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Dia Ruth Gary
Central Washington University

Introduction

Do Valentines, Hallmark, fruitcake and egg yolks have anything in common? As an American born and raised citizen, evolved educator, I believe that they do. Every year around the middle of October my students brought me a round sweet pastry better known as a moon-cake. The students frequently were in competition with each other on whom could present the most attractive, and delectable moon-cake to their teacher. I received them by the droves, much like the Valentines I received in the United States in February.

The moon-cake is generally given to anyone who will accept it as a token to celebrate the Mid-Autumn-Festival celebrated in every province in the People’s Republic of China. It is a token that represents longevity and harmony to most folks who are ethnically Asian (Roberts, 2014). My first taste of a moon-cake was truly a one of a kind experience. The colorfully wrapped pastry came in a bright red box adorned with a dragon on the lid. I always opened the box with great expectation. Inside, there were usually four individually wrapped circular pastries. Salivating, I unwrapped the first one thinking about how tasty it would be. My anticipation turned to a bit of a frown; it tasted a bit like fruitcake. The second bite was worse than the first, but I continued on. The third bite was a literal jolt as I bit into something gooey, pasty, and yellow in color. Imagine my surprise when the realization hit that I had just foraged my way into an egg yolk.
This experience led me to my electronic device where in my zest for advanced scholarship I discovered that the egg yolk represented the moon, thus referring to moon watching, and lunar worship. The original festival had its foundation in the worship of a mythical Moon Goddess of Immortality (Tung, 2011). In my passion to avoid eating moon-cakes (from that time forward), and trying not to offend anyone, I came to the conclusion that immortality was probably the antitheses of what a moon-cake might bring.

Teaching abroad can lead to a life changing attitude and an appreciation and love for other cultures. The following is a personal journey of what it is like to educate a diverse cultural population who themselves were on the same journey of acculturation as their teacher.

**Personal Observations of Teaching in International Settings**

Surrounded by twenty, five-year-old students pointing to the square, circle, or triangle, tying shoes, saying “sneeze into your sleeve” and not getting enough sleep had turned into mechanized routine repeated one hundred and eighty days every year for the last seventeen years. A change was necessary; a dramatic chance to renew the passion that once resulted in intensity, and spontaneity. Looking for a fire to renew and ignite the zeal that once possessed me for educating young children, I accepted a teaching position at an International School located in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The following is my story, one that may re-ignite your passion and zeal for educating today and tomorrow’s world leaders. It is a personal journey of what it is like to educate a diverse cultural population.

It started with an interview in a small humble kitchen in a rural setting in Wilder, Idaho. Sitting across from my husband and myself was a gentleman, once superintendent of the Wilder School District. He was in a partnership with his brother-in-law establishing International Schools in diverse and unusual places around the globe. His
brother-in-law established the first in Sanaa, Yemen. That lone school led to the development of 36 International Schools in 29 countries, resulting in Quality Schools International, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating children around the globe (QSI, 2008-2014). Accepting a teaching position to teach kindergarten in Almaty, Kazakhstan began my journey to the resurrection of my heart-felt passion for teaching.

Living abroad will bring out emotions and desires that living in the United States will not. Tsang-Feign, (2013) posits that expatriates living on foreign soil go through four predictable stages of elation, resistance, transformation, and finally integration. My story will illuminate each of those stages reaching acculturation and appreciation of diversity in children, realizing that children around the world, whether in Sanaa, Yemen or Seattle, Washington have the same needs, desires, and developmental stages.

**Preparation**

Teaching five and six year-olds for more than a decade can lend itself to a wealth of accumulation of a variety of items from toilet paper rolls to plastic bread-tags. Teachers of early childhood display genius higher level thinking envisioning practical and impractical uses for almost anything. Frequently, large storage units are complete with various items such as baby food jars to wallpaper books. One hundred and eighty-five boxes filled to the top were in my possession when I set off for my adventure abroad. When resigning from one teaching position and going to the next it is quite common for early childhood educators to “move” every piece of furnishing and supply that they might find useful in the next position. I was no different and left very little in the classroom I vacated. The dilemma was how to transport one hundred and eighty-five boxes to Almaty, Kazakhstan only a mere six thousand sixty-six miles plus an ocean from Seattle. Preparation included what to take and what to abandon. Leaving behind what I knew to be reliable as a teaching tool was almost impossible. Part of my soul was in every manipulative and resource that I had implemented over the years. It was certainly a challenge to separate and discard those favored items. Thus, separating the treasures was the first hurdle that I faced on my venture to a foreign land. However, I did narrow it down to twenty-five boxes and was prepared to pay out of my own pocket the twenty-five hundred dollar fee it took to get them there via shipping container.
Elation

