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Nurlanov Sh.^{1*}

¹*Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD: IMPLEMENTATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Abstract

The first year of the newly appointed school leader is important because it sets the stage for internalizing the new role and responsibilities. It has been reported that during the first year school principals face numerous challenges and how they deal with such challenges may affect their future career. It is during the first year when the novice principals learn about the school affairs from the leader's standpoint. Juggling among many new responsibilities, school leaders do not have many opportunities to reflect on their experience; specifically on why they chose this career path, the challenges they faced and how they dealt with them. In light of the reforms in education it is interesting to look into how new school leaders perceive their roles which in turn affects how they act upon the new tasks. In this regard, this study explored the reasons, which led the participant of this research to choose this career path. In other words, this study explores the lived experience of the first-year school principal in Kazakhstan. It provides the personal account of this experience from the data gathered in the form of diary entries, personal memories, presentations and electronic mails written during the first year.

Autoethnography was the method employed to conduct this study. This research method is not widely used in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, the literature review suggests that it is popular among education researchers.

The findings of this study suggest that the participant of this study chose to become a school principal partially because of his previous work experience but more importantly because of his life experience. Furthermore, the researcher found out that motivating students, making an impact were the reasons why he chose this profession. Other findings suggest that the researcher faced challenges in terms of resistance to change, dealing with the school culture and managing conflicts. He coped with these challenges by minimizing resistance to challenges, studying more about the school cultures and managing conflicts. A number of recommendations are provided for both policy-makers and the first-year school leaders at the end of this research.

Keywords: autoethnography, school leaders, principal, challenges, career choice, policy-makers, recommendations

Нурланов Ш.^{1}*

*¹Казахский национальный педагогический университет имени Абая,
г. Алматы, Казахстан*

АВТОЭТНОГРАФИЧЕСКИЙ МЕТОД: ОПЫТ НАУЧНОГО ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

Аннотация

В данной статье раскрывается значимость первого года нового руководителя школы, поскольку он закладывает основу для принятия новой роли и обязанностей. Отмечается, что в течение первого года работы директора школ сталкиваются с многочисленными вызовами, и то, как они справляются с этими вызовами, может повлиять на их будущую карьеру. Именно в течение первого года начинающие директора узнают о школьных вопросах с точки зрения лидера. Из-за необходимости находить баланс между множеством новых обязанностей, школьные руководители не всегда имеют возможность порефлексировать над своим опытом; особенно о том, почему они выбрали этот карьерный путь, проблемы, с которыми они столкнулись, и как они с ними справляются. В свете реформ в сфере образования, интересно обратить внимание на то, как новые руководители школ воспринимают свои роли, которые, в свою очередь, влияют на то, как они действуют относительно новых поставленных задач. В связи с этим, данное исследование было также направлено на изучение причин, побудивших участника исследования выбрать этот карьерный путь. В этом исследовании рассматривается жизненный опыт директора одной школы в Казахстане, который занимает данный пост первый год.

Данное исследование представляет личный взгляд на опыт работы директором, основывающийся на таких данных как записи в ежедневнике, личные воспоминания, презентации и электронные письма, написанные в течение первого года. Для проведения этого исследования использовался метод автоэтнографии. Данный метод не применяется широко в Казахстане. Тем не менее, обзор литературы указывает на то, что автоэтнография, в качестве метода исследования, довольно популярен в международной практике среди исследователей образования.

Результаты данного исследования показывают то, что участники эксперимента предпочли стать директорами школы частично из-за своего предыдущего опыта работы, но, в основном, из-за своего жизненного опыта. Кроме того, исследователь выяснил, что основными причинами для выбора данной профессии стали желание мотивировать учащихся школы и стремление сделать вклад в развитие страны. Результаты исследования определили, что исследователь столкнулся с такими проблемами как сопротивление переменам, развитие школьной культуры, необходимость справляться с конфликтами. Он справлялся с этими проблемами, минимизируя сопротивление, изучая школьные культуры и работая с конфликтами. В заключение данного исследования, представлен ряд рекомендаций как для органов, разрабатывающих образовательные политики, так и директорам, работающим первый год на данной должности.

Ключевые слова: автоэтнография, директор школы, руководитель, проблемы, выбор профессии, новый, рекомендации.

