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Educare



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By Steve Bryant

"A third culture kid is a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside their parents' culture." Dave Pollock

One American Family's Journey through the Russian Educational System

When our family moved overseas eight years ago with two small children, we had hoped that they would quickly learn a local language, not only for the educational and occupational benefits multilingualism may bring, but also for the immediate profit language learning has on everyday life in a foreign culture. Soon after arriving, when our three-year old threw a weekly tantrum at a children's group because he didn't understand those around him and the other children refused to submit to his incomprehensible requests, language learning became an immediate and urgent need, a need that wasn't being met by our full-time Russian nanny who would give in to his outbursts by speaking to him in English. At the age of four, we placed him in the local pre-school program in the mornings and hired an ingenious tutor for a couple of hours each afternoon who taught him Russian through the language he loved . . . math. After three months of counting, jumping, and playing in Russian, his temper subsided and, finally, he began to accept this new language, a language that we as parents were also working hard at mastering. Although it was easier for his younger sister to emotionally accept this new language, it became clear, after a few years' time, that she too was not finding it easy to learn any language, English or Russian, and by the time she entered kindergarten, a serious problem of dyslexia faced us head on.

During our four years in the capital city, where Russian is widely spoken, our third child was born and, as the third child, he accepted all foreign language as the norm. Russian and Kyrgyz became a part of his life . . . as did the idea of school. Watching older siblings struggle and learn gave him the desire to do the same (maybe because he wanted more time with mom). When the time came to enter kindergarten, he was prepared and excited to learn with Mom.

Pre-school in Russian had Not only did I, as a mother, norms and health concerns understand the very different held. I struggled daily with the school's personnel as as the mother, didn't children and what they thankful, that my language the skill to respond the demeaning remarks I Because of the controlling some of the teachers and affecting our children, I often questioned whether sending our children to a local preschool was the right thing to do.



never been smooth sailing. not understand the cultural of the system, I did not values the teachers and I the authoritarian attitude of well as the implication that I, properly understand my own needed. Many times, I was was so infantile that I lacked inappropriately (or at all) to received as a parent. and superior attitude of because of the many factors

At one point, our daughter's teacher threatened to cut off the children's heads if they ever scribbled in another book. This terrified our daughter so we decided it was time to keep her home for a while to concentrate on English and allow her to escape from the pressure of the culture for a time. Such decisions were never easy, because the idea of escape was never truly there, since such foreign ideas of child discipline and motivation were embedded within the culture itself wherever we looked. Also we were there to work with the people, to show love to them. In doing this we needed to be part of the culture . . . to understand the people and not to hide from them. Thus, the battle of being part of the people and trying to understand their value system, but maintaining one's own cultural sensitivity and family's value system continued for years (and still continues). In fact, isn't this what we are called to be? To be with others and share our lives with them, yet be different? This becomes dramatically obvious when a family is thrown into everything that is foreign, when one's norms are no longer the norms of society.

My older son, however, thrived for two years in local pre-school, becoming the darling of his teacher. She, in turn, became our hero, a woman who had transformed our child from despising his new language to admiring it. Yet this admiration never developed into a true love; he still missed his American identity and the freedom he felt in

expressing himself in English. His complaints about living in the country mounted and his desire to be with grandparents soared, especially after six months in America – an interval between a change in ministries and locations.

Following the short time of reacquainting ourselves with our American-ness, we entered our new home with anticipation as to what was there for us there in a different area in the south, which meant a change not only in location, but also in the surrounding dominant language. Although we had spent four years in the north learning and beginning to work in Russian, it proved an impossible task for everyone but my husband to change the language of study. Once we had begun attending Russian school, it only made sense to continue with the language we had begun, a respected and widely-used lingua franca within the southern part of the country as well.

Some had previously told me to avoid Russian schools because of the intensity and shame-based culture; however, many expatriates had enrolled their children in the government schools in this Southern city with what seemed to be great results. Their children had learned Russian and even seemed to enjoy school. Since I had read elsewhere that young children forget language if not using it over long periods of time and since we had made great progress in this area already, I didn't want this language-learning opportunity to be lost. So, in March of that year, when we returned from the USA, I attempted to put our son in the first grade of a public school with no success. The teachers didn't want him at this late date in their overcrowded classrooms, and he certainly didn't want to attend school in an unwelcoming atmosphere. Since my son's personality demanded a strict, no-nonsense, professional tutor, and this was almost impossible to find, I continued to teach him myself until the summer months when a professional educator could be found.

