

Educational Values in Kyrgyzstan: Their Transformation and Challenges

Zyinat Esenalieva

Kyrgyz-Turkish 'Manas' University, Kyrgyzstan

Abstract

Kyrgyzstan has an interesting history in the frame of education. In the 1920's, education was the last thing people valued. But today, they are ready to give their savings to get a good education. That's why teachers and trainers are doing their best to learn effective ways of providing a good knowledge. Currently, teaching methodology is facing a crucial problem. Even though teachers are being taught different interactive and collaborating methods of teaching, most teachers do not show this in practice. The aim of most private schools is to prepare global citizens and this is a new and unique attitude in my country. I believe that our positive results from encouraging our students to take part in the learning process will promote interactive learning in other schools. My research illustrates these challenges as well as the changes of educational values.

Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.

~ G. K. Chesterton

Introduction

Kyrgyzstan is a young and developing country that declared it independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. My grandparents say that in the past 25 years, Kyrgyzstan has undergone significant development. It is a country where most young people are eager to get a good education and the country is slowly learning how to provide one. The importance of education in today's society is great, especially in terms of intercultural communication. Many young people are eager to learn languages because they see the opportunities that this knowledge provides. "One will never have obstacles in life if he knows at least one foreign language" is today's most used phrase and becoming a kind of proverb in our society. Even parents are encouraging and supporting their children to learn the English language.

I have lived and graduated from a school in the small town of Toktogul, Kyrgyzstan. During my school years, I had no the idea what the university was because there were only a few students who continued their studies and went on to universities. Many things have changed in a positive way since then. Now, all students get good information about the higher education and the access to internet is getting possible in towns. It helps students

to develop his or her interest independently. The development of technology and raising number of parents and students who are expecting new things from school, make teachers look for different ways of teaching to keep the class interesting.

The Kyrgyz Epic and Literature

From ancient times, Kyrgyz people told stories and proverbs, sang songs and lullabies to their children. They took their sons and daughters to listen to *Manaschy* (i.e., singers of *Manas*). In fact, the Kyrgyz do not have epic singers but they have *manaschi* instead. This was how the Kyrgyz people were educating the next generation when they were nomadic. The great epic *Manas* (Köçümkulkızı, 2005) preserves the whole tradition and background of the Kyrgyz people. It is considered to be the epitome of oral creativity as all stories were sung impromptu by different *Manaschys*. And even today, the way in which they use the language with hundreds of stylistic devices and literary words wisely put together in seconds always leaves the audience in astonishment. The Kyrgyz nation is unique because it enriched their literature in the absence of a written language.

As our great writer *Chingiz Aitmatov* notes: "If other nations displayed their past culture and history in written literature, sculpture, architecture and art, the Kyrgyz people expressed their worldview, pride and dignity, battles and their hope for the future in epic genre." Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008) owned a highly respected place in Kyrgyz literature and generally in educational world (The Aitmatov Academy, 2013). He was a Kyrgyz author who wrote both in Russian and Kyrgyz, and is considered the best-known writer of Kyrgyzstan. His short stories and short novels provide a vivid account of life in the USSR. He writes in lyrical yet simple prose that draws heavily on folklore but yet remains contemporary in its essence. His short novels have been widely read and translated.

One of his novels, *The First Teacher* (1961), is a deeply moving and at times sad story which tells how the young activist, Dyuishen, returned to his village to spread the knowledge that he gained through a more formal education system. He called on the community to create schools in the 1920s after the revolution and assembled pupils for them. He did not fear going against the customs of the mountain-dwellers. Dyuishen cleans out and repairs the abandoned to the stables of a former landowner and helps children to make their way to school while even 'burning' (freezing) their feet as they crossed the icy stream. Some children have to be carried and others ride piggy-back. He also bravely comes to the defense of the best student, Altynai. Years later, she thinks back to the emotions that she had felt as a child: "Back then we probably all loved our teacher – for his humanity and his dreams for our future. Although we were children, I think we were aware of all that even then. Otherwise, what would have led us to make such a long journey every day and climb up that steep hill, panting in the wind or caught up in the snowdrifts? We went to school of our own accord. Nobody forced us to go. Nobody would have made us freeze in that cold shed, where any breath formed a coating of white frost on our faces, hands and clothes". The adult hero recalls those years of her childhood, which as she herself acknowledges, had such a powerful influence on the rest of her life.

Duishen, the first teacher, struggled to convince others of the bright future of the country by obtaining knowledge. Many people lived in darkness before his struggle, and education removed this darkness. A nation is nothing without education. It is considered essential to life. It helps us to enrich our inner world and to improve ourselves. Education can teach us as individuals or communities the good things and the bad. The benefits of education are boundless.

The importance of education in today's society is great especially in terms of intercultural communication. "One will never have obstacle in life if he knows at least one foreign language" is now a common phrase and has become a kind of proverb. Even parents are encouraging and supporting their children to learn English and other foreign languages. Sadly, there are many older people who missed their chance of learning because of the lack of recourse in their time. The oldest visitor of the American Center where I used to do volunteer teaching was 40. Earlier in his life, it would have been silly to frequent educational centers. Now, many people are eager to learn languages because they see the opportunities that this knowledge provides. Ongoing language education strengthens the relationships between the countries, creates friendships between people from different parts of the world, and, most of all, and helps us to enrich our outlook through communicating with other nations.

