

CU-ELST Project Report – Summer 2009

Project Location: Darkhan, Darkhan-Uul, Mongolia

Institution Name: Don Bosco Education Centre

Dates of Project: 30/06/2009-07/08/2009

Approx Amount of Teaching: 40 Students, 4-8 hours per day

Darkhan is the third largest city in Mongolia. Mongolia is the highest in elevation and least densely populated country in the world. The intense summer lasts only three months, and the rest of the year sees the country steeped in a deep freeze. The Don Bosco Education Centre is a school run by the Salesian organization. During the school year, the centre is geared toward enabling students to catch up to their peers. If a student does not enter school in first grade in Mongolia, she cannot enter later unless she is at the level of her age group. During the summer, the centre offers free English lessons and a safe place to play. The children and teens that come to the centre have access to the support of the community, academic resources, and language and financial assistance from foreign volunteers and donors.

I was the only volunteer in the Darkhan centre last summer. I taught three English classes at various levels. The early morning class consisted mostly of women in their 20s who were proficient in English and wanted to improve. Many of them were teachers or worked in the tourism industry. The late morning class was mostly teenagers, but the youngest was about twelve. They were at an early intermediate level. The afternoon class had students from eight to forty years of age. This class was the largest of the three. I often had people who had not registered try to sneak into the class! All three classes made steady progress. By the end of the summer, each student completed a final project. The advanced class students gave reports about English and American authors. The other two classes made posters and spoke about their future dreams. On a practical level, the students made a marked improvement in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Some of them spoke about how they were inspired to continue studying English—and become English teachers! It was humbling to learn about their dreams and to watch the fruit of all their efforts at the end of the summer.

Observing such hope and resilience in the face of such a harsh environment, challenging circumstances and poor infrastructure was inspiring and humbling. While I know that I taught my students, I learned so much more from them. Thank you for enabling this to happen.

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Project Location: Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Institution Name: Asral NGO

Dates of Project: 05/07/09-14/08/09

Approx Amount of Teaching: ~25 students, 4 hours per day

The development process of Mongolia has always been a sail against the winds, what with its landlocked geographical position, drastic climate conditions and lack of arable land, not to mention the constant struggle throughout the 20th century against foreign invaders. In many ways, Mongolia has the trappings of a country that may trip over by its economic growth -- with the apparent betterment of lives in the cities, nomadic herdsman sell their livestock and migrate into cities only to find high unemployment rates supported by a weak social system, whilst adding on to congestion in urban centres. Under such harsh conditions, Asral NGO was set up in 2001 by the Ven. Panchen Otrul Rinpoche to guard against the disintegration of families, as the country struggles to climb the economic ladder.

The main projects of Asral NGO aim at enabling Mongolians to benefit sustainably from the country's growth and seeking a balance in the urban-rural gap. The summer English classes play an integral role by keeping students in the centre during the day, thus preventing them from taking to the streets. As one of the three English teachers at the centre, I was responsible for the elementary and intermediate classes – the former for kids aged 6-9 while the latter 10 and above, though this is not rigid. Class sizes vary depending on attendance (unfortunately, as these classes are free, students do not always attend every lesson) but are in the range from 6 to 15. I benefitted greatly from the resources at the centre as every major EFL textbooks at any level (Cutting Edge, Headway) is available, allowing me to customise my classes accordingly. I developed an overall framework with goals for each lesson, and sought resources to fulfil those goals. To make classes interesting, I supported each class with a theme. I have also made use of significant audio-visual material found on the web that at times were much better than me in grabbing the students' attention. As the English teacher, I also couldn't help but assume the responsibility of editing the promotional leaflets printed by the centre.

Other projects run by Asral include a vegetable growing project in the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar and a felt-making social enterprise (MIM). Endorsed by the Dalai Lama, Asral is very well run and one gets a feel that one is part of something that is transformative in the social development of Ulaanbaatar.

Overall, I am amazed by the tenacity of the Mongolians and sense that the 'Genghis Khan-spirit' (determination to succeed) is still very much alive. Placement aside, I had the opportunity to visit the pristine countryside and ended my trip with a 30-hour journey on the Trans-Mongolian. What more can I ask?