

Introduction

We, as faculty members, were encouraged to apply to become a member of the 2009 University of Richmond Faculty Study Abroad seminar visiting the countries of Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Expectations were that we would read, research, study, present, and discuss prior to traveling and upon return, we would reflect on our trip by sharing our knowledge and experiences with colleagues and students. What an opportunity for someone like me who has spent 30 years in K-12 education and has just begun a second career, working with college students interested in becoming teachers!

As the Director of Field Placement, an initiative suggested for my consideration was the possibility of students completing a segment of their required 15 weeks of practice teaching abroad. Here then, through travel abroad, was an opportunity to network with colleagues, to learn about K-12 education in three separate countries, to consider the reality of student teaching abroad, and to continue the UR tradition of participating in an education that is international, interdisciplinary, intellectual, and experiential.

Background Information

No matter which nation, state, school division, or school one may be associated with, there is generally both pride in the education received as well as conflicting information about the rigor of the educational program. Certainly within one school division there are immense differences from school to school. This I know as fact because I have lived it as a student, parent, teacher, central office employee, and principal. What may be happening in one state may not be in another and what may be standard operation in one school within a school division may not be in another.

With this as a frame of reference, reading about education in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan has been interesting and frustrating. How does one come to understand their educational system, particularly in the post Soviet era? One would think the change to a market economy could not help but be accompanied by profound reforming of the educational systems. Through both research and personal communication I have found that, in fact, educational reform is slow, sporadic, rampant with graft, site specific, and dependent upon availability of funds.

In my report on education to the seminar group, I concluded with:

- Education is critical to the continued success of the individual and the country.
- Finances, infrastructure, implementation of policies, and global developments must be given consideration as education of the masses continues.
- The reading I have completed suggests that the educational systems have regressed considerably since the Soviet era.

Based on the ensuing discussion, there was general agreement that one must be there to fully understand and comprehend.

General Outcomes

Day three of our journey found us on the road to Novgorod. An inscription on a roadside monument during our ride read, “No one is forgotten. Nothing is forgotten.” I wondered what the history and meaning of this monument and inscription was. Now, for me, it serves as an encapsulating statement for this trip or journey. So many sights seen, so many lectures heard, so many conversations held, so many people met, so many thoughts confirmed, and so many more questions to be answered. The outcomes I share

here will be focused on information gleaned about the education of students in preparation for university.

While at the European University on Monday, May 11, our presenter shared that they do not accept state educational standards as they are not as high as desired by this university. A professor associated with Smolny College commented that she feels that students are coming less prepared since the break up of 1991. She elaborated by saying “the base knowledge of students is not as good according to our standards”. A take away concept for me...education, the ability to question the truth or reality of information being presented is critical to a democratic society.

Lunchtime conversation at one point focused around K-12 education – again a comment was made that students are coming to us not as well prepared. A professor stated that, “in addition teachers are very poorly paid. One cannot be only a teacher as you could not afford to live. Student behaviors are in need of more management certainly so since Soviet times. This is true in the case of the university students as well. One must be very firm for the first three weeks of class, particularly with texting and cell phones.”

While in Kazakhstan, and in conversation with two Americans, both stated that they have experienced the fact that the education here is not better than that in the United States, either in content or methodology. Corruption exists! A student cannot fail; if that looks imminent, a parent pays or gives a bribe to the teacher. A specific example was shared. In a class of 22 students, no one came to class, ever. The teacher gave grades of 0 and was told by the director that this cannot be done because a certain percentage of failures gave the school a bad name or a bad reputation. A Peace Corp volunteer, who taught at a Kyrgyz village school outside of Bishkek, shared similar information. He

added that the same would not be true at the next village. There the children were Russian; the parents cared about education and insisted that their children attend school.

