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An Auto-Ethnographic Examination of Adapting to Life and Teaching in Rural Ukraine

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AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION OF ADAPTING TO LIFE AND
TEACHING IN RURAL UKRAINE

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A Capstone Project Submitted

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This autoethnography highlights my lived experience as a Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in rural Ukraine. Over the course of one year, I reflected on my process of becoming a volunteer teacher in Ukraine, and I engaged in participant observation in my professional and personal life. Through secondary data analysis, I sought to learn more about Ukraine's history and culture to better understand the influencing factors of what I was observing. I sought to make sense of the differences in norms and human behavior that I observed between Ukraine and the United States.

The focus of this research is on my experience as an English teacher at a newly consolidated school. School consolidation and teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL or EFL) are both common happenings worldwide. School consolidation remains a controversial process with inconclusive results on the impact to students' academic performance. I will compare my observations of the impact of school consolidation to studies of other consolidations, such as the massive 2013 Chicago Public Schools restructuring. Teaching English as a foreign language is a booming industry that is expected to continue to grow in coming years (British Council 2006). There is debate as to whether native speakers are the best candidates for TEFL. I found it takes much more than a native-knowledge of English to be a successful EFL teacher.

In this autoethnography, I will provide insight to the experience of aid workers in foreign communities. Although common themes emerge in the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers and other foreign aid workers, each individual's experience is distinct based on their personal attributes and work assignment (Clarke 2016; Roston 2014). I found truth in Peace Corps' depiction as, "the toughest job you'll ever love."

I begin by explaining my research methods as a participant observer. I then discuss Ukraine's history and aspects of its current political and economic status, as well as Ukrainian culture. I review my process of becoming a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine. Then, the focus of this research is on teaching English as a foreign language, school consolidation, and my experiences with both.

RESEARCH METHODS

Following a naturalistic research paradigm, I used an inductive approach to qualitative research. Inductive approaches to research allow events to happen more naturally than deductive research (Rubin and Rubin 2012). At the start of my research, I had no hypotheses or guiding theories of what I expected to observe, but I sought to answer the following questions:

- A. What is the process of adapting to a new culture for foreign service workers?
- B. In what ways can foreign service workers ease their transition to most effectively work in a foreign culture?
- C. How is the Ukrainian education system organized and operated?
- D. What is the status of the English language in Ukraine and in the Ukrainian education system?

Over the course of my research, I documented my observations and analyzed secondary data to develop an understanding of my observations. My research includes retroactively documenting my experiences before arriving in Ukraine and during my first six months in Ukraine (September 2016 – March 2017). After living in Ukraine for six months, I started documenting my experiences and observations typically on a weekly

basis. The documentation process concluded in December 2017 after I had lived in Ukraine for fifteen months.

Although I made my research and conclusions as objective as possible, it was impossible to obtain complete objectivity. Reality is perceived by every individual and filtered through their personal lens based on their distinct characteristics and background (Rubin and Rubin 2012). As the researcher, I influenced my observations, analysis and conclusions. My Peace Corps experience is distinct, but there are common themes in my experiences which are relevant to other Peace Corps volunteers and other foreign aid workers.

As a participant observer, I took written field notes about my observations in both my professional and personal daily life experiences. Kawulich (2005) describes participant observation as, “learning to act in such a way as to blend into the community so that its members will act naturally, then removing oneself from the setting or community to immerse oneself in the data to understand what is going on.” My research includes two main foci: my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and my experience as an EFL teacher in a Ukrainian school. My role as a Peace Corps volunteer involved the more personal aspects of my experience. I was an individual navigating a foreign country with no native English speakers in my immediate community. I experienced a new culture with a different language and different gender norms. I adapted to living with a Ukrainian family after years of living independently. My role as an EFL teacher in a Ukrainian school was complex. There were differences between the education systems in Ukraine and the United States, and there were challenges of team teaching with

Ukrainians. My school experienced a consolidation six months prior to my arrival, and six months after my arrival our school received a new director and my main teaching partner was replaced. Both foci, me as a PCV and me as a teacher, are closely intertwined and affected each other.

To supplement my personal observations, I analyzed secondary data including government publications, published journal and newspaper articles, and written materials provided by Peace Corps Ukraine. I focused my secondary data analysis on the following topics: the history of Ukraine, the Soviet Union, school consolidation, education in Ukraine, TEFL and the experiences of aid workers.

My research culminated in an autoethnography capstone project about my experience living and working as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine. The use of participant observations and secondary data analysis helps explain my experiences in a larger context related to Ukrainian culture and life as an aid worker in a foreign community. An autoethnography was most useful for my capstone project due to my language barrier living in a primarily Ukrainian and Russian speaking country.

Reliability, Validity and Generalizability

As an autoethnographer, the reliability, validity and generalizability of my research can be reviewed in an alternate context than other types of qualitative research (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). The reliability of my research is established through my credibility as a researcher and Peace Corps volunteer. The validity of my research is related to its truthfulness. The research is an accurate depiction of my experiences from my point of view. The phenomena I observed were corroborated through discussions I

had with community members over the course of my research. Due to my long-term immersion in the community, I was able to observe the reoccurrence of certain phenomena and to identify how my understanding of certain observations evolved over time. The generalizability of my research is established through its relatability to the reader. Although my Peace Corps story is distinct to me, I believe there are themes in my experience that are relatable for many other Peace Corps volunteers and international workers. For people who have never experienced a foreign culture, I will highlight the challenges and joys of being an American working in a post-Soviet state. My research is autoethnographic and others cannot expect identical experiences.

Ethical Considerations

A major ethical consideration was my level of transparency within my community about the research I conducted. I mentioned to my host family and teaching partners that I was writing a paper regarding education in Ukraine, but I did not provide details about my project. I did not conduct any formal interviews or surveys during my research. My observations were of natural experiences and conversations that occurred in my life. I decided to have a low level of transparency about my research to avoid potential negative repercussions. I was warned by other Peace Corps volunteers that Ukrainians are sometimes suspicious of American volunteers. I noticed how quickly information spread and morphed into falsities in Ukrainian communities. For these reasons, I saw a potential for negative repercussions if I was more transparent within my community about my research.