Ш.Нурланов^{1}*

*¹Абай атындағы Қазақ ұлттық педагогикалық университеті,
Алматы қ., Қазақстан*

АВТОЭТНОГРАФИЯЛЫҚ ӘДІС: ҒЫЛЫМИ ЗЕРТТЕУДІҢ ТӘЖІРИБЕСІ

Аңдатпа

Мақалада зерттеуші жаңа басқарушы мектеп өміріндегі алғашқы кезеңі өзіндік маңыздылығымен ерекшеленетінін көрсетеді. Себебі бұл кезең – жаңа рөлдер мен жауапкершіліктерді қабылдау үшін негіз болатын іс-әрекеттердің бастамасы. Бірінші жыл ішінде мектеп директорлары көптеген мәселелерге тап болып жататынын және осы мәселелермен қалай күресетіні олардың болашақ

мансабына әсер етуі мүмкін екенін атап өткен жөн. Жаңа бастаған директорлар осы алғашқы жылдың ішінде мектеп өміріне көшбасшы ретінде қарай бастайды. Көптеген жаңа міндеттердің арасындағы тепе-теңдікті табу салдарынан, мектеп көшбасшыларының өз тәжірибелерін, мансап жолын не үшін таңдағандығын, жұмыс барысында тап болған мәселелер мен оларды шешу жолдарын саралауға мүмкіндіктері болмайды. Білім беру саласындағы реформалар аясында, жаңа мектеп көшбасшылары өздерінің рөлдерін қалай қабылдағанына, бұл өз кезегінде, олардың жаңа міндеттеріне қатысты әрекет етуіне назар аударған жөн. Осыған байланысты, бұл зерттеу жұмысының қатысушысын осы мансап жолын таңдауға талпындыратын себептерді зерттеуге бағытталған. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы бір мектеп директорының өмірлік тәжірибесін қарастырады, ол осы лауазымда бірінші жыл жұмыс атқарады.

Бұл зерттеуде бірінші жылда жазылған күнделік жазбалары, жеке естеліктер, презентациялар және электрондық пошта сияқты деректерге негізделген, директордың тәжірибесі туралы жеке көзқарас қарастырылған. Осы зерттеуді жүргізу үшін автоэтнографиялық әдіс қолданылды. Аталмыш әдіс Қазақстанда кеңінен қолданысқа ие емес. Дегенмен, білім беру саласын зерттеушілері арасында автоэтнографияның зерттеу әдісі ретінде халықаралық тәжірибеде айтарлықтай танымал екенін әдебиеттерге шолу жұмыстары көрсетеді. Сонымен қатар, зерттеуші бұл мамандықты таңдаудың негізгі себептері - оқушыларды ынталандыру, адамдармен жұмыс істеу және «сәулетші» болу мүмкіндігін атап өтеді.

Зерттеу нәтижесі бойынша, зерттеушінің алдында басқалардың өзгерістерге қарсылығы, мектеп мәдениетінің жаңаруы, жағымсыз жағдайлар мен қақтығыстардың шешілуі, стресстік сәттерді жеңу қажеттілігі, сондай-ақ оқу процесінің «сәулетшісі» ретінде іске асырылуы сияқты мәселелер туындады. Теріс, стресстік сәттер мен қақтығыстармен күресудің түрлі әдістерін қолдана отырып, әртүрлі қиыншылықтарға төзімділікті барынша азайту арқылы ол осы проблемаларды шеше білді. Осы зерттеудің соңында аталмыш лауазымда бірінші жылда жұмыс істейтін білім беру саясат әзірлеуші мекемелер мен директорларына бірқатар ұсыныстар берілді.

Түйін сөздер: автоэтнография, мектеп директоры, көшбасшы, мамандық таңдау, жаңа, ұсыныстар.

Introduction. On the first workday of 2018, I was officially appointed the principal of one of the schools in Astana. Before assuming this leadership position, I had served as a vice-principal and manager for academic affairs for six months respectively at the school where I was later appointed the principal. I had never worked at school before joining it as the manager for academic affairs in 2017. In other words, I was a non-traditional school leader, who had never held a teaching position and who had little administrative school experience before leading it.

