

E.Y.E. on Mongolia: Early Years Education

Why Mongolia?

For several years I have been encouraged to and considered applying for a Fulbright. I have **eagerly searched** for awards that I felt would match my interests, knowledge and skills and where I might develop a respectful and mutually beneficial relationship with my hosts. This year, I was **delighted** to find that the first specialization listed by the award in Mongolia was early education. This is my passion, and I am assuming it is a priority in Mongolia. In addition, I have a minor in Special Education (also listed in the award description) and have taught courses in Early Childhood Special Education.

And then, while in Finland supervising my students' international teaching practicum, I found that the principal of the elementary school where we were working had just come to Helsinki from four years in Mongolia! After talking extensively with him about Mongolia, the people and culture, and education there, I was not only convinced this would be a great match, but very excited about all the possibilities. He has promised to put me in touch with colleagues in Ulaan Baator should I be selected. I am hoping to spend February through June, 2011 in Mongolia.

Who am I?

I have nearly 40 years of experience in education and child welfare, specifically focused on children from birth through age 11. I entered this field in 1970, convinced that the early years were crucial for laying a strong foundation that leads to competence and confidence in all developmental domains – cognitive, physical, social, and emotional. Research over the past two decades has confirmed my conviction. With a consistent professional goal of working in collaborative relationships for the benefit of all children, I have worked in childcare centers, early education programs (Head Start), public elementary schools, community colleges and large universities, community programs serving children and their families, in research and training programs and as a consultant. I have volunteered in numerous community settings including in several agencies serving children and families in Northern Ireland during "The Troubles." I am currently a tenured, full Professor of Education at Columbia College. I have been in this setting for the past 10 years and plan to end my career here. The college boasts a diverse student body, including students from many countries. Faculty are encouraged to be innovative and creative, and to expand their own horizons as they work with students to stretch theirs.

First and foremost, I am a teacher. It is most important to me to work with learners – whether they are six or sixteen or sixty – in a way that helps them apply the theory, the information, and the research, in real-life situations. In general, my courses are structured so students participate in activities designed to acquaint them with theory, and/or with knowledge about a particular topic or age range or developmental domain. Then, there is a carefully crafted opportunity to interact with children or families in ways that amplify and clarify the theory

Lynne Steyer Noble, Ed.D. Award # 0167

under discussion. Finally, a reflective experience allows for deeper understanding, for the opportunity to evaluate, and to hone the ability to plan for future interactions. I have consistently received excellent ratings from students in my courses both for my teaching style / methods and for the quality of their personal and professional learning outcomes.

In addition, I am a learner. Every experience, whether in a local school, at a professional conference, or in a new land / culture not only affords me the opportunity to add to my own understanding of the world, but also enables me to enhance what I offer my colleagues, my students, my friends and family. I had the opportunity to design and implement a clinical (teaching practicum) program for our undergraduate students in foreign countries and have taken students to Seoul Korea several times and to Helsinki Finland once. These schools have students from 50 – 60 different countries and my students and I have always returned to Columbia College with an appreciation for the culture(s) of those countries, and with the opportunity to incorporate new ideas and understandings in our own work. I was fortunate to be a part of a Fulbright Hays trip to Lithuania, Latvia and Russia. Following my return, I developed several seminars which were presented at Columbia College. I was also part of delegation from South Carolina to China to develop collegial relationships that resulted in having several Chinese professionals come to South Carolina to teach Chinese in our public schools. I regularly use my experiences in these countries in my courses, as I was always eager to visit schools and/or speak with educators during my travels. My experiences in Northern Ireland as a volunteer in peace and reconciliation efforts led to the design and implementation of an Honors Seminar on Civil Unrest: A Case Study in Northern Ireland. This course includes a travel component. . I promote cultural experience, understanding and appreciation to all my students. I encourage their travel, their focus on other cultures, and have had two students decide to teach abroad. One is in Korea, one is in China.

It is always more informative when I can spend an extended time in a new place. I look forward to learning as much as I can about Mongolia and the Mongolian people, culture and practices and then sharing that new knowledge through my teaching and through seminars for both students and faculty and community members at Columbia College when I return. I am aware of the high literacy rate in Mongolia, and would hope to come back with recommendations that I could implement in my community.

What will I do?

I propose to teach a version of my Development and Learning in the Early Years course. This is a very hands-on, research-based course that promotes both intimate understanding of theory and practical application in the classroom. The theoretical background is an eclectic mix of Vygotsky, Piaget, Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner and others. The practical application is based on the principles and guidelines of Developmentally Appropriate Practice – using what is known

about child development and learning, what is known about the child as an individual and what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live. The course focuses on the constants in development, but also on the characteristics that make each child an individual. Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, learning styles theory and an exploration of divergence in learning are examples of the ways in which children learn differently and at different paces. Clearly, there is a wonderful opportunity to see how theory interacts with the social and cultural contexts of children in Mongolia – urban and rural areas.

A second course would focus on integrated curriculum in the early childhood and primary setting. This course will require students to offer explicit examples and course content would need to mirror the content and skill expectations required on the state examinations. Integrated curriculum allows teachers to provide effective and efficient education – by combining content knowledge and skills and the ability to utilize differentiated instruction. Creating a course that incorporates culturally specific content and skills requires teacher candidates to participate in the planning and development of an integrated curriculum. The ability to do this is indicative of expert teachers, and this course will encourage the development of this skill. These two courses would allow me to bring my expertise to Mongolian teacher candidates, but also allow me to integrate new ideas gleaned from learning about Mongolia and Mongolians. These ideas and new understandings would become part of my courses after my return.

In addition, I would hope to work with undergraduate and graduate students to design and implement action research/inquiry projects in classrooms and community settings. I currently supervise approximately 30 such research studies each year. Most are studies carried out by teachers in their classrooms. Some, however, are studies designed with students who carried out the research while in diverse places such as Namibia, Senegal and Northern Ireland.

Teaching teachers to design and carry out active research in their settings prepares them to constantly improve their effectiveness, be innovative and enhance their self-efficacy. This would be of great benefit to the educational community in Mongolia. In addition, there is the opportunity for cross cultural / comparative research in this circumstance. I would hope to develop professional and collaborative relationships that would last beyond my stay in Mongolia.

I would like to work with the Mongolian Education Alliance, Step By Step program. This project is based on the same principles as the National Association for the Education of Young Children of which I am a member. I was the President of the South Carolina affiliate, and continue to work at the national level on review and evaluation activities. Our early childhood teacher education program at Columbia College is accredited by NAEYC and I am a strong believer in their criteria for programs for young children and for teacher candidates. I would also like to be involved in some way with the efforts to provide early childhood education to nomadic and migrant children and their families. I have read about some of the programs and resulting research in this area and feel it would be an outstanding opportunity. This would provide me

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with a new perspective on early education and could translate, perhaps, into work with our migrant populations in South Carolina.

On a very personal note, I am a yarn enthusiast – I knit, crochet, felt, etc. I am most interested in learning about, and trying my hand at, some of the wonderful yarn / felt art that exists in Mongolia.

In summary, I believe that I can bring knowledge and skills to Mongolia that can enhance the education of their future teachers and augment the practice of current teachers and those working with young children and families. I know that I will benefit from this experience both personally and professionally. I will learn a great deal about a part of the world not well-known to most, and will be able to incorporate that new knowledge in my work. Finally, I know that I will develop strong and long-lasting relationships with my hosts, and that those relationships could lead to continued collaboration – comparative research, publications and perhaps, a place for our students to complete an international practicum.