Limitations

A significant limitation of my research was the language barrier. I completed nearly three months of intensive Ukrainian language study prior to beginning my Peace Corps service and I continued private lessons throughout my service, however, my Ukrainian language skills remained inadequate. This restricted my ability to conduct interviews and focus groups, which I think would have provided valuable insight on local culture and norms. In my community, I could converse in English with other English teachers and a few students. My observations focused on people's behavior and non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, volume and rate of speech.

PEACE CORPS

I first remember learning about Peace Corps when I was fifteen years old. My teacher showed us photos from her friend who was serving in Peace. The volunteer had recently completed a project to install a water well in her village, and I remember how ecstatic the residents looked in the photos. I knew immediately that that was what I wanted to do with my life. When I applied to serve as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I requested to work in Community Develop but I was open to serving in any country. When I received my offer to serve as a Peace Corps Ukraine volunteer and teach English, I was excited, relieved and grateful to be accepted, but less than thrilled about my placement.

In the months leading to our arrival in Ukraine, Peace Corps Ukraine staff provided an abundance of resources related to language learning, teaching, local news and culture to help trainees prepare for service. Before traveling to Ukraine, trainees met

in Washington D.C. for one night and completed one day of training. That was a time for us to complete paperwork, get to know each other and to begin preparing ourselves for what we may experience over the following twenty-seven months in Ukraine. We completed activities designed to help us navigate difficult situations that one might encounter, such as sexism and racism. We were encouraged to try to blend in once in Ukraine so as not to draw unwanted attention to ourselves. Some of the suggestions we received from Peace Corps staff and other volunteers were to avoid speaking loudly in English in public and to smile less. I had to make a conscious effort not to smile at and greet strangers I passed on the street.

I was shocked by the overwhelming number of young white people in our group of seventy-seven trainees. Based on their seemingly young appearance, I assumed many of the people were fresh out of college. During the first days when everyone was getting to know each other, it felt like a competition to be the smartest, most-interesting, most-unique volunteer in the group. People exchanged stories of all the countries they had visited, and discussed which countries they planned to visit during Peace Corps service. I got the feeling that many of them had grown up wealthy, and had chosen to serve in Ukraine due to its convenient location for traveling in Europe. It was very discouraging for me because I selfishly expected everyone to be serving for the same reasons as me – a dedication to human services and to help make the world a better place.

Although discouraging, it is not surprising that most Peace Corps volunteers may be of privileged backgrounds. Volunteering is very much a privilege. The Peace Corps application process involved numerous medical evaluations which were reimbursed up to

a certain amount but had to be paid out-of-pocket initially. Applicants must free their schedules to complete the medical evaluations which may become time consuming for people with health issues that require additional attention. I had no health issues, so my medical examinations were relatively simple, but I had to go twice to have bloodwork processed because my first reading was .01 over the suggested level of potassium. I was fortunate enough to be in graduate school when I applied to Peace Corps, so I had student health insurance and a flexible schedule which made completing the Peace Corps application process possible.

I noticed two types of Peace Corps volunteers- those who needed a lot of information (whether accurate or not) before an experience and those who let things happen more organically. These groups first developed virtually when we were just names on a screen to each other. A Facebook group was organized for trainees to connect with each other and previous volunteers in Ukraine. Some people posted frequently with questions about what to pack and what to expect.

I took a more passive approach to my preparations for Peace Corps. Life is unpredictable, so I try to go into experiences with minimal expectations and preconceived notions. Having worked as an AmeriCorps volunteer for two years, I had an idea of the uncertainty that accompanies working for a government organization. From my graduate studies research about Ukraine, I expected a patriarchal society where one's personal appearance is highly valued and I expected a climate like my home state of Illinois. I also could say about five words in Ukrainian when I arrived in country. I am glad that I had minimal expectations when I arrived in Ukraine because I was impressed by how similar

my life in Ukraine felt to my life in the United States. After only a few months in country, it was clear to me that every volunteer's experience is very different regardless of how similar their living/working situations may look on paper.

After arriving in Ukraine, the trainees, language coordinators and technical coordinators stayed in a hotel for three days and began training. Trainees were split into groups of about five volunteers who they spent three months with training. Training included about three hours of Ukrainian language lessons five days a week with a language coordinator. Trainees learned about teaching methods and culture with a technical coordinator. My group trained at a school where we taught English lessons, offered after-school English clubs and developed a teacher training workshop for English teachers in the region. Throughout the three months of training, Peace Corps staff offered additional trainings to discuss health and safety topics. During the trainings, I was most interested in the Peace Corps volunteer's cycle of vulnerability and adjustment (Appendix B). The diagram depicts the typical periods of high and low emotions that Peace Corps volunteers experience. Other than language training, the diagram prepared me for service more than anything else because I realized I would never get to a point in service where everything would feel comfortable and easy. It prepared me to expect twenty-seven months of mental instability. My emotions over my course of service closely reflected the diagram. The nadir of my service occurred after one year of living in Ukraine. As I returned to teaching after a wonderful summer of camps, I struggled to accept the behavior issues I was witnessing at school. Everyday I stood in front of my classes as students yelled, hit each other and played on their phones wondering what was

my purpose. I became increasingly discouraged and hopeless for about two months. During that time, I think fear of embarrassment in admitting defeat was the only thing that kept me from quitting, but I eventually found my way out of the darkness.

In one small study of fieldworkers in foreign communities, a common theme was the feeling of self-reliance that individuals developed during their work (Wax and Was 1974). For the first year of my Peace Corps service I had the opposite experience. I felt less self-confidence than possibly ever in my adult years. The language barrier made it difficult for me to feel like I was accomplishing anything of significance. Although, it seemed to be part of the Ukrainian culture to view a woman as a child until she is married, coddling from people who were close in age to me made me feel incapable of self-reliance.

Over the course of our service, I continued to see the competitive spirit in PCVs that I noticed during our original meeting. Whereas volunteers originally seemed in competition to be the most interesting, the basis of competition evolved over the course of service. At times, group conversations seemed like a competition of who had it worst at site, who had the worst physical resources, whose partner was least qualified to teach English. As volunteers settled into their communities and roles as PCVs, talk shifted to who had the best projects and who was making the greatest impact in their community. I spoke with other PCVs on nearly a daily basis during my service to check-in, vent of frustrations or share embarrassing cultural mishaps. Speaking with other PCVs was helpful because they understood my experiences better than anyone, but I think we sometimes fueled each other's negativity. Hearing that other PCVs were experiencing the

same problems I saw at my school and in my community made me feel hopeless for the future of Ukraine and in our ability to make any change. Especially when surrounded by other Americans, it became easy for PCVs to act culturally insensitive.

