

Education in Russia: ISU College of Education Travels to Vladimir, Russia

By: Melody Haigh, Middle Level Teacher Education 2018

IDEA



Since the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975, the United States has been working to support the right to free public education that will meet the unique needs of disabled students. Special education has come a long way in the years since, and we now train specialized teachers to support these students within the classroom. As spring semester finals wrapped up in May, a group from the Special Education Department at Illinois State University, and me, representing the Middle Level Department, traveled to Bloomington-Normal's sister city—Vladimir, Russia.

In the last year, Russia has passed a similar act to the U.S.'s IDEA. Because of this, schools are just beginning to implement full integration in the general education classroom. Upon arriving in Vladimir, we met with a group of professors and administration from Vladimir State University. They shared with us the history of Vladimir and their institution, taking us to various museums and sites. As we began to work more closely with the pedagogical institute, we met various students and professors who were interested to hear about our education system in the States and to share their system with us.



Education in Russia



In a roundtable discussion at the beginning of the week, the Russian pedagogical students provided us with an overview of the Russian education system. Similar to the U.S., Russia has various “levels” of education. Students begin by attending kindergarten before or around the age of six before moving to primary (elementary) school. Students typically spend nine years completing their “general education.” Then, they attend secondary school (high school) for two to three years. Russian students graduate with a Certificate of Secondary Education around the age of 17 if they are able to pass a state-given final exam. This certificate allows them to continue to higher level education either at a trade school or university.



While there, we had the opportunity to visit three different schools. A “kindergarten” for students age 3-7, a primary school, and a high school. Schools in Russia put emphasis on general education, physical development, and the arts. The kindergarten we visited was a school that focused on academics and physical development through movement. We had the opportunity to watch various 3-7 year old classes perform songs and

dances. These kids were IMPRESSIVE! They sang songs about letting go of their childish ways as they were growing up. At this school, we watched a young boy with autism being integrated into the general education classroom. We were also able to observe an academic class utilizing a Smart Table to practice syllabication.

The primary/high school we visited had a focus in athletics. Students would spend roughly three hours of their school day training in their athletic event. At this school, we observed children with cochlear implants, assistive hearing technology. These students were integrated in the general education classroom as well as being pulled out for special education intervention.

While content delivery and educational strategies are similar to ours in the States, what stood out most to me about the schools was the culture. When a teacher or guest would enter the classroom, the students would stand to show respect. I was so impressed, especially with the primary students, how engaged and interested they were in having Americans visit their classroom. They even practiced their English with us by asking us questions about ourselves.



In the United States, classroom management is one of the greatest issues teachers face. But in Russia, the students are expected to meet high behavioral expectations, and they do. Students speak when spoken to. If they wish to speak during class, they must stand. They wear uniforms and many girls wear their hair in long braids. They still hold many traditional values.

Roundtable Discussions: Sharing Cross-Culturally

Like the university students did for us, we prepared a presentation for them covering education in the U.S. We discussed Illinois licensure requirements and special education strategies used commonly to support various disabilities. What we thought would be an audience of 15 undergraduate students, turned out to be around 50 of the university's students and professors. It was an amazing opportunity, giving them a chance to ask us questions and allowing us to share what we do in our classrooms. Following our presentation, we even had one professor ask us for a copy of our slides, as she had a student writing a dissertation on special education in America. She was so excited that she had the opportunity to listen to our presentation.



Cultural Experience

Besides working with the pedagogical institute, we spent much of our time as tourists. Before arriving in Vladimir, we had the opportunity to travel throughout St. Petersburg; and following our time there, we spent a day in the capital city, Moscow. Russia is truly a beautiful country with rich history. We were able to visit many historical sites in each city.

Russia is getting a bad reputation from the media right now. Many Americans look at Russia with "political goggles." Returning to the States, I see that education in Russia really is not all that different from our own. Yes, the culture is different. Yes, the schools look a little different. But the love for education is the same. The kids are the same. We set out expecting to share our "expertise" in special education with them, but I think they ended up sharing a whole lot more with us.