When school began in the fall, I decided that perhaps these overcrowded classrooms in the public schools were not best for him, and instead enrolled him in the school of his summer tutor, the most "prestigious" in the city with its limit of twelve students per class. Since the director had been professionally educated in an American university and because the school's emphasis was on English, I felt this to be the best situation for him. Furthermore, the director welcomed parental involvement and requested that parents observe class at least once every quarter. Since I had not been allowed to sit and help my son in his adjustment at either the pre-school or at the first public grade school, this excited me, and I decided to attend every day with my son, learning with him and evaluating the system. This time of cultural learning proved extremely beneficial, and I would recommend it to anyone. Not only did my Russian improve dramatically, but I learned the intricacies of Russian education and began to understand my neighbors and local friends a little bit better.

My dream had been for my son to attend school all day, studying in every class just like the other local kids. It didn't take long, however, to realize that my idea of education and that of the Russians were often completely opposite. Perhaps it was because we were in a "prestigious" school which modeled its program on Moscow's, but the expectations were unreachable. Many of the students in my oldest son's class did not speak Russian at home, and yet, they were expected to somehow learn a mountainous vocabulary in a short amount of time by memorization of poetry and text. Almost all of the poetry they read was to be memorized and large portions were assigned the night before to be recited in front of the class the next day. For a second language learner with minimal vocabulary this was unrealistic. All stories were expected to be read ten times, a feat which would take us three hours to complete.

Homework had a different meaning attached to it than the typical Western one, which uses homework as an extension of class teaching and is used to assess whether a student understands properly. In a Western educational system, children only move to independent practice and assessment after the teacher has modeled it and guided the students through that same sort of exercise. Homework, or independent practice, is given to monitor students' understanding of that same topic. In the West, if the first two (modeling and guided practice) have not been completed, the third (independent practice) is not assigned. However, in the Russian system, I soon discovered, homework needs to be set for every subject every single day. Often, this leads a teacher to set homework on a completely different topic than that of the class teaching, depending on which exercise comes next in the book. I sat in class with my son every day for six months, and more often than not, I could not complete the homework without copying the answers directly from the teacher. Likewise, because homework was impossible for the child to complete independently, parents often did it for their children. When the teacher assessed large at-home projects and asked the children which relative had completed their work the students replied openly. Homework, then, is often not about extension of class work and that of monitoring student understanding, but is given to teach responsibility in completing it - even if that means through

pleas, crying, and rants at family members. This was confirmed to me by both teachers and an administrator at two different schools.

Memorization is emphasized from the start of school because

1. It is seen as the best way to expand the mind's learning capacity.
2. It is the only way to guarantee that the students, and not their parents, have done the homework. Therefore reading speed, retelling of story text, and memorization of poetry is emphasized – outcomes that only students can obtain without parental takeover.
3. In this educational system memorization is the way to ensure that learning takes place.

I sat through science classes (which took place once a week for forty-five minutes) with my son that year. For three weeks in a row the teacher attempted to teach the rather inexperienced second-graders the concept of the shortening of the approaching winter days. After two weeks of reading and rereading the few paragraphs describing the week's topic with students being instructed to study the text as homework, they still didn't understand the concepts and were not able to answer any questions the teacher asked. My humble recommendation to have the students chart the times of dusk and dawn on a graph located in the room, and thus build experience (schema) with visible data, was ignored. By the third week, the students still could not answer the teacher's questions, and in extreme frustration, the teacher required the students to memorize the final paragraph summary at the end of each weekly thematic unit for the remainder of the school year. Every week, from then on, science class consisted of students reciting their paragraphs, a

subsequent (five being the worst), followed teacher about theme. Once in variation with In this, students draw a picture and write a No instruction



ranking announced best and two the by a lecture from the the next week's a while, we had set research projects. were expected to of an animal or plant paragraph about it. had ever taken place

on paragraph writing or how to obtain the information, meaning that the homework was really given to the children's able relatives. My son worked hard on his project all week, creating his own beautiful artwork and writing his own paragraph to be displayed for all to see in his room. I had hoped to keep his project but found out a few weeks later that it had been stolen or thrown away. I found out through the teacher and from others' experiences that this was common in the country. Good projects were taken (or borrowed) to be claimed by others as their own. The next time I refused to have his artwork displayed in that particular school.

