

Promoting inclusive practices in Russia

By Dr Phil Stringer

I have been to Russia twice. The first time in the 1980s when I spent four weeks in Moscow studying special education processes and provision. I returned, as a tourist, in October, with my wife and our daughter, travelling independently, and visiting St Petersburg and Moscow.

During our stay in Moscow we met Amy and Michael, friends of Susie Flett, who trained at UCL (DECPsy 08-11 cohort) and until recently worked at Hampshire EPS. Amy and Michael have lived and worked in Moscow for a number of years and quite apart from having a wonderful evening with them in the Dr Zhivago restaurant in the Hotel National (opposite Red Square and where Lenin stayed before he moved into the Kremlin), we heard about Amy's work with a Russian charity, the Center for Curative Pedagogics (CCP). Soon after we got home, Amy contacted us to say that Anna Bitova, the Director of CPP was going to be in London for a few days and would be interested in meeting us, an opportunity we leapt at. We met at Sarah and Alan Philips' house, where Anna was staying. Sarah is a UK based director of a charity, Action for Russia's Children (ARC), which supports CCP.

Our conversation with Anna, a speech and language therapist by background, ranged far and wide. It quickly became clear that there are many areas of mutual interest when it comes to improving the learning experience of children with additional needs although the scale of the task that CCP faces is huge. In 1989, when the organisation was set up, the government viewed most children with special needs and disabilities as 'unteachable'. Many were either placed in a special children's home or kept at home. In both cases children received little stimulation, no education, little interaction and no planning for adult life.

The Center for Curative Pedagogics works with children with a range of needs, and typically the population that EPs work with in the UK, although about 60% of children supported by the CCP show autistic spectrum conditions. Anna's values are values that we share: the right of all children and young people to learn and develop, to live a good life and to be fully accepted in their communities. The Center provides teaching and therapy support, a range of social and educational visits, a summer camp, support for parents, and training and seminars for professionals.

Anna was especially interested in our approach to children with autistic spectrum conditions and to those with social, emotional and mental health needs (since understanding, intervention and provision in Russia for children with such needs is virtually nonexistent). We realised that in working with school staff to promote better learning experiences for children we face similar and familiar difficulties. Anna and other staff from the CPP frequently find themselves attempting to convince headteachers that they can meet the needs of a particular child and that in supporting that child, staff either do have the skills or can acquire them.

As we left Anna, we shared our admiration for what she, CPP and ARC are working to achieve, a huge sense of optimism about the successes they (and as EPs, we) experience, at times against the odds, and recognition of our shared values across quite different social and political contexts.

There is much more about the work of the CPP and ARC that I haven't described and if you are interested in learning more then visit their respective sites:

<http://www.ccp.org.ru/en/> and <http://www.actionarc.org>

Postscript - Moscow – where surreal things do happen

The starting point of the article on promoting inclusive practices in Russia was meeting Amy and Michael in the Hotel National. When we left the hotel at the end of the evening we found an angel outside...