In the autoethnographic study I explored why I chose to become a school principal. Such choice is usually affected by previous work experience and even by what happened earlier during the school and university years.

According to Tichy as cited by Sparks, leadership is autobiographical in that it is shaped by life events and experiences. In his own words:

“Who we are as leaders comes from the ups and downs of our life experience, not the books we have read or the courses we have taken. When people look back at what shaped them, inevitably it is the tough times. Really good leaders learn from those experiences (Sparks, 2005, p. 53).” [1].

Therefore, it is important to look into one’s life history in order to understand why he or she makes certain choices about a career.

According to Dethloff (2007) [2], principalship is a highly complex job. It is even more so today when the field of education is going through significant transformations. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that I faced strong challenges from day one of this job. Nevertheless, I embarked on this journey full of enthusiasm and hope.

Materials and Method. This research is not a traditional interview or observation based qualitative study. Nor is it quantitative. That is, it does not have a hypothesis, which can be either rejected or accepted. Rather, it is a personal account of what I have experienced. Therefore, its value will inevitably change with time and each individual reader. Nevertheless, it will provide a unique insight into the educational profession by providing self-reflections and analysis of one’s own practices and ideas. As Connelly and Clandinin put it: For each of us the more we understand ourselves and can articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen, the more meaningful our (experience) will be. The process of making sense and meaning...of the narratives of our experience is both difficult and rewarding (1994, p. 11) [3].

The research on education in Kazakhstan usually looks at similar studies from a third-party perspective. Such methodology fails to provide in-depth reflective insights. Only by employing the autoethnographic method can such a goal be achieved. Many of the experiences in this study are unique to me. However, some of these experiences will be shared by all professionals working in the field of school education, particularly in the context of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, as Ellis puts it, all stories are potentially more than our own experience (2004, p. 37) [4]. Therefore, many readers will be able to relate to the experiences and insights shared in this study and gain an understanding of what a principals' job entails.

According to Ellis, autoethnography is “research writing and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection...” (2004, p. xix). This definition encompasses both the cultural aspects and the personal as well as social ones. But more importantly, I chose to use autoethnography as a method for my research because it is the only method, which allows me to research myself.

According to Pavlenko (2002) [5], one of the main advantages of personal narratives is that they give us access into learners' private worlds and provide rich data. This method also allows me to make my voice heard from me as opposed to the analysis of other researcher's interpretation of my experience. That is, autoethnography provides a transition from being an outsider to an insider in the research (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995) [6]. As such, the readers will have the opportunity to learn about the perspective of the insider, the first-year school principal.

Last but not least, I chose to employ the autoethnography because it gives me an opportunity to explore myself. First year in a new position is both stressful and busy. It is difficult to reflect on my experience while juggling among so many new responsibilities. This method allowed me to reflect on my lived experience.

Data collection

The data for this research was collected through writing personal diaries. I also used the information from my personal memory. According to Chang (2008) [7], in autoethnography, the researcher himself provides the personal memory data. In other words, the researcher is the person who provides the data.

Another important source of information that I used in this study is self-observation data. In a traditional ethnographic study the researcher immerses himself in the culture. The culture being studied in autoethnographic research - the new school - is part of the researcher's life. Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw give two stages of self-observation. In the first stage, the researcher immerses in culture by getting to know people and customs (1995). In this process the researcher becomes an active member of that culture. In the second phase, the researcher systematically writes down what is being learned and observed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) [8].

The data for this study was also gathered from the letters and emails I sent to teachers, staff and students, meeting minutes, reports I wrote, and the presentations I made. This time, however, I looked at these data from the standpoint of the researcher as opposed to that of the author and presenter.

Last but not least, I also looked into the critical incidents that took place during the year. Such incidents included cases with students, staff and parents. The data for critical incidents was derived from my personal memory as well as from my diary. I also did a systematic reflection on each phase of my personal and professional life and tried to make meaning of what I did when; the way I did; and why I did what I did. It is this reflexivity that enabled me to identify events, incidents, and experiences and understand the relationship between cause and effect and thus relate them to my becoming a first year principal.

Research results and Discussion

As I mentioned above, autoethnographic study is a highly personalized account of oneself. The guiding questions of this study were as follows:

RQ1. How and why did I become a school principal?