On one occasion, the students were asked to prepare for a test. Every day that week, my son and I studied the assigned paragraphs, making sure we understood the vocabulary and information recorded there. When the four-multiple-choice-question test was written on the board, the students quickly, and neatly, copied the questions into their notebooks. The teacher would not explain the vocabulary of the questions or answers to any of the students, yelling at them for their lack of Russian vocabulary and their choice to attend a Russian-medium school while opting to speak their minority languages in their homes, and simply explained to them that this was a test and that she could not help them. The test, however, had nothing to do with that week's topic or any topic, for that matter, we had studied the entire school year. The vocabulary, likewise, was new and unfamiliar to me, even though I had looked up every unfamiliar word in science, reading, and grammar class up to that point, and, although she explained what a "hummingbird" (in Russian) was to my son, she would not reveal this to any of her other students "who should know better." When explaining my shock to a local college friend, she said that these experiences I had were typical and something that had happened to her many times. This was a new revelation to me and furthered the compassion I felt for my neighbor who had previously demanded I complete her English homework for her (and I didn't - ruining our relationship).

There are a few reasons, in our context, why this lack of logical teaching exists. First of all, through a conversation I had with a local friend who had gone through the preparation process to be a teacher, I discovered, clearly, that the typical eight-step lesson plan Americans employ is taught in the universities here. However, because the pay is so low in education and government expectations are so high, the best teachers quit and join another more profitable profession, or emigrate from the country altogether. Secondly, the government specifies what is to be taught and when. The teachers are strict with their students and push them to move along quickly, because they have to. Schools will be shut down if teacher and student notebooks don't demonstrate perfect handwriting and subjects aren't taught according to a strict, ordered plan defined by some government officials, regardless of whether it is logical and attainable or not (and, with the *No Child Left Behind Act* I believe the USA is heading a little more in this direction as well).

In the host country, during my four-week period of substitution as an English teacher a couple of years ago, I learned that in being honest towards student learning, this meant being dishonest to the administration and to the government. I have joked about this since with some fellow local teachers whom I admire (finding out that is exactly what they choose to do). Every day's activities need to follow a certain prescriptive plan and be documented, along with the students' daily grades, in an official book. This plan followed regardless of whether the class of students is strictly needs to be strictly the class of students is course of study or not. system explains the the students' ability. Understanding this simple mismatch of class teaching and



Because of the system, need for lots of expectations for beautiful the teaching of uniformity motivation, and the only difficult for children to expectations, but also for know how much to expect

second language learner and foreign culture child it is difficult to know how much he or she should be achieving in the foreign language/culture classroom, and how much non-compliance should be excused and even encouraged for the child by the parent. Such variation is allowed for and even expected in a Western classroom, allowing the language learner time to grasp vocabulary and concepts. (In fairness this is a complicated and well-debated topic in America, one that I have spent a lot of time researching this year.) However, when the system itself does not allow for deviation, does the parent excuse the child from tasks that just seem too difficult? Does the parent accept cultural norms and do the homework for the child? At what point does the parent step in and explain to the teacher (with hopes that he or she will listen) that unrealistic expectations will not produce the results desired and will turn off the child completely towards the language itself?