I envisioned that the school in Almaty would be a hut with virtually little to no curricula or supplies. Imagine my joy when I arrived and saw that the school had a beautiful library, a classroom full of supplies, and any essential item needed to teach a classroom of five-year-olds. Even so, when receiving word that my “boxes” had arrived via shipping container I wanted to immediately get in the car and retrieve them from the customs office. I was not familiar with the procedures and paper work necessary to recover my shipment and was naïve when they suggested that I pay a large fee so that they could release them. Nor, did I realize that it was necessary to hire a brokerage firm to retrieve them. My twenty-five boxes filled with treasures resulted in a hefty fee that surpassed my first month’s salary.

Elation in having a beautiful school to work in was escalated when I found that my classroom had only seven students in it with a full time paraprofessional. I discovered that class size does make a difference. However, having only seven students did present some challenges. Playing an interactive game such as “Farmer in the Dell” was difficult with few people to hold hands in a circle, especially if you wanted to have a farmer, his wife, the daughter, a cow, and a pig. Having five participants in the middle of the circle left two children and a teacher to make the outer circle.

That was not an easy task when the length of arms was on the short side. Additionally, it was even more comical with children “mooing”, “oinking’, “quacking’, and “neighing” in seven different languages.

I was pleased with the relationships that I made with the staff at the school. Living in a foreign land can often present times of isolation and longing for home. Expats begin as outsiders. Relocating to a country where you do not speak the language, or understand the customs can lead to frustrating and intense periods of loneliness. In a relatively short period of time the people that you work with become very important to you. In a sense they become your surrogate family. Those relationships have been long lasting and continue several years after everyone has traveled to new destinations. In any expat community a posting of two years is usually the normal stay whether it be a business executive or an educator. Expats who invest the time it takes to really know those they work with often will be more successful in their new country (Tsang-Feign, 2013).

Resistance

Kazakhstan, having gained independence from Russia in 1991, was still a country struggling with identity and confidence (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada, February 2007). Water storage systems were like an image of an octopus reaching its’ long arms and sucking tentacles into a culture finally free of
oppressing tyranny. Those long arms contained the main water source for the city. One flick of the switch could end all water and electricity rights for a community of over one million.

Those extensive pipes snaking around the city were a symbol of dominance in an era that had passed. Electricity was generated through water, which magically appeared through steam heaters in almost every apartment in Kazakhstan on the same day, October 15th. If the weather grew cold before October 15th, wool hats and gloves, not to mention two pair of socks would help against the barrage of early snow and freezing temperatures. Yet, despite the cold, the ice glistening on the limbs of the trees was a beautiful and tranquil sight. The children thought nothing of wearing snowsuits and gloves inside the classroom. My students would venture bets on how many layers of clothing I would wear to school. On one particular day the count reached 10! That was certainly a developmentally appropriate way to teach early numeracy skills.

In any life-changing situation resistance often follows those elated feelings upon arrival in a foreign land. Customs that once seemed endearing began to appear somewhat forward and abrasive. Cultural norms such as asking personal questions, “are you married” and “how old are you” began to annoy me. Respecting standards such as not crossing your legs when seated, or opening up a gift in front of the giver began to seem silly.

Because of having only seven in my first overseas posting, difficulty in making a team for soft ball and other various activities took some creative planning. Additional differences included students learning English as a second and third language and parents who had definite opinions of how their children were educated. My experience in my home country had been with parents who primarily were uninvolved because of lack or interest or consumed with how to earn an income. Many of the international students’ mothers were very educated young women and had left blossoming careers stateside to see their
husbands succeed in employment success (Tsang-Feign, 2013). This often led to very involved mothers often critical of what their children were learning or not learning. My initial encounter with one parent of a five-year-old involved expectations that her child be fluently reading English books within the first six months of the school year. My explanation of developmentally appropriate activities for a five year-old was not accepted with understanding or an acknowledgement that I was providing the best education for her child. Eventually my teaching abilities were appreciated and I was given accolades for a job well done. Some of the initial discomfort with living abroad was my need for quiet and solitude in a city of one million. Almaty, Kazakhstan was a city of bustling people. Shenzhen, China my second abroad location was even larger. Both cities were vibrant with movement, involving vehicles, bicycles, motorbikes, and horse drawn carts. My solitude consisted of making my way to the sea or the mountains, both breath taking, and worth the effort to travel there. My lack of knowledge of the local languages prevented me from owning my own mode of transportation. Car ownership in China was very expensive and not recommended for someone who was not fluent in reading and writing Mandarin. However, desperation leads to ingenuity. I soon developed a way to get from destination A to destination B without too much trauma. I concluded that taking pictures of bus stop signs and collecting business cards with addresses of venues I wanted to return to alleviated my stress level. My ingenuity led to the accumulation of hundreds of business cards that I very neatly alphabetized and presented to bus attendants and taxi drivers without even opening my mouth.