UKRAINE: AN OVERVIEW

Ukraine is a country with rich history, culture and traditions. The history of Ukraine is saturated with turmoil and change and helps explain the modern Ukrainian culture (Makuch et al. 2017). Over time, the land that is now independent Ukraine was controlled by various foreign powers. As control changed hands, national rules such as the official language also changed. In 1922, Ukraine was part of the inaugural founding of the Soviet Union (BBC 2015; Peace Corps 2015). In 1932, Joseph Stalin's forcible collection of grain led to a famine which killed up to 10 million Ukrainians. Five years later, Stalin ordered a purge of intellectuals which resulted in mass executions and deportations. From 1941-1943, German Nazis gained control of the capital city Kyiv and 5 million Ukrainians died fighting to reclaim power. In 1954, the Soviet Union gifted the Crimea Peninsula to Ukraine, but Russian rebels invaded eastern Ukraine and took back control of Crimea in 2014. In 1986, Ukraine suffered from the catastrophic Chernobyl nuclear accident which infected soil and water with radiation. In 1991, Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union.

Politics

Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union before gaining independence in 1991. Ukrainian adults, mid-30's and older, sometimes glorified the Soviet Union and discussed how much better life was under Soviet power. People's reasons for preferring

the Soviet Union to independence ranged from a better economy to better soda and snacks. People reminisced about the free field trips school offered and how many more opportunities were achievable during the Soviet Union. Common complaints I heard about present life were how little money people had and the high cost of goods. Studies have shown that people with little wealth typically favor the communist regime and display a preference for income redistribution due to the low unemployment rates and security it provided (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2014). People with greater wealth tend to be against income redistribution.

Although Ukraine has been an independent country for 25 years, some people, including Russian president Vladimir Putin, do not recognize Ukraine's independence (Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007; Wilson 2014). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had to actively develop a national identity (Janmaat and Piattoeva 2007). The Ukrainian language was declared the national language and was to be used in education and public areas. The national history was to be taught in a way that promoted nationalism and presented Russia as an aggressor state. Within Ukraine, there is a disconnect of the population, "...Ukraine has inherited a set of ethnic, linguistic, religious and regional differences that are more complex than most- many of which divide the Ukrainians amongst themselves as much as they divide them from others," (Wilson 2015: 207). There are nationalist Ukrainians who support a united Ukrainian identity and a portion of Ukrainians who continue to identify with a Russian heritage. Ukraine is large in comparison to other European countries, but its land size is comparable to the state of Texas. Despite such a small geographic territory, the regional differences within Ukraine

are substantial. Eastern Ukraine maintains a strong Russian identity. Western Ukraine has a strong religious and Polish influence. Regions near other boarder countries have influences from their respective neighbor.

In 2013, then President Viktor Yanukovich broke a European Union trade agreement to instead strengthen ties with Russia (Central Intelligence Agency 2016). In response thousands of Ukrainians gathered in the capital city of Kyiv forming the Euromaidan protests. After the Euromaidan civilian protests in favor of the European Union agreement turned deadly, President Yanukovich fled to Russia. Soon after, Russian rebels invaded parts of Eastern Ukraine and reclaimed the Crimea Peninsula. Since 2014, there has been ongoing violence in eastern Ukraine between Ukrainians and Russians causing over 30,000 casualties (Central Intelligence Agency 2016; UN Web TV 2016). Towards the end of 2017, reports of political protests in the capital city increased in regularity and started to spread to other cities throughout the country. At the time of writing, many Ukrainians that I spoke with feared that a second Euromaidan was inevitable.

Economy

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, many formerly Soviet countries experienced extreme economic downfall (Sapsford 2015). Since then, studies show that Ukrainians continue to have a low level of trust in others and a bleak outlook on their future. In a 2014 Gallup survey (Bikus 2016), Ukrainians rated their quality of life at 4 out of 10 on average- a ten-year low (Esipova and Ray 2014). Ukrainians rated their anticipated quality of life in five years at 5.2 out of 10 on average (Bikus 2016). In the

survey, there were geographic factors in people's ratings, as people in the western region rated their quality of life higher than people in central and southern Ukraine- the areas closer to the war with Russia. Most Ukrainians reported feeling dissatisfied with their standard of living and consider Ukraine's economic situation to be poor. Ukraine's current economic challenges can in part be linked to the war with Russia (Morelli 2017). Ukraine's gross domestic product experienced decline in 2014 and 2015 after Russia developed trade sanctions with Ukraine. At the same time, other countries reduced their foreign investment in Ukraine as the war with Russia continued (Morelli 2017; The World Bank 2017).

Culture

When I first arrived in Ukraine I was disappointed by how similar it felt to life in the United States. In Ukraine, I had the same amenities I had in the United States, Ukrainians listen to American music and watch American movies and the food wasn't that dissimilar to what I ate in the United States. Of course, some differences were obvious such as the language, patriarchal gender roles and Ukrainians don't smile as much as Americans. The longer I lived in Ukraine the easier it became to identify deeper cultural differences between Ukraine and the United States.

Hofstede (1983) analyzes country cultures using six categories (power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation and indulgence) to help explain the motivators for people's behavior and values. A Hofstede culture comparison of the United States and Ukraine (see Appendix A) shows inverse scores for the two countries in nearly all six categories. The Hofstede culture scores for the United

States and Ukraine help explain some of the challenges I encountered working in Ukraine.

The way Ukrainians act at work and in the classroom reflects the broader Ukrainian culture. Ukrainians rank high for power distance which explains the high level of respect shown to superiors. Ukrainians often accept what their supervisor says even if the statements are clearly false or not the best option. My Ukrainian teaching partners acted almost scared of our school director; whereas I would disobey directions from the school director if I was convinced that it was not in the best interest of my students. When I wanted to make small changes, such as conducting a lesson outside on a sunny day, my partner became nervous and said I needed to ask the school director for permission.

