



A Storytelling Club for Social Orphans of Kazakhstan: Emergence of Strength, Hope & Resilience in Institutional Care

The Storytelling Club is a cooperative venture initiated by UNICEF, the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation and the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) of the Bavarian Broadcasting Corporation.

Storytelling Clubs promote stories of strength, resilience, creative & innovative output, in addition to mental health education, wellness and awareness in the lives of children experiencing difficult and/or challenging life conditions. The Storytelling Club workshops implement a life-long sustainable toolkit that offers essential life skills of coping mechanisms amidst difficult situations. The STC program was designed over a period of 5 years by elite industry media professionals in two formats: a 5 day-intensive workshop or a 8- week programme facilitated by pedagogies.

The Storytelling Club premiered in summer 2017 in Beirut, facilitated by Maya Goetz, Suzanne Kanso, Fadi Taher and Hania Asgari.

Post the successful launch of the pilot project in Lebanon and its nationwide adoption across Egyptian school boards, my team and I carried the suitcase to Kazakhstan where the birth of our NGO Echoed Foundation: **Yalla, Speak UP!** was established by Fadi Taher, Hania Asgari and I. This suitcase was particularly unique as our children were *social orphans*: children who have no adult care, albeit one or more parents being alive; typically, parents are alcoholics, drug abusers, or simply no longer interested in the child. This opportunity was made possible via our in country facilitators Zhuldyz Alimbek and her brother Tokhtar Alimbek, founder of U:Projects.

U:Projects is a comprehensive platform created to foster open interaction between citizens and government agencies; it focuses on charity, culture & tourism. Their projects aim at changing the behavioral patterns of city residents via systematic studies. Their goal is to become a growing point of contact between the population and government bodies.

UNICEF Kazakhstan

In a meeting with the President of Kazakhstan's representative, Zhandoz Kaltayev, I had the opportunity to bring to light UNICEF's work in the country pertaining to: Analysis of the Situation of Children and Women in Kazakhstan; Child Suicide in Kazakhstan: Special Report; and a journal on Reforming child institutional care in the Post-Soviet bloc: The potential role of family-based empowerment strategies. Researching and understanding empirical data, the country's customs and governmental policies has allowed me to utilize key measures and strategies that are country-appropriate; that neither limits adoption nor strictly employs a North American lens and model. As an

educator, learning, engaging and adopting every country's set values, gives permission and yields way to building rapport and establishing trust with all involved stakeholders.

In Kazakhstan, institutional care is the most widely used out-of-home placement resource for children who have either been abandoned by their parents or removed from their families to protect them from harm. Little is known about the perspectives of young people and their lives in this setting. Through STC Kazakhstan, our aim was to explore young people's descriptions of their lived experience of trauma and focus on their daily activities and relationships to significant others. After thorough research, the following methodologies were implemented in Kazakhstan: Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Photovoice & Visual Imaging, Music Therapy and Mapping. The implementation of these strategies helps us understand key protective factors in children's everyday lives in order to promote well-being, resilience and coping mechanisms and deal with social challenges such as stigma. This forces us to re-think the role of institutional care for orphaned children, guided by the unique perspective of children themselves.

According to UNICEF and World Health Organization data, Kazakhstan shows the highest rate of child suicide in the world. Research has found that children in residential institutions, such as orphanages and juvenile detention centers, are at increased risk of deliberate self-harm and suicidal behaviors ⁽¹⁾. Kazakhstan was 2nd worldwide for suicide among teenage boys, and 1st among suicide for teenage girls.

According to a UNICEF study conducted in five Kazakhstani cities with 1700 teenagers, social issues, family problems and a lack of support were among the main reasons for teenage suicide. According to the study, Kazakhstani parents spend only 20 minutes of 'quality time' with their Children ⁽²⁾.

