear, and teachers explain everything well and always thoroughly explain if you do not understand something.

Despite the workload and other challenges, rural teachers likewise are very committed to their work and students. Students men-

tioned in their focus group interviews that teachers guide them about their application to Kazakhstani universities. Moreover, teachers prepare students for the university application process; they play the role of tutors.

Participants from all regions mentioned that rural teachers always conduct extra lessons for all students, and they pay attention to talented students. One principal in one of the Kazakhstani regions confirmed that teachers also participate in contests and involve their students even in paid contests. They pay for contests from their incentives.

Stakeholders' Views on the Rural School Environment

Across all regions, respondents acknowledged a collaborative atmosphere in rural schools, with school administrators fostering teamwork and appreciating employees' cooperative efforts. In one region, where two schools were merged, teachers and students from diverse backgrounds harmoniously coexisted, often working together without conflicts or intense competition, according to a vice-principal's report.

Rural schools actively promote parent-teacher collaboration, as indicated by survey results showing that 58% agreed, and 36% strongly agreed that strong rapport exists between teachers and parents. Interviews with teachers confirmed their ability to discuss various matters with parents, including academic performance, school events, attendance, excursions, and child upbringing. Communication channels like WhatsApp groups and parents-teachers meetings facilitate this interaction. Additionally, parents and teachers jointly organize inspections, and teachers invite parents to observe lessons, fostering positive teacher-student relationships.

However, some issues remain less accessible for teachers to discuss with school administrators. While 89% of respondents in the survey agreed that teachers were involved in decision-making, teachers admitted they could provide self-reports detailing

work-related challenges. Nevertheless, proposing suggestions to the administration was not always straightforward.

Discussion

This paper primarily focuses on examining issues and challenges from the perspective of teachers, underscoring the crucial role teachers play in a country's national educational system, including Kazakhstan. Fortunately, recent years have witnessed gradual improvements in the Kazakhstani educational system, aimed at enhancing conditions for teachers. These improvements include initiatives such as professional development courses, the involvement of organizations like the Center of Excellence of NIS and Orleu, reforms in collaboration with NU for pedagogical institute programs, and NIS-led initiatives related to attestation, compensation, and career advancement [25, 14].

While these reforms bring positive changes, they are not without challenges affecting all education stakeholders. This study identifies significant issues, such as a shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in specific subject areas. In rural schools, the role of teachers and their capacity and capability becomes even more critical due to limited alternative learning and support resources for students [28]. However, there is a growing concern that more qualified teachers and effective educational leaders are drawn to urban areas for better career prospects and a higher quality of life [10]. In rural schools, only 13.8% of teachers are highly qualified compared to 32.8% in urban schools [29]. Although professional development courses are available for rural teachers, this study highlights that these courses do not always effectively enhance teacher capacity and capability.

The shortage of teachers in rural areas presents several challenges, including a lack of teachers for specific subjects, a shortage of young specialists, a limited presence of male teachers, and an aging teacher population nearing retirement. Both quantitative and qualitative data highlight the scarcity of

teachers for subjects such as English, mathematics, ICT, and science in most schools. Many participants also expressed concerns about the English language proficiency of teachers, particularly for teaching STEM subjects exclusively in English, which can hinder both teachers' and students' readiness for English-based instruction [30]. As young teachers are generally not inclined to work in rural schools, a significant proportion of teachers in most rural schools belong to the older generation from the Soviet era, with an average age of 45 years. Consequently, these older teachers may be less motivated to adopt new technologies and modern teaching methods, impacting their ability to adapt to contemporary learning and assessment approaches [31].

In interviews, some participants emphasized the need for more male teachers in rural schools, citing their potential positive influence on the upbringing of school boys and the development of male qualities. The shortage of male teachers in the teaching profession is attributed to various factors, including heavy workloads, limited resources, low salaries, increasing administrative tasks, non-teaching responsibilities imposed on teachers, lack of autonomy, and the stress caused by frequent inspections [9]. The teaching profession's low status and the growing salary disparity between the capital city and other regions further exacerbate the teacher shortage in rural schools [13]. However, there is optimism that the "Law on the Status of Teachers," once effectively implemented, could enhance the prestige and standing of the teaching profession [32].

The majority of participants highlighted the insufficient supply of resources as a significant impediment to the quality of the teaching process. This scarcity extends to classrooms, equipment, stationery, and textbooks, all of which affect the effectiveness of teachers. Despite being a small minority, the study identified teachers at each research site who make extraordinary efforts to support students' learning. Some of these teachers personally invest 20,000 to 30,000 Tenge per month to purchase stationery and teaching materials to enhance their lessons. The COVID-19 pandemic ex-

acerbated the resource disparity between rural and urban schools, particularly regarding technical aspects like poor internet connectivity, lack of WIFI access, and a shortage of computers in some remote rural households. These challenges further hinder the rural teachers' capacity and capability.