I am very independent, so team teaching was challenging because I wanted to be in complete control of my lessons. Ukrainians have a very high level of avoidance of uncertainty. That was challenging for me as an outsider trying to make changes in a Ukrainian school. I saw value in reviewing my work and regularly identifying ways to improve. I felt reluctance from my teaching partners to make major changes to their teaching methods and classroom behavior. Ukrainians have been using certain teaching methods for so long that it seemed hard for them to imagine implementing alternative teaching methods. Although Ukrainians want to see improvements in students' performance, the uncertainty of new teaching methods seemed too uncomfortable to adopt.

Although I often felt that people did whatever necessary to get what they wanted or to gain the most benefit of a situation, Ukraine is an overall collectivist society which seemingly reflects the nation's communist history. Families are very close and many single people continue living with their parents well into adulthood. Small towns are especially tight knit communities where news travels fast and interpersonal relationships are key to getting what you need. Even when visiting the home of someone they do not know, it is not uncommon for Ukrainians to knock then immediately open the door. Numerous other volunteers had instances where Ukrainians tried walking into their apartments, and while living with my host family they once found a man standing in our foyer loudly asking if anyone was home.

I typically hated my lack of anonymity in my town, but I never felt unsafe because I knew the entire town had eyes on me. While at home alone, a strange man entered my yard and started walking around waving a stick at our dogs. A neighbor watching from across the street immediately called my host family who were on vacation to check that I was okay. Once when the train schedule randomly changed, I and a family that I did not know missed the train. When we realized our mistake, I started to walk home, but the family immediately called out for me to get in their car and we drove to the next town to catch a bus. And when the weather was bad, random people who recognized me would stop and drive me home.

I struggled with feelings of ethnocentrism during my service in Ukraine. Whether the education system, personal hygiene and health, or human behavior, I continuously found myself judging what I perceived as flaws in Ukrainian systems. I compared what I

was seeing to what I learned in my American education and what I was accustomed to in American systems. I often longed for the United States where strangers would not enter my imaginary bubble of personal space and I could open a bus window on a hot summer day without being chastised for giving everyone a cold. Whenever I found myself comparing the two countries, I tried to analyze the situation from the Ukrainian perspective to better understand the local norms and culture. I reminded myself that every place has its benefits and downfalls, I was simply not adjusted to Ukrainian norms.

Language

During the in-country training provided by Peace Corps, we received one day of Russian language lessons and almost three months of Ukrainian language lessons. As a show of support for Ukraine, Peace Corps Ukraine chose to use only English and Ukrainian language. This caused frustration for many volunteers who were placed in mainly Russian speaking communities. Some volunteers wished that our site placements occurred earlier in training so volunteers could focus on learning Russian if they were to serve in a Russian speaking community. I felt that Peace Corps under emphasized how often Russian is spoken by Ukrainians. In the community where I served, people mostly spoke Surzhyk, a blend of the two languages. It seemed most Ukrainians spoke Surzhyk to some degree, either mixing words from the two languages or using words from one language and grammar from the other language. Each region of Ukraine had their own style of Ukrainian. Ukrainians can typically tell what region someone is from based on their use of specific vocabulary. I was fascinated by the fluidity of the Ukrainian language. In Ukrainian, word order is flexible and inessential words are often dropped

allowing for messages to be communicated in few words. This lack of formality in language is something I encountered in most aspects of life. Everything seemed flexible from adherence to first-come-first-served lines to public transportation drivers alternating designated routes to accommodate passenger or self-interests. Unexpected changes were often met with a shrug of the shoulders and declaration of, “це життя,” – it’s life.

In communications prior to my service in Ukraine, Peace Corps coordinators boasted of our arrival during the Year of English Language in Ukraine. The year 2016 was declared the Year of English Language by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko (President of Ukraine Official Website 2015). The motion followed the Euromaidan protests and Russian invasion in Ukraine, and came at a time when Ukraine was trying to strengthen ties with the European Union. The initiative included a push for English proficiency of Ukrainian government employees, increased emphasis on English lessons in school and new certification processes for teachers of English, reduced barriers for native English speakers to work in Ukraine, and increased English content on television (Oliver 2016; President of Ukraine Official Website 2015). When I learned of the Year of English Language, it sounded like an important initiative being celebrated nation-wide. Peace Corps successfully made me believe that English teachers were desperately needed in Ukraine due to high demand. I expected that people would be excited and eager to learn English and I imagined extravagant events dedicated to the study of English.

I quickly learned that my town’s view on English was much different than I had anticipated. During my first semester of teaching I became discouraged by the overall lack of interest in English that my students displayed. I often pessimistically felt that my

time of service was being wasted on a project that my community did not want. I was envious of EFL teachers in Asian countries where I heard stories of the pressure students faced to learn English, and I watched classroom videos where primary students understood the teacher's English instructions. During my first year teaching I unnecessarily focused on the fact that most of my students did not find value in speaking English. At times, I failed to remember that even if just one student learned something during English lesson it was worth it. I had a handful of students who regularly attended my after-school English Clubs and I had a wonderful group of adults who gathered to practice English every week. I met people in my town, at summer camps and during my travels in Ukraine who placed a very high value on knowing English, but they were always a pleasant anomaly to find. I knew a family that forced their daughter to study English starting at a young age. The girl shared stories of how when she was young her mom made her go to individual English tutoring after-school and on the weekends, and she would cry because it was hard and she wanted to play with friends. It was apparent that she had spent much time studying English because at just fifteen years old she was already one of the most fluent English speakers in my town.

Although some Peace Corps Volunteers worked at schools with a high proficiency and focus on English, my experience of students lacking interest in English was not surprising based on language learning in Ukraine. Education First (2017) scored Ukraine as having a low-level of English proficiency, and ranked Ukraine twenty-fifth out of twenty-seven European countries in English proficiency. Education First's research shows that countries in northern Europe, such as Netherlands, Sweden and

Denmark contain the highest levels of English proficiency. These countries all require English lessons starting at a young age, teach with a communicative approach and have an abundance of English programs on television. Ukraine is making strides to improve the proficiency of English, such as offering more English programs on television and making changes to English requirements in school. However, I think it will take much time for citizens, especially in villages, to place a greater value on English proficiency.