RQ2. What challenges did I face when I assumed this position?

RQ3. How did I respond to these challenges?

Findings

RQ1. By analyzing the data from the findings that relate to the first research question “How and why did I become a school principal?” the following themes were derived: significant incidents from childhood, previous career, motivating students, making an impact.

Significant Incidents from Childhood

It appears that my own childhood experience has significantly affected my choice of education as a career path. Specifically, the incident with the backpack, which I described in my personal diary, seems to have had a significant impact. In my diary I wrote:

“That day Aunt Nina instilled in me the idea that education is a necessary ingredient in one’s success in life I am forever thankful to her for instilling the idea that education is important in life. This belief has guided my life journey not only in terms of my personal educational aspirations, but it has also affected the choice of my career path.”

Looking into this critical incident from my childhood it seems that I chose education in general as a career path.

Previous Career

When reflecting about my career path I wrote the following in the diary:

“My professional career before school can be broadly divided into two parts; working for think-tanks, where I mostly promoted ideas and best practices from around the globe through writing reports and policy memos as well as working for organizations where I helped, coordinated or led the actual implementation of projects...While working in these organizations I felt that I was working with the big picture. Therefore, I wanted to work on the ground.”

It seems that working on the ground for me meant that I wanted to work at school. My previous career path was in the field of education. However, it was not in the field of school education. My entries in the diary suggest that I felt that by working on the ground, I could make a stronger impact and my desire to work on the ground was affected by my previous work of not working on the ground.

Motivating Students

The desire to motivate students seems to have been the main reason why I chose to become a school principal. In my memory diary I wrote:

“Nurlan told me that I inspire my students to achieve their goals. It was during this conversation when Nurlan told me that I should become a school principal so that I could inspire and help more students. This thought had never occurred to me and at the time I did not give it any serious consideration.”

The analysis of the memory diary suggests that I pay attention to the issue of motivating students in a number of entries. For instance, in another diary entry I focus on how I gave the motivational speeches at the school graduation ceremonies, during meetings with the Olympiad students and student meetings with the principal.

Making an Impact

The analysis of the presentations that I gave to students and parents suggests that I wanted to make an impact on the life of students. In those presentations, I talk about social lifts and the elite of the country and how the alumni of our school, as part of the country’s elite, are contributing to the development of our country. After rewatching the video about the history of our school and its alumni, which I showed to our teachers and students, I again focused on how our alumni are changing our country. I also emphasize how our school has historically played a significant role in nourishing and teaching the future political, business and intellectual elite of Kazakhstan.

The analysis of these presentations and videos suggests that I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself. In this case, I wanted to be in the same team with the people, who prepare the future elite of the country. It also seems that I did not view our school as a regular school. Rather, I looked at our school as “the school which produces the future elite of the country”. And, as a principal, I wanted to make an impact on the development of our country by educating its elite.

RQ2. Looking into the challenges I faced the following themes emerged: dealing with the school culture, resistance to change and managing conflicts.

Dealing with School Culture

When I posed this question to myself, I wrote the following in my diary:

“At our school we have different teachers; those who have Soviet experience and education, those who have post-Soviet experience and education and those who have foreign experience and education. These teachers have adopted certain elements of the cultures of schools universities where they studied. It is safe to say that we have a jigsaw of cultures among our teachers. There are many benefits of having this many variety of people, who represent different cultures. Nevertheless, sometimes we have challenges”.

It seems that I viewed the school community as a compilation of different representatives of cultures. Namely, I divided the teacher community based on their life, education and work experiences into Soviet, Post-Soviet and foreign. When giving an example of dealing with school culture, I wrote the following:

“I had to resolve a conflict between a Soviet and a Post-Soviet teacher. Both of these teachers were teaching in the same class but in different groups. When it came to assessing students' learning, the Soviet teacher insisted on the oral exam while the Post-Soviet teacher was giving students written tests. Later on some

angry parents came to my office demanding that I resolve this issue immediately because their children were getting unfair marks.”

It seems that cultural differences also led to conflicts. Therefore, understanding the root cause of conflicts, the culture, seems to have been important to me.