According to Raisa Sher, head of the country's education ministry's child protection committee, there are several factors behind such high rates of suicide among people of a young age, such as: ⁽³⁾

- School bullying
- Absence or loss of values
- Falling standards of social behavior
- Alienation

From international research, it was shown that children in institutions are more likely to experience trauma and abuse, exhibit emotional and behavioral problems, poor cognitive development and academic achievements, experience severe difficulties in social relations with peers and adults, and have difficulties with adjusting to and reintegrating into society in adulthood ⁽⁴⁾. Further studies conducted among teenagers in boarding schools ("internats") in Kazakhstan showed that they are more likely to be involved in risk behaviors such as smoking (22.6% vs. 9.2% of children in regular schools) and drinking (36.1% vs. 23.7% from other schools) and are at high risk for drug use (16.2% reported having friends who have used drugs compared to 2.8% of children from Kazakh-speaking schools and 5.6% from Russian-speaking schools) ⁽⁵⁾. Since orphans are isolated from society, it breeds stigmatization and discrimination against them, making them one of the most marginalized groups in society.

The main goal of this research study is to give orphans in Kazakhstan a voice to share their stories through photovoice (photography) and music expression therapy primarily, and FGD and mapping secondarily to understand the effects and implications of *Social Microcosm* on institutionalized children. Storytelling is therapy based on neurological findings that is helpful in stress relief, connecting with others, increasing resilience and most importantly finding a voice and establishing identity in society. As an educator, the adoption of these four methodologies in addition to the STC guidebook, was essential since the target audience were social orphans. The

birth of space to express oneself in more than one candid method was integral to the survival of this program given the complexities of the continuous revisiting and retriggering of trauma in social orphans. It deemed quite difficult to negotiate childhood amidst abandonment. However, the 'Strength & Resilience' component in our work was in the establishment of children's identities away from social constructs of both "orphans" and "social orphans." This was orchestrated by conducting a child-centred research and exploring children's agency in relation to adults/orphanages who care for them and their displacement.

This particular suitcase was exceptionally tasking and challenging, due to the layered trauma and the limited access and information about these kids. Orphans are government protected and access to private data is governed by laws to which the process becomes lengthy and complex.

One of our main mandates as an Echoed Foundation is to foster a safe and empowered space for voices to be heard and where children are actively shaping their world and how they see their place in it. Some pivotal takeaways for STC facilitation are:

- Adapt STC suitcase to every country's norms, customs, ethical values and culture
- Avoid imposing personal bias and/or hegemony
- Adopt a mindfulness lens when dealing with children
- Plant seeds of sustainability – train and host pedagogical workshops for future in-country educators

Takeaways:

STC Kazakhstan by far has been one of the most challenging STC clubs to launch; the constant retriggering of social orphans with parental visits, makes this case unique as trauma never parts the growth of the child from infancy to adulthood.

Our immediate work was faced with children who:

1) Separated from their biological parents 2) Isolated from Society 3) Endured Childhood Trauma 4) Experienced Neglect & Cruelty 5) Suffered Abandonment Issues 6) Experienced Alienation

As a result, some of the developmental problems identified were:

1. Disruptive behaviour/ Acting Out
2. Emotional & behavioural
3. Social Isolation
4. Negative Peer Association
5. Stigmatized Self-Identity
6. Dependency

Albeit trauma emerging in the first hour of Day 2/5 and half the kids dropping out, there remains a sense of curiosity and desire for a different circumstance than the one accustomed to. Kids in Kazakh orphanages are not allowed outside the set parameters of the institute. Some of the immediate findings upon arrival, was the 1 to 10 ratio of Kazakh to Russian children, despite the immediate identification as "all" Kazakh citizens. There is a major sense of pride and nationalism when it comes to Kazakhstan – instantly noted on Day 1 of our meet and greet; a child poised me with the following question: "Miss, are you an American Psychologist here to study our brain and how we think as kids in orphanages?" Avykhael, 13 years old. Kids were notably uncooperative, unengaged and skeptical. It was not until Day 3 that my team and I made were made aware that last year an American psychologist had visited the orphanage and the outcomes were extremely unfavorable.

Drawings, a heavy and integral component of the STC's programme, quickly became a trigger point – the psychological association was made instantly by kids; every psychologist who came to their orphanage, *their home*, asked them to draw to collect data and analyze kids. This was one of the major roadblocks encountered, which led to an overnight overhaul of our program, conclusively being redesigned with the implementation of the four methodologies". Another finding was writing – few of the kids who were newer (age not a factor) to the orphanage did not know how to write, because of parental abandonment and/or negligence causing triggers and trauma to surface.