Gender

My research prior to arriving in Ukraine conclusively described Ukraine as a patriarchal society. When I arrived in Ukraine, I quickly noticed the high level of care females devoted to maintaining their physical appearance, but men did not seem as concerned with their own physical appearances. Women seemed to do all the housework, raise the children, maintain the garden, and work for pay. I often felt judged based on my clothing. When I walked into a room, I could see people clearly look me up and down. It bothered me enough that I was ashamed of my scuffed shoes, but I did not care enough to stop wearing shoes that showed visible wear.

Many of the female volunteers spoke of feeling uncomfortable around Ukrainian men. I felt some volunteers were unnecessarily, excessively threatened by the presence of Ukrainian men. Americans typically are more individualistic than Ukrainians, and Americans seem to desire more personal space and less communication with strangers than Ukrainians. I think these differences were sometimes a factor when female volunteers felt threatened by Ukrainian men. In other cases, volunteers found themselves in legitimately threatening situations. They shared stories of being verbally threatened,

stalked, groped by strangers and having men shout at them on the street. I thankfully never had such experiences while living in Ukraine, and I always felt much safer in Ukraine than I did in the United States.

At a Peace Corps conference of volunteers and Ukrainian counterparts, we discussed gender. When asked if there is gender inequality in Ukraine, every American said yes and every Ukrainian said no. I was shocked to hear Ukrainian women say the genders are equal in Ukraine. I struggled with how to feel about the topic. As a foreigner, I do not know if I have a right to feel Ukraine has a gender inequality issue if the citizens do not feel that way. I do not know whether to feel sorry for the women for, in my opinion, not realizing their inequality, or to support the women for feeling equal to men.

The Ukrainian education sector is disproportionately female. When our group of seventy-seven Peace Corps trainees met our teaching partners, one other trainee and I were the only two with a male partner. From talking with other volunteers, it seems that the P.E. teachers and shop teachers are almost always males, but most of the other teachers in a school are female.

During lessons, the disruptive behavior of male students seemed to be excused more often than disruptive behavior of female students. On numerous occasions I saw my partners scold female students for texting or watching videos on their cellphones, while a number of male students were ignored as they sat in the back of the room doing the same. The overall impression I received was that girls were expected to sit nicely and do well in school, whereas “boys will be boys” and getting them to behave and participate in class was a lost cause.

Family Life

Peace Corps volunteers in Ukraine typically live with two host families. The first host family stay is for the three months of training and the second host family stay is for the first six months of living at one's permanent site. When I applied to Peace Corps, we were allowed three preferences of where to serve. I purposely avoided selecting countries with a long host family stay requirement because I prefer to live alone.

After a few days in Ukraine, I was sent to live with my first host family. The other nine volunteers who trained in my town and I went by bus to meet our host families who were gathered waiting at the bus station. During the bus ride, I read and reread the list of survival Ukrainian phrases that I had learned, such as, "where is the toilet?" Through the window of the bus, the host families looked as nervous and excited as I felt. When I stepped off the bus, I was ushered to a small woman in her sixties. Two large men also in their sixties grabbed my luggage and started walking between two cars deciding where to put everything. The woman kept asking me something in Ukrainian that I did not understand, so she grabbed my hand and led me to my language coordinator. My language coordinator translated that she wanted to know where was the rest of my luggage, she did not believe that was all I brought. Because I did not understand the language, and I was so frazzled from the experience, the woman had to practically place me in a seat of a car, and we made the short drive home.

The woman and the taller of the two men lived together in a large apartment, and they were my first host family. The two-story apartment building was split into four units. I remain uncertain of specifics of the living situation. I am unsure if the couple was

married and I believe there was a “hotel” in the unit(s) above us. Every morning I saw groups of men dressed in military fatigues exiting the building, and at night they would gather by the entrance next to my bedroom window drinking alcohol and singing songs until the early morning hours. Sometimes my host mom would come into my room, open the window and yell at the men to be quiet.

When I first arrived in their home, I wanted to integrate, so I put my bags in my bedroom and then went back to the living room and sat on the couch. The woman repeatedly gestured for me to change my clothes, unpack, and rest in my bedroom. Ukrainians typically change into pajamas or comfortable clothes as soon as they get home. I have heard some people say that your outside clothes are dirty, so you should change into your house clothes when at home. I was hesitant to accept this concept, because I thought about how much laundry I would accumulate if I was wearing two outfits every day. I quickly adopted a more Ukrainian approach to laundry and started wearing my clothes numerous times between washes unless the odor was obvious.

Living with my first host family was challenging at times. I was the first female volunteer to live with them after nine male volunteers, so the woman was thrilled to have a “daughter.” I know that she loved me like her own child, but they were a quiet older couple, so I often felt lonely and the mystery foods that I was served made me nervous. They were both retired so the home, food and their lifestyles were modest. I was jealous of other volunteers who lived with younger families and who told stories of taking vodka shots with their host family and going boating together.

My second host family experience was drastically different. Before moving to my permanent site, I visited for a few days. I had been given a piece of paper with information about my host family. It said their names, ages and occupations. Listed was a mother, father and teenage daughter. The paper informed me that the parents were divorced. When I arrived, a woman, man and teenage girl arrived to retrieve me, so I assumed it was the host family. I was debating whether to embrace them, shake hands with them or to not physically touch them, but thankfully the teenage girl initiated a hug. At some point during the short car ride home I realized the woman was our school's director. I vividly remember walking up to our house and the actual host mother stepped outside with wide eyes looking nervous. My host sister told me that her mom had been frantically cooking in preparation for my arrival.

I immediately felt comfortable in my second host home. They laughed and talked to each other. Their love for each other transcended the language barrier. I was fortunate to live with the daughter who was in the tenth grade when I arrived, and she spoke English very well. She gladly took on the role of my translator, something I was thankful to have, but I think it impeded my learning of Ukrainian. My host sister was my best friend at site and it helped to have someone to whom I could vent my frustrations. She was also a key informant during my research. She provided a source of insight to Ukrainian culture, the community and our school. I enjoyed living with my second host family so much that I opted to stay with them eight months longer than required.

Alcohol

Prior to Peace Corps, I was familiar with the stereotype of Ukrainians being vodka-loving people. During my Peace Corps training, I heard other volunteers' host family stories of vodka-fueled shenanigans, but I lived with an older couple that did not drink. The host mother always seemed displeased when I went to the bar with other volunteers. My last night living with them, the host mother came into my bedroom late at night with two shot glasses and a bottle of vodka. My jaw dropped. She put her finger to her lips indicating for me to be quiet so the host father would not hear us. The host mother hid the bottle of alcohol under the table every time she thought she heard her husband in the hallway.