During our time in Kazakhstan we were blessed with a burgeoning enrollment. That prompted the building of a new school facility. My husband had the responsibility of overseeing the building of that school and making sure that the school would open in August on schedule. One bright Saturday morning
we were returning to our apartment after grocery shopping. I noticed a billowing black cloud and sparks soaring towards the sky. I made the remark that I hoped the smoke was not coming from our new gorgeous school. As we drew closer, I realized the prophecy in the statement I had just made.

The entire roof of the new school building was in flames, just fifteen days until the first day of school. That was probably the lowest time in all of the years I spent teaching abroad. To see hopes and aspirations go up in smoke because of one careless welding spark crushed any ounce of inspiration for the upcoming year. However, through grit and determination we survived that fire, rebuilt, and continued with quality education for the students we loved. 

Transformation

The third stage going from elation, then resistance, led me into transformation. I began to recognize both the frailties, and strengths, of the foreign land I was occupying. I was being transformed into a dual citizen. A citizen that had a keen respect for the United States but also an acute awareness of the power and uniqueness of the country I was residing in. I came to understand how the customs and conventions were not so varied from my own. Most families had the same desire to love their children, raise them to be outstanding citizens, and esteem their country, very much in sync with my own desires. I began to appreciate the hardship that most of the population faced, attitudes were never whining or negative. They had so little compared to my comforts, yet they appeared self-sufficient and satisfied. I appreciated the smiles and the laughter at my humble attempts to speak Russian or Mandarin, and the willingness to help even if it meant sacrificing their own time and money. I felt comfort when interacting with the Babushka I saw every Saturday morning, her gleeful spontaneity when I clutched her hand and left several thousand tenge so she could eat for the next week. A face aged and wrinkled with knowledge of the past, yet hopeful for the future. This was a joy that I had never experienced in my small community in my home country.

Integration

Integration is the last stage that according to Tsang-Feign (2013) is when cultural barriers are bridged. I loved the country I resided in, but I longed for the country I was born in. The wind of loneliness for my family and the country of my birth began to whisper my name.
I longed for the freedom and independence that only my native country could offer me.

Returning home can also be stressful when you have been isolated from all the luxuries it has to offer for an extensive period of time. The first time I went shopping after being abroad for so many years was as overwhelming as traveling to a foreign country. I was faced with too many choices in the grocery store, in the bookstore and at the corner coffee shop. The streets were empty of pedestrians, and the silence was eerie. Pedestrians, bicycles, and horse drawn carts did not crowd the streets. There were no elderly men calling out in a loud cadence that they had household goods for sale. No roosters crowed outside my window, and loud boisterous laughter did not interrupt my sleep coming from the apartment next door. When I drove my car, there was no competition to see who could get through the traffic light first. There were no bumper car demolition derbies, and no policemen standing on the side of the road directing me to pull over as they pointed their nightstick at me. Back in the home of my birth, I began the stages of acculturation once again. I was elated to see my family and old friends, resistant that those around me were not interested in hearing about my global explorations, transformed by accepting that my home country was still the best place to be, and finally integrated enough to accept what I could not change, and make goals to change what I could.

I am so much more confident as an educator after my experience teaching abroad. I came to be a cheerleader and encourager for overseas experiences especially for educators who want to deepen and strengthen their pedagogy and worldview. My view of other cultures is now more accepting, and I developed a deep empathy for those students in my classroom who are not native born. I now have a deeper understanding for parents who are in a culture that is so diverse from what they were raised in, and I have developed an intentional outreach to them so that they feel accepted and appreciated. I realized that children are warm, wonderful, and exuberant human beings who grow and develop in similar patterns around the globe.

**Conclusion**

This experience did not change the world, and it probably did not change the children that I taught, but it certainly changed me. I am a more confident, and enlightened educator with a view of the world that has grown from a limited egocentric view to a global view. I highly recommend teaching abroad for anyone who desires to reignite the fire they once felt for educating the children of today’s world, for tomorrow’s future.

**Dr. Dia Ruth Gary** is currently an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood Education at Central Washington University. She has 28 years of
experience working in private and public school settings in varied and diverse environments. Dr. Gary can be reached at garyd@cwu.edu.

References


A Global Experience

Gary