

A Model of Spiritually-based Education: The Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk International School and the International Educational Initiatives Global Immersion Curriculum

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Abstract

In the first part of the presentation, Dr. Johnson explored the theoretical underpinnings and the history of the development of the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk International School in Sakhalin, Russia, which opened in September of 1992 with two fifth grade classes. International Educational Initiatives, Inc. (a non-profit corporation owned and operated by Baha'i educators) was asked by Russian educators in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk to help them develop a school and curriculum which was ethically or morally-based, which had a high academic standard, and which would teach from a global perspective in English. The pilot project that extended through the 1996 school year (grades five through eight) was considered to be quite successful in attaining these goals.

Dr. Johnson also explained that the pedagogical approaches used in the International Educational Initiatives (IEI) Immersion Curriculum are all supportive of the Baha'i concept of the high station of the individual. Much of the instruction in the spiritually-based IEI curriculum is activity-based.

The IEI curriculum met and exceeded the academic requirements of the Russian Ministry of Education, including creative arts. Additionally, although moral education and values development are woven into all aspects of the curriculum, it includes specific moral education classes which deal with the historical roles and processes of religion, and school, home and community service projects. Group consultation time is a part of the weekly schedule. In consultation periods students plan activities, make and discuss class rules and behavior, discuss and solve problems, and take care of other concerns of the "community" (class). Consultation helps children develop their communication skills, sensitivity to others, and leadership and "followership" skills. It gives them an opportunity to actively participate in and have some control over their learning process and environment. It helps them develop a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others and for their own actions. In this way the curriculum is also service-based.

In the Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk International School, with the exception of Russian Language Arts, Labor Arts, some ancillary math classes, and Physical Education, all classes were taught in English. The IEI Global Curriculum content is organized and presented in the format of modules. Subjects are not studied separately, as in traditional academic institutions, but, rather are taught in such a manner that the students can see the relationships among the various disciplines. Because it is a modular-based curriculum, any subject can be alternately (or immediately turned into) an English lesson, or a math lesson, or history or moral education lesson.

The second part of the presentation, by Dr. Higgins, dealt directly with the various practical aspects of implementing, administering, and evaluating this program. He explained that testing was conducted in all three domains, the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. The base level English ability was virtually nil, with few students in the third and fifth grades able to read the English alphabet at the beginning of the 1993-1994 school year. The sixth graders were reading and writing English at the American second grade level after one year of a partial curriculum implementation. At the end of the 1993-1994 school year, in which the curriculum was fully implemented, all grades were reading and writing at, or very close to the equivalent American grade level of English. The evaluation results of the academic content learning level showed the students to be at or above grade level in all subjects, which is consistent with findings reported for other immersion programs around the world. Further, their demonstrated growth in the area of moral expression and service was quite distinctive and received very favorable comment and notice by non-Baha'i educational specialists from Europe.