My second host family was more accepting of alcohol, and we always had large water bottles full of homemade wine in the refrigerator. They were younger than my first host family and they had many friends in the community. We would go out in large groups to celebrate holidays and school events. Ukrainians typically drink only after a toast is made which sometimes took so long that my raised arm would grow tired. It can be difficult to get a group of Ukrainians to accept your refusal to drink alcohol. I once refrained from drinking at a celebration with the teachers from my school. I happened to be sitting next to our school director, and he badgered me to take shots of vodka. I became very annoyed and uncomfortable as numerous intoxicated people talked at me loudly in Ukrainian, pressuring me to do something I did not want to do. I felt especially uncomfortable with the school director pressuring me to drink because I had only met him once previously and he was in a position of authority. This was an incident of clear

culture clash. Although their behavior made me uncomfortable and seemed inappropriate to me, I believe my colleagues were trying to make me feel included and wanted me to have fun.

Hearing that my students drank underage was not a surprise for me. What surprised me was how open the students were about drinking alcohol, and how young they started. In response to my weekly inquiry, “what did you do over the weekend?” I had eighth graders regularly reply that they drank a lot. When I asked a class of older teenagers what the legal drinking age is in Ukraine, I received mostly shrugs and murmurs. I think they honestly did not know.

The most confusing aspect of alcohol consumption in Ukraine for me was the double-standard. If a person refrained from drinking, everyone pressured them to drink, but if someone became too intoxicated, then other people gossiped about their behavior and seemed to negatively judge the person. At celebrations, I always felt like I was tiptoeing on a very narrow line of what was an appropriate amount of drinking to seem integrated and what would be considered an inappropriate over-intoxication.

EDUCATION IN UKRAINE

The Ukrainian education system contains three phases: primary education in grades first through fourth, secondary education in grades fifth through eleventh and post-secondary education in college and University. Children typically enter first grade at the age of six and graduate eleventh grade at the age of seventeen. After the ninth grade, students can choose to leave secondary school and attend college for two years before attending University, or end their education entirely. After graduating eleventh grade

most students attend University. University programs typically last four-to-five years. In ninth grade and eleventh grade students take tests which are used to determine how much financial assistance Universities will provide for the student. Ideally, a high score means the student will pay little to no money to attend University. It is common knowledge that the higher education sector in Ukraine is corrupt (Round and Rodgers 2009). Although it seems that regulations have developed in the last decade to reduce the opportunities for corruption, bribes to professors and school staff still occur so students can enroll in certain courses or earn higher scores.

The Ukrainian grading scale is a numerical system with twelve being the highest. In my experience, teachers rarely gave a student below three points on participation or assignments. On occasion, students who did not complete assignments were still awarded four points. Based on what I have been told by numerous Ukrainians, students will progress to the next grade regardless of their academic performance. I was informed that previous generations of students could fail and had to repeat a grade, but that no longer occurs.

The school I worked at was split into two locations, a primary education school and a secondary education school, located about a quarter of a mile apart. At the primary school, children remained in one classroom with the same teacher for most of their classes. At the secondary school, each teacher typically taught one subject and worked in one classroom. The fifth-through-eleventh grade students switched rooms between each class. The class periods were forty minutes long with a ten-to-thirty minute break between classes. There were seven class periods every day, but students sometimes had

less than seven classes in a day. During my time teaching at the school, fifth grade had five or six classes each day, whereas tenth grade had seven lessons every day. The students attended most classes two or three times each week. I was shocked by the large course load students maintained. For example, tenth grade was assigned seventeen courses including English language, Ukrainian language, Ukrainian Literature, Foreign Literature, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Geography, History, Math, and others.

Many Ukrainian students attend private lessons after-school and on the weekends. The lessons may be with the students' teacher, a teacher from a different school, or a community member who is versed in the specific subject. The amount of time students spend in private lessons varies. Some students do not attend private lessons while other students participate in private lessons for numerous school subjects, in addition to the typical seventeen subject course load. Teachers rely on private lessons as supplemental income to their low teaching wages. Some teachers return home after a full-day of lessons and have back-to-back private lessons with students until late in the evening.

I had many students, parents of students, community members, and strangers online contact me for private English lessons. As per Peace Corps rules, volunteers are not allowed to engage in any work for pay, so I redirected inquirers to the times of my English Clubs and office hours. On one occasion, a person of authority requested I provide his child with private lessons. After explaining my restrictions as a Peace Corps volunteer, I suggested the child gather a small group of friends and we could all meet to informally speak in English. As I found common in Ukraine, the man persisted and tried to weasel his way through the situation to get what he wanted. He suggested after a group

meeting, then I would stay, say, ten-to-fifteen minutes later to speak only with his child. If the conversation had gone differently I probably would have tried to be more accommodating, but I tended to shut down when I felt I was being taken advantage of in Ukraine, so I insisted that if he wanted private lessons he had to contact one of the Ukrainian English teachers. After that conversation he still continued trying to find ways to make me tutor his child.

I felt ethically torn about providing extra help for students outside of school. On one hand, I knew I may be taking extra income from my teaching partners who offered private lessons in English for a fee. On the other hand, it made me uncomfortable that students had to pay to receive extra help in school. The community I lived in was not wealthy and I worried that some students may want to improve in English but lacked the financial means to participate in private lessons. I felt that private lessons were perpetuating inequality amongst the students. Students who went to private lessons were either highly self-motivated to learn or had parents who were involved in their academic lives, in both cases the families were financially stable enough to afford private lessons. I believe this is one of the factors that resulted in such broad spectrums of students' English proficiency which made teaching English lessons at school more challenging.

Individual lessons are a common supplement to schooling in many countries around the world (Bray 2007; Hamid, Sussex, and Khan 2009; Huang 2017). It is typical for students to increase their participation in private tutoring as they progress closer to the year of graduation. In Ukraine, as other countries, students mainly engage in private tutoring during their secondary education and increase the frequency of lessons during

eleventh grade. At the end of eleventh grade, Ukrainian students complete final exams and their results typically determine the amount of financial aid students will receive from universities. Studies on private English lessons are inconclusive as to the effectiveness in increasing students' English proficiency, however, students typically view private English lessons as a vital part of their studies (Huang 2017).