During the first month of schooling, I realized that my son could not fit into the normal school's program. The second national language class (other than Russian) which met three times a week, was also based on memorization and, with no background in this language, my son could not be expected to memorize a stream of sounds for every lesson. Because the school's emphasis was on English, gym and art were conducted in English, which meant that students would string some words together, take one step and throw a ball, or draw artwork based on elementary English words. This proved to be boring for a fluent English speaker and did not provide the instruction needed. The Logic class proved to be very illogical, another exercise in parent's mental abilities and sense of responsibility in homework completion. The math class was a waste of time for my son, since he had finished the exercises that summer in preparation for school (another story). Thus, he and I continued to attend only a couple of classes a day, and for those two classes, the two hours of consequent homework.

with its value differences (the memorization, high script in writing and in math, in thinking, the shame-based devaluing of diversity), it is not live up to the teacher's the parents - a challenge to of one's own child. For a

It didn't take me long to realize that this first school was not going to work for my son . . . teachers could set high expectations for homework, because they weren't the ones supervising it. When my daughter's tutor emigrated and my husband could no longer watch our youngest son at home, it was time to move on to a new private school, one which had a full-day program (and not crammed into a half a day like most local schools), and one in which there was an actual physical education class, recess (and social interaction with other students), and teacher-supervised homework. This last one appealed to me, as a parent, because if the teachers couldn't handle the amount of homework being assigned, they wouldn't set it at unreasonable limits. After two and a half years of attending this second school, it proved to be full of pot-holes, educationally (and socially), as well. However, I found generally, the teachers and administrators were *somewhat* more willing to work with me in varying the expectations placed on our children. I continued to attend Russian school, but without sitting in on actual classes, rather maintaining my distance by renting a space and pulling out the expatriate children for further instruction and clarification of what was being taught in their classrooms (a sort of Russian-English bilingual instructor).

With a base of understanding, I have come to appreciate the Russian culture and even admire aspects of their educational system, wishing such would be implemented in American classrooms (and, since returning, have found that American education is beginning to adopt some of these, specifically in teaching spelling through morphology and etymology). This is not to say, however, that I wouldn't change much of the system if I could. And yet, as one parent coming from a foreign land that's not possible.

My children have not been the only ones I have watched and observed in the national schools. Since then, I have seen other American and Korean children attempting to make the best of what their parents have deemed best for them. This is not easy for them, nor for their parents. However, in my past year of research as a graduate student in a TESOL program in the States, I have been affirmed as a mom in my role as a bilingual teacher. Although the situation isn't ideal for Russian

because of the employed in the still learn and do

Bilingual education in the USA, methods of English immersion, a the child's mother program taught in home language and within a span of bilingual instruction



after which point all instruction is done in English. These questions have been battled for the past century and will continue to be debated as long as immigrants continue to pour into richer nations who then try to acculturate them, or as long as nations try to accommodate multilingualism within their school systems. I have found that there are many factors affecting the outcome of second language learning, but what I have discovered is that experts mostly agree that a bilingual form of education, extending over six to eight years of time, is the best way to aid the acquisition of a child's second language. In other words, children do best when they are able to use their first language and learn concepts in their first language alongside learning the second. The reason for this has a lot to do with the inability of a child to grasp both a concept and a language at the same time without a lot of visual and kinesthetic support (which most certainly does not exist within Russian schools). In fact, if a child is immersed in a second language situation with little support, it is most likely the child will gain very little of either and the education will be of very little benefit.

In order to aid in Russian language learning and understanding the ideas, I have implemented an English-based curriculum steered by the Russian one. When trees are being studied in science class, we study the same subject in English, connecting it to the Russian text. When nouns and verbs are studied in Russian, we learn this as well in English, creating connections between the languages. In this way we support the Russian instruction, allowing for learning to take place. Since some subjects are taught at a quicker pace (reading), are taught in an odd way (music – more copying and memorization of text without actually singing it first), or are too easy (English), I take my students out of

language learners philosophy of education local schools, they can well.

has been debated fiercely particularly as to which instruction are best – pull-out program taught in tongue, a pull-out English, teaching of the then merging to English three years, or continuous for up to seven years -

these classes and give them the support they need not simply to survive in their other classes, but to thrive and begin to enjoy school.