Children's Literature in Kyrgyzstan

As our country is in a process of developing, we should not forget that children's literature is an important part on the way to prosperity. Currently, Kyrgyzstan is struggling with children's literature. Twenty years after independence, most of the book publishers were privatized and they stopped publishing books for children. Only in the past two or three years, the government and many NGOs are working hard to develop the genre. This is a blessing, as the roots of education must develop early in life. Chingiz Aitmatov, expressing high value to a fairytale's importance on educating young generation, noted: "In our civilized century of technology, no one wants to believe in fairytales, but [we are] not about to throw away fairytales as unnessesary thing. If we do this, it will be foolishness from the side of humankind. We cannot refuse our history. Fairytales are the experience of the past, and we should learn to keep our fairytales."

Books can take children to the completely different world and improve their imagination there. By reading children learn a lot about the world, humanity, what is good and what is bad and many other things. Providing this opportunity for children we will form the foundation of a strong person, strong family, and strong country. As we say, many things are done and still many things need to be done. For example, books like 'White Fang' by Jack London, 'The Giver' by Lois Lowry and 'Little House on the Prairie' by Laura Ingalls Wilder are translated into Kyrgyz. Currently, many other works of foreign literature are being translated for our children. I strongly believe that Kyrgyzstan will succeed in this struggle.

The Education System in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, every child has the right to a public education. It is mandatory until the 9th grade. State schools do not charge any money for the education. Children start school at age 6. The general education program has three divisions: grades one through four, grades five through nine, and grades ten and eleven. After graduating the 9th grade, students can leave the school although they also lose the right to study at a university or continue their studies in an upper secondary school or a specialized secondary school. To qualify for the university, one must graduate from 11th grade from within the public program and pass the compulsory test in particular subjects.

The biggest impact of the Soviet system is the language of instruction which continues to be Russian. As the Kyrgyz system separated from Russia, there have been strong political movements to change the school curriculum and to introduce more Kyrgyz culture into the school program. More specifically, there is interest in including Kyrgyz language study and a focus on Kyrgyz history, culture, art, music, and literature. The result of these attitudes shows that the usage of Kyrgyz is gradually increasing. The Ministry of Education organizes competitions, supported by foreign donations, to develop Kyrgyz language. For example, American children's books are being translated into Kyrgyz with the support of American embassy.

There is a significant support from the foreign countries after the independence. America has contributed a lot and is still helping to develop education through the U.S. A.I.D programs and U.S. Information Agency programs. Additionally, many students of urban and rural places are improving their English and worldview with the help of Peace Corps volunteers. Turkish Universities and lyceums are working with a perfect system and method of education also improving the quality of education.

Teaching Methods in Kyrgyz Schools

Teaching humanity to young people always has been very important for Kyrgyz people. *Manas*, the great epic of the Kyrgyz, played a significant role as the best tool to educate young generation. It enriched millions of little children's world when there was no other source of education. With coming of formal education, students started to go to schools, read books, make researches and learn about their history. They have been striving to improve their knowledge in the sphere that they were interested in because education was promising a good future. Most of graduate students were sent to Russia to develop their knowledge.

The methodology must be very neat as education became a source of the life. The more effective the methodology, the education is of greater quality. Most private schools and education centers put a huge emphasis on quality teaching methods. The first reason for this is that the private education market is getting more competitive, and second reason is that their main aim is to prepare global citizens. A global citizen is the person who will be able to speak more than one foreign language and learns about that culture. A good school tries to inform the student about the world efficiently and make him or her ready for intercultural communication. That is why, in Kyrgyz private schools, students have

computer classes and learn English language from the first year of school. This is a new and unique attitude in my country. Compared with local schools, there is not much difference with private schools. The education system and programs are similar. The only advantages of private schools are providing extra lessons after lunchtime and different kind of clubs.

There are special centers where teachers learn new methods and ways of effective teaching. Teacher Centered vs. Student Centered approaches have radically altered teachers. From the Soviet Union, teachers and students got used to the Teacher Centered method. Even though teachers are being taught different kinds of interactive and collaborating methods of teaching, most teachers do not show this in practice. The main reason is that there is no opportunity at many schools and universities. For example, teachers attend special trainings to learn how to use the interactive board but because of the lack of interactive board they cannot use it during the class. Compared with public schools, private ones have much more convenience; computer rooms with new computers, free internet and extra intensive lessons. Compared with local schools, there is not much difference with private schools. The education system and programs are similar. The only advantages of private schools are providing extra lessons after lunchtime and different kind of clubs.

Conclusions

Today, when the government is paying much more attention to education, many things are getting better. A lot of schools and universities have already provided a comfort such as heaters in classrooms during the winter, new computers for IT classes etc. In addition, the guiding to new interactive methods of teaching inspired both teachers and students. Teachers who were educated in USSR period are still facing this challenge. It is difficult for old-generation teachers to change teaching habits of directive teaching that they have been teaching for their whole life. Nevertheless, I believe in our positive results by encouraging our students to take part in the learning process that will create interactive learning where they also will start to feel the responsibility for the class. As Nelson Mandela once said, education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world. We are trying to make a little but meaningful contribution to our country's development. Moreover, I am proud being a part of the society where the number of young teachers is growing and so many young people are eager. And in this long learning, let us keep our eyes always on the stars.

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