As I imagine is common in most countries, there were Ukrainian teachers who truly cared about their students and teachers who openly disliked teaching and who were minimally invested in their work. Teachers received very low wages which could make affording even basic necessities difficult. Ukrainian teachers participate in ongoing education to maintain their teaching credentials. In 2016, my school had trainings twice a month for English teachers from surrounding communities which were led by a local teacher certified through the British Council. Within the first two weeks of working at my school I attended one training for English teachers and I was impressed by how progressive the teachers' views were regarding teaching. They almost unanimously agreed that teachers need to develop interesting lesson plans and to offer a variety of activities in the classroom.

After working regularly with some of those teachers, it seemed they understood the justifications for modern and progressive teaching methods, but they continued to use old teaching methods such as teaching directly from a textbook and requiring students to memorize long passages. Teachers seemed to focus their attention on students who actively participated in the classroom. I had teachers tell me certain students were "not bright" and the teachers told me not to waste time helping those students. Some of the

other teachers recognized that the English textbooks were of low quality and they tried to use additional resources during lessons.

On my first night at site, the school's director informed me that one of my teaching partners was going to try to make me teach at another school in town. The director was very stern in telling me I was not allowed to do this and reminded me that it was per Peace Corps instructions that I only teach at my assigned school. This warning made me very uncomfortable and before even meeting the partner, I had a negative impression. Soon after meeting my partner I learned that she simply wanted me to visit the other school to introduce myself and meet the staff and students.

Competition is intense between Ukrainian schools especially when there is more than one school in a town. It is common for schools to be protective of their resources to maintain an advantage over other schools. At my school, I was one of those resources. I felt like a show pony being paraded for the community to see that our school was so good they even had an American teacher. Being involved in such behavior made me uncomfortable. I wanted to help my entire community, not just the school where I was assigned to work. This became a problem when I decided I wanted to offer an after-school English club once a week at the school next door. I had three other clubs each week at my school, so I saw expanding to other locations as a positive move to integrate in my community. The director of my school forbade me from going to the other school, but I insisted that I could and I would. The director called my Peace Corps manager in what I saw as an inappropriate attempt to get me in trouble. My manager informed me of their interaction, and that she reiterated that I could host after-school activities at the

other school. After that, the school's director still tried to prevent me from hosting activities at the other school.

Team Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Teaching was a pleasant experience during the three months of Peace Corps training. Each week we met with our technical trainer who taught us about teaching in Ukraine. We taught lessons at a school that had received Peace Corps trainees for numerous years, so the teachers and students were accustomed to working with native English speakers. The students at the school where we trained were well behaved, engaged and had a decent level of English proficiency. The teachers were very accommodating; they showed us the textbook topics and allowed us complete freedom to develop the lesson plans. Most trainees team-taught English lessons with other American trainees, but a few trainees experienced team-teaching with a Ukrainian teacher. We typically spent hours developing creative lesson plans and materials that loosely followed the textbook lessons. Our focus was for students to talk and to teach through games to keep students engaged. At the time, I had no idea how ideal the situation was.

When I arrived at my permanent site I faced the reality of team-teaching with Ukrainians. Team teaching was more challenging than I expected. During my first year teaching, I team taught with five different teachers. My partners were all fairly young, ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-30s. This was an anomaly compared to other PCVs who had partners with decades of teaching experience. I felt this was a positive element, perhaps my partners would be more progressive and open to change.

In my first weeks, I was overwhelmed by the differences in teaching style that each of my partners used. I hadn't had much teaching experience up to that point, so it was a lot to process and adapt to. My first partner focused on students speaking English and rarely used the native language in the classroom. That partner understood that the textbooks were low-quality and was open to teaching outside material. That partner naturally dominated the lessons and I struggled to identify my role. My second partner taught straight from the book, but we quickly fell into a comfortable routine of team-teaching. Each lesson was nearly equally taught by each of us alternating who led activities. I felt that we were most effective at team-teaching. My third partner used a mixture of textbook work and games; however, the native language was frequently used. I often became lost during lessons because so much Ukrainian was being spoken that I could not follow. The third partner was open about their dislike of teaching, and it was obvious during lessons. That partner often yelled at students and aggressively ripped papers out of student's hands. It made me very uncomfortable. My second semester teaching I worked with two new English teachers and I again underwent the process of adapting to their individual teaching styles. With all of my partners, team-teaching could have improved through more communication and planning which is something I should have more proactively advocated for.

Students complete end-of-semester testing which includes written and oral tests. The first testing I was present for occurred just two weeks after I arrived at my site. For oral tests, my partners had students stand one at a time and recite a text. The students appeared nervous and uncomfortable. I felt it would be better if students did their

speaking test in a more private setting with the teacher. One third grade student's oral test made me especially uncomfortable. The student stood to speak and it was clear to me that he was nervous from the way he was fidgeting and the look of displeasure on his face. He started speaking and when he made a mistake, his classmates all laughed. My partner started yelling at the boy in Ukrainian, so I am not sure what was said, but the general feeling was that the boy was being reprimanded. After each third-grade student completed their verbal test, my partner asked the other classmates (8-9 year olds) what score the student should receive. I was appalled. During a tenth-grade speaking exam, my partner asked me what score to give after each student spoke. Being used to the American education system where grades are private, it made me uncomfortable to discuss scores in front of the entire class. When handing back tests, my partners would announce each student's name, their score and would sometimes announce what each student did wrong on the test. Typically, my partners would tell the class that they did not do well, but most of my partners would not go over the correct answers or try to reteach the material. I asked one partner why we did not review the correct answers, and that partner shrugged and said, "No, we just move on."

In every grade, there were a few students who did their homework regularly, volunteered to do tasks in class and answered questions consistently. Those students typically read well in English and spoke English at a level that was not perfect but I could understand their message. At the other end of the spectrum were a few students in every class who never did their homework, never volunteered to do tasks in class and who refused to answer questions. Some of those students seemed to understand English at a

similar rate as their classmates and others seemed to know very little English. Most of my students fell in the middle of the spectrum- they did their homework sporadically and had a low level of English language knowledge. It frustrated me that after a year of routinely greeting students with, “Hello! How are you?” many students continued to respond with blank stares until I repeated the question in Ukrainian.