Findings:

In my previous article on STC Beirut, I engaged kids with a folkloric activity where we sat under the tree and stories of strength emerged. The connection to mother earth is more powerful than we can possibly compute; it allows for alignment and centredness, provides a sense of zen and calmness and has the ability to create safe spaces. In Kazakhstan, we added Kurt (cheese) to the table to honor their traditions as it was considered a national symbol of freedom from enslavement during Stalin's concentration camps.

It was end of Day 5 and still there were no stories of strength from children, due to their reserve to protect themselves from "foreigners". The push back against this activity not being successful proved otherwise. We sat down and talked. We shared. Tears were shed and hearts were open.

"I was 8 years old when I ran away from home. My mom and dad would hit us, my brother and I. So one day, I took my 4 year old brother and fled to the souk, the bazaar, and asked one of the guys to provide us with food in exchange for work. We slept in the souk, but after one week, my parents found us. Two weeks later, I took my brother and this time went to the orphanage, our new home." Viktor, 13 years old.

In celebration, of what initially premised failure, turned out more successful than we could ever ask for. It was a celebration not in the number of children falling out of the programme, but rather in the number showing up every day and being courageously present outside their comfort circle.

Further, this is what the orphan psychologist and head of the orphanage, primary caregivers and parent-like role models for the kids, had to say:

"Kiril is very active but also extremely very closed off; I was surprised to see so much from him in this programme. He came up to me to show me a picture of his crush at the orphanage; typically there is no eye contact and he rather looks down and is unengaged when participating, but for the first time in years, he looked at me directly with an enhanced self-perception." – Kyrmyzy, Head of Orphanage

"Eventhough you, Suzy, are not a licensed psychologist, Mrs. Kyrmyzy and I have seen a lot of improvement from kids, especially some of our kids who have mental difficulties and communication barriers as a result." – Zhanar, Orphan Psychologist

"In five days only, you were able to make this much difference, I can now only wonder the tremendous potential you and your colleagues can bring in the 8 week module." – Kyrmyzy, Head of Orphanage

"Despite working with Misha for so long, for the first time ever, he was able to acknowledge, express and communicate his feelings. Thank you!" – Zhanar, Orphan Psychologist

"I learned so much from you, but one of the main things that I learned was how to give kids more freedom." These were the parting words of the Head of the Orphanage – a mother figure to many kids, who ran, managed and experienced both the joys and tears of children who graduated and/or relocated from Orphanage no. 5 in Shymkent, Kazakhstan. Breaking free from *Social Microcosm*, the concept in which children's institutional world is ordered in both time and space, deemed most effective with the Storytelling Club in Kazakhstan and the holistic methodologies and strategies implemented to breed freedom of expression via various outlets.

Recommendations:

Contrary to UNICEF's aforementioned research and findings, our qualitative research proved otherwise. For example, kids ran away from the care of their parents and sought refuge and sanctuary in orphanages. Post a one month stay in Kazakhstan, our qualitative research findings deemed value in placing children in institutional care on the condition that reintegration strategies are implemented. Engagement of children with society, outside the parameters of the orphanage, allows for cognitive and social skills enhancement and development.

1. Similar to the Big Brother, Big Sister organization in Canada, the pairing of orphans and/or social orphans with a mentor outside the orphanage parameters enhances quality of life and engages children.
2. The facilitation of Life Skills workshops throughout the year by different professionals bridges the gap of alienation and reintegration.
3. Music & Photography classes – similar to our adopted methodologies of music therapy and photovoice, beatboxing was one of the elements that we introduced to our music model. We also used our own body to generate sound and utilized resources from our immediate environment as instruments to form music bands. This exercise showcases and builds children's creativity, confidence, pride, teamwork and independency.

The culmination of this experience was welcomed with a traditional celebration of food, music and customs of Kazakh pride. Every kid, even the ones who did drop out, were still celebrated with a Certificate of Participation and a book copy of Strong Stories of Strong Children from Kazakhstan. The resilience and stories of strength in this STC was the daily presence of kids, their willingness to expose their fears, to open up to non-Kazakhs despite their traumas, and immerse themselves in new experiences and school of thought.

These are the strong resilient children of Kazakhstan who are more than the labels of *orphans*, let alone *social orphans*.

*" We are not just orphans, we have an identity and we have a voice."
Gauhar, 17 year old.*

*Report by Suzanne Kanso
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