After our visit to the Kyrgyz village school and the insightful conversations with the peace corps worker and mentor teacher, I came away with many questions about where are the children of this village, country, and the world heading. The situation included, but was by no means limited to, buying grades, not attending school, telling students to go home because of misbehavior and not to return, assigning passing grades, having no electricity, doing no homework, receiving no support from administrator, and using textbooks from 1996 saying that blacks in NYC are afraid to go to school with the whites. There is an outhouse for the students that is rarely, if at all, visited by the custodian. All teachers except for the Peace Corps volunteer are over 65 years old. In fact, one has purchased flooring linoleum, table and chairs for the school using her personal funds. Yet, the children are children, happy, smiling, and excited to see foreigners, shy about practicing their English, and eager to have their pictures taken. Per one of our speakers, the basic struggle for power is the issue in Kyrgyzstan after the break up of the Soviet Union. Corruption has reached very high levels. And still the children smile.

While visiting at Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP), the question was asked, “we have read and heard that the K-11 school system does not produce educated students. Why is it that the Minister of Labor and or the Minister of Education do not recognize the importance of the need for well-prepared teachers for the K-11 students? If they do, how is it evidenced?” The very brief almost non-response was “the minister of education has changed over the past 11 to 12

years to become more in line with western education. Here in town the students are very well prepared. The students from the west are not. They do learn but never catch up.”

I wrote the following comment in my journal referencing our visit to the Ethnography Museum and in particular after our tour guide’s commentary in the exhibit on Jews. “Often questions have to be asked to ascertain the truth, otherwise some things were glossed over, omitted, or simply lied about.” This sentiment seemed to be the case in several of our lectures, tours, and dinner or luncheon conversations. Perhaps it is national pride, the need to appear successful, or the desire to be better than...

Reality at Home

Research into the possibility and reality of having UR students complete part of their student teaching abroad has begun. The first hurdle is meeting Virginia Department of Education licensure requirements. The Virginia code is clear; in order to receive Virginia licensure, student teaching must be completed in an accredited institution within the state of Virginia. This information creates a pause, not a stop, in the journey to providing UR students with the opportunity to student teach abroad.

Searching international student teaching on the web reveals several institutions of higher education here in the states that offer students the opportunity to complete student teaching abroad. Initial contact has been made with two of these institutions to learn from their experiences. Conversations will continue. Questions to be asked and answered are:

- How do these institutions meet individual state licensure requirements?
- Are individuals who student teach abroad more marketable because of this experience?

- Do future employers consider it more desirable for individuals to student teach in English speaking schools or non-English speaking schools?
- What about students' perspective regarding their placement?
- What length of time is spent in student teaching abroad?
- What about expenses and living arrangements?

Sharing my experiences and knowledge gained is and will continue to be an ongoing experience. I have held travel-logs for colleagues, staff, family, friends, and neighbors. Beginning in late August, I will be a student advisor. This is a new responsibility added to the duties of the Director of Field Placement. A responsibility that was requested and certainly timely based on my participation in this seminar. In the past, the only students I would be in communication with would be those who student taught. The opportunity to speak with a wider student audience is most welcomed. Certainly they will benefit from my experiences.

Conclusion

Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin are the authors of Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace...One School At a Time. This book is the #1 New York Times bestseller. It was named nonfiction winner of the 2007 Kiriya Prize, 2007 Pacific Northwest Booksellers' Book Of The Year, Time Magazine Asia Book Of The Year, People Magazine Critic's Choice, and a BookSense Notable Title. There are many remarkable and moving moments in this book. Framed by our trip to Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and an attempt to provide student teaching abroad possibilities to UR students, one paragraph speaks loudly to me.

When the porcelain bowls of scalding butter tea steamed in their hands, Haji Ali spoke. "If you want to thrive in Baltistan, you must respect our ways," Haji Ali said, blowing on his bowl. "The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea, you are an honored guest. The third time you share a cup of tea, you become family, and for our family, we are prepared to do anything even die," he said, laying his hand warmly on Mortenson's own. "Doctor Greg, you must make time to share three cups of tea. We may be uneducated. But we are not stupid. We have lived and survived here for a long time." (p.150)

As I begin student advising and pursue the possibility of providing student teaching abroad opportunities, there is much I will share. As our students have the opportunity to travel to another country, to become a member of someone's family, to exist as others do, to speak a new language, to develop inter-cultural skills, all their understanding will be deeper and more authentic than if they had simply read or heard about a different country or culture. It is imperative that we grow in our understanding of others in this ever-narrowing world as some may be uneducated but many are not stupid in the ways of their lives.

Submitted by

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