This form of bilingual education is costly - a factor which is at the heart of the debate in western countries. It requires expertise and training not easily acquired (bilingual teachers are more expensive to hire and train) or requires twice as many teachers, a lot of time and attention is needed to properly educate recent immigrants, not something all Americans are eager to fund. Likewise, to properly educate our children in a national school, I argue that we need extra time and effort to properly do so. Many parents, I have observed, expect their children to be immersed in national school and do fine with very little outside help. In such situations, bilingual experts such as Jim Cummins have noted that these situations are not what would otherwise be termed as "immersion" situations, but "submersion," in which a child is submersed and drowned. Contrary to what many may believe, most immigrants of the past and the present, when placed in a second-language medium school without major accommodations made for them, will eventually quit school out of frustration, rarely reaching the upper to middle-class social strata of society. Of course, there are many factors affecting a child's future, but submerging a child into school with very little support does not build the right educational foundation.

Thus, if we as parents cannot help our children attend national school, either by attending with them or by hiring private tutors for an hour or two a day, then how do we hope for our children to succeed in either language? Some do, which is always the argument given in the ongoing debate, but what about the large majority who won't and can't? We cannot ignore our child's home languages in attempting to create bilingualism. Giving our children the support they need in order to understand the cultural differences in a local school environment, thinking through which differences our children can embrace and which they must respectfully reject, and giving our children the support they need in order to understand the teaching they are receiving in the local language is costly. But it is well worth the effort. Researching the topic over the past year has confirmed my desire to help as many TCKs along this path however and whenever I can, and I hope others would dare to join me.



Caring for our TCKs

The provision of education and welfare services for TCKs has improved significantly over the last 20 years. There are several reasons for this, some of the most important being the impact of major international conferences such as ICMK Manila in 1984, the impact of books such as "The Third Culture Kid Experience" (Pollock, D.C. and Van Reken, R.E., 1st edition 1999 but now revised, 2009) and the growing awareness of past problems caused by the lack of any coherent TCK policies in many organisations. It is also significant that many TCKs are in leadership in cross-cultural agencies and the messages of the books, conferences and other sources have fallen on fertile ground. It is now the norm for larger agencies to have TCK education and welfare consultants. There are also many inter-agency organisations that provide similar services for smaller agencies as well as specialist expertise.

Why should all of this time and energy be devoted to looking specifically at TCKs? The simplest answer is that they are part of our organisations in the many of the same ways as their parents.

A Bainouk proverb from Senegal likens fathers to two kinds of tree, the mango and the oil palm. The oil palm trees there give shade to a small moving patch of ground, usually some distance away from the tree itself. So it is with the father who spends too much time concerned with business away from his home. A full-grown mango tree by contrast offers a lot more shade all around the tree itself throughout the whole day. A father who looks after his family well provides a shaded haven for others in addition to the family itself. A healthy family is also open to welcome others to their "mango tree" haven. Most of us in cross-cultural agencies view ourselves as family-orientated, - even as overgrown families, so this proverb fits us too. So much cross-cultural

work is very rightly focused on the needs of extremely vulnerable children, but in doing this we should never neglect our own – the mango tree that is a great haven for war orphans or those rescued from human trafficking should also shade our TCKS. Part of being a successful organisation is getting the basics of care right for our own people without being focused in on ourselves.

The questions to us as agency leaders, TCK staff and families are -

- Are we a mango tree agency or an oil palm one?
- If we see too much of the oil palm approach to family care with disjointed or missing elements, what are we going to do to put that right?



Two other reasons are also clear, namely the need to care for our families in order that cross-cultural agencies function properly and to nurture the huge potential within our own children.

So much of our work affected by our children's needs. Most of our families have to leave cross cultural service, often just at the point that they are becoming most effective, because of their children's education – usually during the last two or three school years or for higher education. The more we can do to support them where they are and provide workable education options the better the likelihood of retaining effective workers.

Within the TCK community lies great potential for leadership in organisations working overseas or in the passport country and the world in general. So many of the TCKs that we worked with during our years in Senegal are now in cross-cultural work, in leadership positions, or they are faithfully serving in whatever workplace they are employed in. It is exciting to see the potential in their lives realised in such diverse ways and a privilege to us to have been part of their formative education and care.

Educare is an e-magazine produced for cross-cultural families, organisations that send them and their supporters. It can be forwarded on freely to anyone who will benefit from it. Feedback on any issue is welcomed, as are ideas for other themes to be covered or offers of articles for future editions.