Resistance to Change

This theme emerged from my memory diary when I wrote about the implementation of the new curriculum. In the diary I wrote:

“I faced resistance from mostly Soviet educated teachers. Soviet educated teachers are used to transferring knowledge so that students only memorize it without critically scrutinizing it. They are also not used to using information technologies or organizing lessons so that students can work in teams. The Soviet educational system was mostly theoretical. It was both its strength and weakness. Students had solid theoretical background but lacked the practical skills to apply that knowledge in real life.”

It seems that resistance to change from some teachers was a challenge for me. In addition, my writings suggest that I had this challenge mostly from the Soviet-educated teachers

Managing Conflicts

When reminiscing about the conflicts I had to deal with as a principal, I mentioned four such events: between students, between parents, among janitors, between a teacher and a student. My diary entries suggest that it was challenging for me to deal with conflicts. In the diary I wrote:

“This role seems to be challenging because teachers expect the principal to back them no matter what the issue is.”

This seems to suggest that I did not always take the side of the teachers in the conflicts. Rather, I tried to make fair judgments, even though teachers always expect that the principal will support them.

RQ3. When analyzing how I dealt with the above-mentioned challenges, the following themes emerged: understanding what school culture means, minimizing resistance to change, managing and resolving conflicts.

Understanding What School Culture Means

It seems that before becoming a school principal, I did not have much exposure to the issues of school culture. Looking at the literature, which I read, it seems that significant part of it focused on the matter of school culture. The highlighted parts of the articles I printed out seem to have caught my attention, because they were important for me in terms of understanding the school culture. For instance, I highlighted the following piece:

“Schools have a culture that is definitely their own. There are, in the school, complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of traditions, mores, and irrational sanctions, a moral code based upon them. There are games, which are sublimated wars, teams, and an elaborate set of ceremonies governing them. There are traditions, and traditionalists waging their world-old battle against innovators (Deal and Peterson, 1999, p.5)” [9].

It seems that having a firm grasp on the issue of school culture was of great importance to me and it seems that this importance stems from the fact that misunderstanding or not taking into account the school culture would be harmful.

Minimizing Resistance to Change

Like dealing with cultural challenges, it seems that reading literature on resistance to change was one of the most commonly used methods to deal with this challenge. In this regard, I was fortunate to be studying at Nazarbayev University at the time because my professors helped me find relevant literature. In one of the printed materials on this matter, I highlighted the following:

- “1. Resistance is inevitable, because people resist change
2. Schools are essentially conservative institutions, harder to change than other organizations
3. You just have to live reform one day at a time
4. You can never please everyone, so just push ahead with reforms
5. Mandate change because people won't otherwise
6. Keep it simple, stupid; go for small changes rather than big, demanding ones. (Fullan and Miles, p.745-746)” [10].

It seems that I used these ideas as tactics for dealing with resistance to change.

Managing and Resolving Conflicts

In terms of managing and resolving conflicts it seems that I again focused on reading the literature. Furthermore, the trainings, which I had in my previous job as a Project Coordinator at an international

organization, seem to have had a significant influence on my decision-making on this matter. The presentations, which I had saved from the training, indicate that I focused on the following tactics:

- “1) Separate the people from the problem;
- 2) Focus on interests not positions;
- 3) Invent options for mutual gain;
- 4) Insist on using objective criteria (Fisher et al. 2011)” [11].

Overall, it seems that the training on conflict managements that I received in my previous job helped me manage and resolve conflicts at work.

Conclusion. Autoethnography as a research method is not widely used among education scholars in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, this research method can be revealing in terms of looking into one’s own experience. By examining my own experience, I found out that significant incidents from my childhood, my previous career, the desire to motivate students and the desire to make an impact were the main reasons why I decided to become a school principal. This realization helps me continue do my job even during challenging times.

Dealing with the school culture, resistance to change and managing conflicts were the main obstacles during my first year as a school principal. Understanding what school culture means, minimizing resistance to change, managing and resolving conflicts by employing the instruments from literature and trainings were my responses to the challenges I faced. By reflecting on and analyzing my personal experience, the following recommendations for policy-makers and first year principals emerged.

