

Crossing Borders within Borders

It all begins when we walk to class, down the dim halls of the primary school “Dr. Petar Beron.” One of the little Turkish 5th graders has spotted our posse: myself, our teacher Mrs. Eneva, and my 3 students visiting from Yambol’s elite high schools; here with me today volunteering as assistant teachers. The scout bolts back to the room screaming “*Idvat! Idvat!*” - “*they’re coming, they’re coming!*” Some of the other kids come out, start clapping, go for high fives and give their *kaka* (older sister) and *bate* (older brother) an enthusiastic hug. Finally we enter the room and the chaos continues as the most excited ones run wildly around the desks. Once the excitement dies down, the class divides into groups, each with one volunteer, digging into the lesson of the day. For one year now, I have been leading a secondary project in Yambol bringing ethnic Bulgarian high schoolers to volunteer as assistant-teachers in a school in a Turkish/Roma neighborhood they would otherwise avoid; crossing borders within borders. The dream was to raise educational achievement among minority youth, supply positive role models and increase understanding between the three main ethnic groups that call Yambol home. It was one of those dreams I remember discussing during PST, but was doubtful would really happen. The project that ensued achieved a level of success that I never thought possible.

The issues surrounding multi-ethnic education in Bulgaria are numerous. The Primary School “Dr. Petar Beron” is one of the many *de facto* segregated Turkish/Roma schools located in the Roma neighborhoods in larger cities throughout Bulgaria. The educational environment is one of the most difficult in the country. Expectations of the children are low, in part due to societal prejudice (“they’re gypsies, they can’t learn anything,”) and otherwise due to the complexities of multi-ethnic education in a relatively homogeneous society. The majority of these children enter the Bulgarian education system at 6 years old not knowing Bulgarian, but instead speaking either Turkish or Romanes at home. As the curriculum is designed for children speaking Bulgarian as a first language, these students are immediately at a disadvantage that follows them throughout their entire school career. They are forever behind the textbooks, some students more than others, and the ensuing frustration leads to demotivation, mistrust and disbelief in the system. Add into this the anti-Roma sentiment all-too-often heard in the streets and in the media, and one can imagine just how complex and widespread the issues are in this school, in Yambol, and in Bulgaria.

My primary assignment, however, is teaching english at the High School for Foreign Languages “Vasil Karagjozov.” Before I had brought any of these students to come with me to “Dr. Petar Beron,” I was disturbed by the many anti-Roma comments I would hear as well as similar nasty remarks about the Turks. I started working at “Dr. Petar Beron” as a secondary project 3 months into my time at site, and the difficulty of the situation became quickly apparent. Still, I was impressed by the amount of trust and goodwill gained by an outward show of respect for these childrens’ cultures. One day, when asked by my students, “*Teacher, do you know Turkish?*” I answered “*ama, biraz türkçe konuşabiliyorum*” - “*well, I can speak a little bit of turkish.*” The response was a stunned pause, followed by wails of joy and applause. Respect is a powerful unifier – and a lack of respect, just as powerful a divider. It was this lack of respect, the

antiziganism, the misunderstanding, the hatred, that I feared would make my imagined exchange impossible.

Once I had found the first 3 students willing to come with me, they were still beset by a mix of doubt and fear about dealing with Roma and Turkish children. I was equally anxious that it would turn out terribly, that these volunteers would never return. To my great surprise and relief, our first attempt was an immediate success; the same student that 2 days before was telling me how much she hated the Turks was now being taught basic Turkish phrases by a 5th grader, and she was loving it; completely overwhelmed by the power of cute. Just last week, one of our newer volunteers was enthusiastically reciting many of the Roma words for the different body parts she had learned the week before. For the students of “Dr. Petar Beron,” this is a level of respect for their culture they rarely, if ever, see from the ethnic Bulgarian majority. The joy of openly celebrating their own language and culture creates trust that is vital not only in the school, but in Bulgarian society as a whole. My student-volunteers, on the other hand, leave every class with a broad smile, repeating the words “*mnogo sa sladki!*”- “*they’re so cute!*” all the while reciting their favorite *sladki* moments from class. Cute is a drug, and 4th graders a serious addiction. Their most frequently asked question: “*so when are we coming back?*”

In terms of methodology, the project is based on a simple model of increasing the effectivity of education: lowering the student-teacher ratio, allowing for more individual attention for each student. While the volunteers are busy working through the lesson with 4-6 students, the head teacher and I can sit with the most left-behind students and cover the basics, such as the alphabet. Motivation is increased when the students see that they too can learn english, that there are these older friends of theirs who believe in them and expect them to succeed. The added interest of sharing their own language creates an extra link to what is now their third language: english. To my eyes, however, the greatest success lies in the positive contact established between these cultures. Besides the teachers, it is likely that these young students have no other positive personal connection with ethnic Bulgarians. Even with the teachers, it cannot be said that their connection is always positive.

My curly-haired fourth grader has cornered me as I enter the classroom and begins scolding me. “If *kaka* Lucy doesn’t come back next week, I’m never going to talk to you again.” She swears she’s not kidding. I do my best to reassure her. It is moments like this that have shown me how this project has generated true goodwill and friendship between formerly apprehensive neighbors. The older students are seen as friends and role models, an example of who these students could be; of elite high schools that with enough hard work, perhaps they too could attend. After the period ends, a similar cacophony ensues to that before class. Students from many different classes enter the room, engulfing the volunteers with personal questions and asking for their skype names. Pictures are taken. The sound of 50 young students chattering loudly in Bulgarian, Turkish and Romanes is impressive. The walk back to the teacher’s lounge closely resembles that of salmon swimming upstream in a rushing current of frantic elementary schoolers.

And what of measureable success? We’ve had 12 students volunteer their time as assistant teachers. We’ve helped in 6 different classes, from the 3rd to 7th grades. I’ve been told that test scores have increased, though I don’t know by how much. We’ve had

a local newspaper article written about the project, as well as coverage on local cable; something that's actually watched in Bulgaria, as compared to the US. But the effort suffers from the same lack of measurability as goals 2 and 3 of the Peace Corps do – how does one truly measure the benefits of cultural exchange? By the number of pictures taken with *bate* Mitko and *kaka* Alex? By the number of skype addresses exchanged? The number of words learned in Romanes or Turkish? What figure could I apply to the student-volunteers' newfound level of dedication to understanding the situation? To the conversations I've had with them about improving this project and Bulgarian education? To their gained confidence and self-respect? These students are the future leaders of Bulgaria, although no one can yet say in what capacity it will be. I firmly believe that that which they've learned in their time at the primary school "Dr. Petar Beron" will be of vital importance to the decisions they make, and the way in which they influence their peers from now into the future. I don't yet know how to measure this.

Recently, as last year's volunteers became more busy in their studies, I began to worry that the project was fading away. I mentioned it to this year's 10th grade class, and was happy with the quick response and interest in participating. Again, with this new group, I was moved by how swiftly years of mistrust and prejudice can be broken down in one 40 minute class period. I am not sure that these volunteers know how large a leap they've taken. It's one thing to sit in a classroom and learn numbers and facts about their world. It's another to challenge yourself to see it, touch it, and seek to change it. The true success of this project is theirs; I've only been lucky enough to open the door for them and watch it happen.