Conclusion

The study revealed several challenges that hinder the effective functioning and capabilities of participants, mainly focusing on rural teachers. These challenges encompass low motivation, teaching quality issues, and deficiencies in the psychological, academic environment, and support systems within rural schools. Interviews and surveys uncovered that some rural teachers lacked motivation due to factors such as nearing retirement age, the lingering influence of Soviet-style teaching methods, and limited or absent support from educational authorities. Despite the availability of numerous professional development courses and certifications for rural teachers, there are still concerns about the quality of teaching, primarily attributed to resource and facility limitations.

Furthermore, the study highlighted a gap in understanding between senior and young teachers. While senior teachers may be perceived as somewhat conservative by students, their younger counterparts often seem ill-prepared to navigate the challenges and demands of rural school life. Remote schools, in particular, grapple with heavy workloads and a shortage of essential resources, including basic sanitation facilities and slow internet connections. In some rural schools, participants acknowledged the existence of less open and trusting relationships between students and teachers, as well as between teachers and school administration.

Taking into account the various issues and obstacles faced by rural teachers, the study participants put forth the following suggestions to enhance the quality of education in rural areas: elevating the status of the teaching profession, attracting qualified professionals, encouraging young teachers

and talented graduates to remain in rural settings, and creating conducive environments for rural educators, including support for inclusive education. A consensus among most respondents was that offering favorable conditions like free housing, transportation, competitive salaries, and essential resources would entice skilled professionals to rural areas and motivate young teachers and graduates to continue working there.

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Қазақстандағы ауыл мұғалімдерінің кәсіби мүмкіндіктері

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала негізгі мүдделі тараптардың көзқарасы бойынша Қазақстандағы ауыл мектептері мұғалімдерінің кәсіби қабілеттері мен мүмкіндіктерін зерттейтін зерттеуге негізделген. Аралас әдісті зерттеу тәсілін қолдана отырып, бұл зерттеуде мұғалімдердің қабілеттері мен тәжірибесі туралы мәліметтерді жинау үшін сандық сауалнамалар да, жартылай құрылымдық сұхбаттар да қолданылды [1]. Қазақстан бойынша 40 ауыл мектебінің 125 мұғалімі арасында сандық сауалнама жүргізілді. Алматы, Шымкент қалалары, Қызылорда, Маңғыстау және Шығыс Қазақстан облыстарының шетіндегі ауылдық мектептерде қатысушылармен 90 сапалы сұхбат (41 жеке және 49 фокус-топ) өткізілді. Әңгімелесуге мектеп директорлары, директордың орынбасарлары, пән үйлестірушілері, мұғалімдер, 7-11 сынып оқушылары, облыстық және аудандық білім беру басқармаларының өкілдері, ата-аналар қатысты. Зерттеудің негізгі нәтижелері ауыл мектептері мұғалімдерін мүдделі тараптардың қалай қабылдайтынын және осы мұғалімдер тап болған негізгі мәселелер, қиындықтар мен дилеммаларды көрсетті. Сондай-ақ, зерттеуде ауыл мұғалімі мамандығының сапасын арттыру бойынша ұсыныстар да берілген. Зерттеуді жүргізу үшін ЮНЕСКО-ның сапа жүйесі пайдаланылды.



Кілтті сөздер: Ауыл мектептері, мұғалімдер, мұғалім мәртебесі, мүмкіндіктері, оқыту сапасы

Профессиональные возможности сельских учителей Казахстана

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Аннотация. Данная статья основана на исследовании, в котором изучаются профессиональные способности и возможности учителей сельских школ Казахстана с точки зрения ключевых заинтересованных сторон. Используя смешанный метод исследования, в этом исследовании использовались как количественные опросы, так и полуструктурированные интервью для сбора данных о способностях и опыте учителей [1]. Количественный опрос был проведен среди 125 учителей из 40 сельских школ по всему Казахстану. С участниками сельских школ на окраинах городов Алматы, Шымкент, Кызылординской, Мангистауской и Восточно-Казахстанской областей было проведено 90 качественных интервью (41 индивидуальное и 49 фокус-групп). В интервью приняли участие директора школ, заместители директоров, координаторы предметов, учителя, учащиеся 7–11 классов, представители областных и районных отделов образования, родители. Ключевые результаты исследования показали, как сельские школьные учителя воспринимаются заинтересованными сторонами, а также основные проблемы, сложности и дилеммы, с которыми сталкиваются эти учителя. Исследование также дает рекомендации по улучшению качества профессии сельского учителя. В качестве руководства для исследования использовалась Система качества ЮНЕСКО.



Ключевые слова: Сельские школы, учителя, статус учителя, возможности, качество преподавания

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