**Traveling for a purpose: The Essential Question**

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As a teacher traveling for the purpose of learning more about other cultures, it was important for me to have a specific intention; a focus of thought; an essential question, if you will. For me and other teachers at our school who struggle with the issue of the lack of student engagement in the classroom, this became the essence of my essential question I was hoping to explore while visiting schools in Russia.

In order to focus on my essential question, I had to break the elements of my inquiry into observable questions.

1. How does student engagement differ in the classrooms I observe from my American classroom?
2. What contributes to any observed differences in student engagement?
3. How seriously do Russian students take their own education as opposed to some of our American students?
4. How does family engagement in the school differ?

**1: How does student engagement differ in the classrooms I observe from my American classroom?**

During my first visit to a Russian classroom starting in Moscow, the level of observable student engagement was very high. Evidenced by how well the students were responding to their teachers, it was clear that there was a high level of respect that students had for their teachers. Students appeared prepared to be in class with completed homework, and students appeared to be eager to be called on in class to exhibit their learning. Thinking that this was an anomaly, that we were being given the proverbial “dog and pony show,” I was hoping to wait until I traveled to the far eastern city of Khabarovsk where I was to spend an entire week at the same school.

**Student dress:** One of the first impressions I got when I entered the classes was that the students were dressed for success. Boys wore dress shoes, slacks and shirts. Some wore ties and or jackets. Girls wore nice skirts and blouses. Many of the girls also wore their hair up in braids. In other words, the students dressed in a manner that conveyed that they took their education seriously, as if their education was their “job” and they dressed the part.

Of course, this is very counter to the image many American students give when they are getting dressed for school. When I gave PowerPoint presentations in the Russian classes where I spoke, the Russian students were very eager to see what their American counterparts were wearing. The Russian students spoke a desire to dress in a more relaxed way like my students do; however, they also spoke of the importance of taking their education seriously and to be seen by their teachers to be taking it seriously.

**Educational Competition:** The competition to do well in school in Russia school seems to be directly tied to the opportunities Russian students have to receive a free higher education at the university level. From what I learned, about 85% of all Russian high school students go on to a university. About half of them get a free university education, which is based on how well they do on their Russian national exams. Students take these exams very seriously; they are competitive and appear quite stressed by the exams.

**A 6-Day School Week:** The thing I learned about the Russian educational system that surprised me the most was the 11-year, Monday through Saturday 6-day school week. The high school where I teach is a Monday through Thursday school. Having Fridays off at our school is considered to be a privilege. Hence any student with less than a “C” average in all their classes is required to come in on Fridays to get caught up on their academics. Based on the discussion I had with Russian students and their teachers, everyone felt that students work very hard, are worked very hard and they are tired. The Russian teachers believed that the same level of rigor could be achieved with a 5-day school week. Likewise, teachers working a 6-day school week get tired too.

**Rigor:** During my classroom observations, it was clear that STM-focused (Science, Technology, and Math) was a priority in Russian schools. Note that I omitted the Engineering component of the more traditional STEM-focused education we see here in the U.S. I was asked repeatedly by different teachers, students and at different schools about how I teach engineering at our school (since I teach science and engineering). In fact, during my visit, I was offered a guest teaching job at a private school in Moscow. The school’s headmistress wanted me to come and spend two months to set up and initiate my Project Lead the Way engineering program that I do at my high school. I had to respectfully decline. I didn’t think my principal would approve such a leave of absence.

It was interesting to see the science curriculum’s emphasis on physics. Another interesting observation was during a 6th grade geography class I sat in on. I was surprised to see that it was not so much a geography class, but an earth science class. I was informed that world geography is a subject of geography class up until 5th grade; earth science is the geography curriculum for 6th and 7th grades. Geographical economics is the geography curriculum for 8-11th grades. The physics classes I observed had a high level of complexity and required students to not only complete the assigned problems, but also to come to the white board to explain *how* they came to their answers. During these science classes and several math classes, I observed that students were required to complete/solve fewer questions than what we are accustomed to her at my school. I feel that asking students to do fewer questions, but delve more deeply into the content as I observed in Russia is a by far a better system of study.

**Emphasis on high education:** I believe the greatest influence on the high student engagement I observed is the emphasis Russia places on promoting higher education. As a country, it was evident to me that Russia values a highly-education populace. Placing a significant emphasis on national exams to achieve a free education is key to students taking their education more seriously. Parental pressure for their children to do well also was evident.

**The school community** in Russia tends to be the focal point within communities. Schools do not provide transportation to and from school for students. It is up to the parents to make sure their children get to school, on time. Schools appear to be able to apply pressure on parents from a civic responsibility perspective. If the child does well on the Russian Unification exams, then it takes the pressure off of the parents to pay for university. I also observed a high level of parent involvement directly with the schools and with the classroom teachers. Many of the teachers I spoke with have made home visits to their students’ homes to the point of being invited to family dinners. Parents also volunteer in the classroom, and help to finance classroom supplies their students need as well as finance and participate in class field trips. On a field trip we made out of Khabarovsk, several parents came with us and provided the food and cooking/barbecuing labor for the communal meal. It was a very special time for my travel partner and me to be able to interact with the parents of the students with whom we were working.

Students and teachers are on a first name basis in the classroom. Since so much of the community life revolves around the school community, students generally attend the same school for all 11 years (unless they qualify for a higher-level STEM school). Hence, students and teachers are familiar with each other for up to 11 years, creating a friendlier student/teacher relationship.

**STEM Enrichment Activities:** The STEM school I visited for one week in Khabarovsk was a destination/magnet school. The school itself had an entrance exam through which students had to qualify in order to attend the school. This helped to emphasize the need for students to do well and excel in their academics. Otherwise, they would be placed back into a typical public school. The parents and students want to be a part of this STEM school (not a private school) because the level of achievement is high for the students engaged in this curriculum. Also, the students graduating from this STEM academy are more readily accepted into high-rigor university programs.

After school programs I participated in included robotics clubs which use the same Lego Mindstorm NXT 2.0 platform I use for my middle school, 5th grade robotics club.

**Global Perspectives in the Classroom:** The schools I visited placed a high level of importance on being bilingual or multilingual. In the schools I observed, students study English from grades 2-11. As one teacher said to me, “We don’t see learning English as a ‘class.’ We see learning English as an opportunity.” Other languages I observed being taught with fluency in my school included German and French. The schools also afford the students opportunities for international travel, a chance to learn about other cultures. The schools also encourage students to participate in international study abroad programs.

At my school in Khabarovsk, one of the after school clubs was the “Success Club.” The club met weekly, was conducted all in English and the teachers used games and skits to promote culturally relevant educational enrichment.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I was impressed with the high level of student engagement I witnessed in the Russian school system. Whenever teachers or an administrator enters a classroom, the students rise up from behind their desks and stand at attention. My students told me in no uncertain terms that this was not going to happen in my classroom. Again, I think this is a prime example of the level of respect that students show toward their teachers that is one thing that is lacking here in the U.S.

I also believe that *hope* plays a large part in the Russian school system that enhances student engagement. From my observations and conversations, I sense that Russian students have a high level of hope or the expectation that if they work hard and apply themselves to the best of their abilities, they will go onto study at a university and they are likely to do so at no cost to them or their family. Here in the U.S., I do not get the same level of hope or expectation that students will be able to go onto, or that their families will be able to afford a university education.

Parental engagement in the school system is prevalent. This sets e good model for students to follow: That their education is important, and that they are expected to do well. Parental engagement at my school here in Arizona is almost nonexistent.