Recommendations for policy-makers

1. This study suggests that policy-makers may provide the first-year school principals with training on leadership and leadership styles at school. There are a variety of trainings on general leadership or business leadership. However, school is a specific place because its stakeholders are students, parents, school staff, universities and society in general. Unlike traditional leadership, school requires specific set of leadership skills such as transformational, instructional, visionary etc. The latest research on this topic and my experience suggest that there are a number of ways, in which leadership at school can be defined. Trainings on leadership should provide first-year principals with knowledge about different leadership styles, an opportunity to find out what their dominant leadership style is knowledge on each styles suitability in different situations and limitations of each style. I was fortunate to learn about school leadership at Nazarbayev University. Therefore, it was not a challenge for me. Lack of knowledge and skills in school leadership can be a challenge for new school leaders.

2. This study also suggests that policy-makers may provide first-year school leaders with trainings on conflict resolution. School is a place where many different people interact. Therefore, conflicts are inevitable. Principals should treat them as part of their work. It is especially important for first-year principals to understand that conflicts are part of their everyday lives at work. They may not blame themselves for letting conflicts take place at school. These trainings should include different methods of dealing with conflicts. They may also focus on how conflicts between different people with different cultures can be resolved. From my personal experience, I can recommend to include the Harvard Negotiation Method in the program. Nevertheless, all of these methods have their limitations, which should be discussed in these trainings.

3. Dealing with resistance at school is another important topic for a training. Currently, there are many reforms being undertaken in the educational system of Kazakhstan. All of these reforms are top-down. Partially because of this many teachers resist change. It can be challenging for the first-year school principals to deal with resistance. These trainings may focus on various methods and their limitations when it comes to resistance not only from teachers, but also from parents, vice--principals and students.

4. My own case suggests that school principals can come from a non-school environment. In other words, it is not absolutely necessary for principals to be former teachers or school staff. Nevertheless, I recommend that such principals may work for at least one year at school. I personally had worked as a manager for academic affairs and as a vice-principal prior to assuming the principal’s position. This one-year transition period gave me an opportunity to learn more about how the school operates, its culture and people.

5. Last but not least, I would recommend policy-makers to provide soon-to-be first-year principals with more access to currently serving principals. I would suggest a one-month period, during which the new first-year principals can participate in all of the meetings with the principal, have an opportunity to observe and learn from principals and discuss school matters. This would provide the new first-year principals with more insight into the roles and responsibilities of the principal as well as current school issues.

Recommendations for the first-year school principals

1. When first appointed a principal, it is tempting to jump to changing something at school. However, first-year school leaders should spend their first days observing and learning. It is important to understand why certain traditions and rules were established. There is a high probability that even though we may not like them, these rules and traditions were set up for a good reason. Besides, as my experience suggests, any change can be met with resistance. I would not recommend that the first-year school principals begin their new journey with resistance.

2. Understanding the school culture and its people is important. There are many types of school cultures. There are also a number of sub-cultures within each school, as this study suggests. Sometimes these cultural differences lead to conflicts. Therefore, it is important to understand what the root causes of these conflicts are. If they have cultural roots, they should be treated differently. Any resolution of such conflicts should take into account cultural differences.

3. When juggling among so many responsibilities it is also easy why we choose to become principals in the first place. Writing an essay or reflections on this topic can be revealing. As this study suggests, usually life experiences shape our career choices. Therefore, understanding the deep reasons for choosing to be a school leader can be helpful in terms of better understanding why we do what we do. It is also important to remind ourselves from time to time, why we are at school. This study reveals that reminding oneself these reasons can be motivating, especially in times of stress.

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С.А.Ұзақбаева¹, З.Т.Әбілова^{2*}, Р.Ю. Балтиева³

¹Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ халықаралық қатынастар және әлем тілдері университеті,
Алматы қ.Қазақстан

²И.Арабаев атындағы Қырғыз мемлекеттік университеті,
Бішкек қ., Қырғызстан

³Қазақ ұлттық қыздар педагогикалық университеті,
Алматы қ.,Қазақстан

**РЕФЛЕКСИВТІ ҚҰЗЫРЕТТІЛІК – БОЛАШАҚ МҰҒАЛІМДЕРДІ КӘСІБИ
ПЕДАГОГИКАЛЫҚ ӘРЕКЕТКЕ ДАЯРЛАУДЫҢ МАҢЫЗДЫ ШАРТЫ РЕТІНДЕ**

Аңдатпа