Younger students seemed more willing and eager to participate in classroom and English Club activities. I think part of that reason was age, the younger students were simply more willing to play games and engage in activities, but I also think it related to students’ level of English. In primary school classes (grades 1-4), English lessons are very repetitive and use simple language. Most of the students could follow along with the English lessons, but even at that level, I could see some students were falling far behind their classmates. When students move to the secondary school in fifth grade, suddenly they are expected to be able to conduct full conversations in English using extended sentences. Each year of secondary school (grades 5-11), the English textbook lessons become increasingly difficult, but most students do not increase in English proficiency during that time. In ninth grade, students who were still at a fourth grade English level were expected to engage in discussions about endangered animals and environmental issues. It wasn’t possible for most students to follow along with English lessons, but students would rarely admit if they did not understand something. I do not know if their reluctance to admit confusion was out of fear of being scolded (which teachers did often if a student did not know something rather than reteach the content), out of

embarrassment, or out of lack of interest. The more confused students felt during English lesson, the less likely they were to try to participate.

Having English lessons for two-or-three times a week for forty minutes hindered students' ability to learn English. With such infrequent lessons, we should have spent more time reviewing previous content. During the Soviet Union, the national curriculum consisted of teaching an entire pre-approved textbook during the course of a school year. Although that is no longer the case, many Ukrainian teachers still feel pressured to complete an entire textbook in one school year, so we spent minimal time reviewing. Over the school year, we continued to progress quickly through the textbook, but I saw few students improving in their English proficiency, and it often felt like a waste of everyone's time.

Classroom Culture

I was interested in the ways strictness and passiveness were present in Ukrainian classrooms. The rules of behavior at my school were unclear. The students talked while the teacher and other students were speaking, and "inside voice" seemed to be a foreign concept. Some students would scream for their classmates to listen to the teacher and pound on their desk in an attempt to quiet their classmates. I was always surprised by how quickly students went from talking to screaming at each other, and how nonchalantly they hit each other. At least daily I saw a student smack or punch another student. The other teachers did not seem phased by the physical violence occurring in our school. I heard numerous stories of domestic violence in my town, so I wondered if the children were used to seeing physical violence at home. The students used their phones during

class to play games, take photos, listen to music and even answer phone calls. Students openly cheated on tests when instructed to work alone. When the bell rang at the start of class, students slowly started making their way to the classroom, sometimes from outside the building. When students arrived late to class, some would stop at the door, apologize for being late and wait for the teacher to instruct them to sit. Other students would carelessly enter the class, start talking to classmates and loudly unpack their bags. Students argued with me and my partners and refused our instructions to switch seats or change their behavior. I was always shocked when students argued with my partners as if they were equals. Student behavior annoyed me to no end, but it seemed students were simply mirroring the behavior of their teachers.

During breaks between classes, the teachers congregated in the teachers' lounge and when the bell rang they began winding down conversations, gathering belongings, and slowly heading to class. If the teacher isn't in the classroom ready to begin at the bell, why should students? When the teacher entered the classroom, the students would stand to greet them. Some teachers required students to stand when answering a question. At the primary school, the homeroom teachers would sometimes sit in the back of the room doing paperwork during English lessons. The teachers would shout out the answers they knew and yell at students as I was trying to teach, which I found distracting. The teachers left their cellphone ringers on high and would answer phone calls during class. The teachers used shaming and embarrassment to try to motivate students. When there were numerous students who excelled academically in a grade, the teachers sometimes

fueled competition between the students. The teachers may say, “(the other student) knows the answer, why don’t you?”

I never observed a Ukrainian teacher providing consequences to students for bad behavior aside from yelling at them. Detentions and suspensions did not exist at the school where I worked. Many students did not do their homework but they still passed the courses. Some students slept through entire classes with headphones in their ears and the Ukrainian teachers said nothing. During tests, the students all copied from each other despite repeated instruction to stop cheating. When I told students to stop talking and cheating during tests the students acted offended and explained that they were not cheating, they were “helping their friend.” This is a behavior that I found infuriating, but I suspected it was a lasting behavior from communist culture. Although it often felt like education was not valued in Ukraine, even the students who slept through class seemed at least slightly anxious when they received a low score. One tenth grade student said if they took a year off after eleventh grade before attending University people would think they were stupid which the student implied would be shameful. Maintaining a good appearance and being better than, or just as good as, peers seemed very important to Ukrainians.

Other volunteers and I discussed the general feeling of “survival mode” in Ukraine. Throughout Ukraine’s history they were controlled by various foreign powers and experienced great tragedies. The nation adapted to those changes and persisted through turmoil until gaining independence, but it continues to struggle through national crises such as the war with Russia. The national feeling of survival mode was reflected in

the daily lives of individuals. People had their lives and were trying to get through one day at a time. I never heard talk of “five-year life plans” or financial planning. Students did not have guidance counselors and received minimal college and career planning assistance. Some students’ parents were actively involved in their academics and encouraged their student to perform well. When I asked students if their parents helped them in applying to and selecting a university, some said yes but many students said their parents did not know how to help with such things. When I asked students what careers they wanted or what they wanted to study at university many could not provide an answer. When I inquired about their interests or what they would do if they were rich many responded they would sleep. I was discouraged and saddened by the overall lack of imagination and dreams for a future. Without doing interviews or focus groups it was hard for me to understand why students acted the way they did. One student thought classmates did not participate in school because they wanted to look cool. To me, it seemed that students were behaving in response to a lack of motivation.

As MacLeod (1995) writes, “Given that work determines one’s social class, the perpetuation of class inequality requires that [youth]... go on to jobs that are comparable in status to the occupations of their parents,” (p. 61). My students had spent their short lives watching their parents and other adult relatives living in survival mode. Children pick-up on their parents’ stress and hear the complaints of a bad economy. The participants of my adult English Clubs were of various occupational backgrounds, but during discussions they all agreed that low wages and a lack of employment opportunities

were a serious challenge in our community. I think my students were aware of these issues and accepted that those would be their future struggles.

There is a distinct difference between one's aspirations of what they want versus their expectations of what they will have (MacLeod 1995). In my discussions with students, most seemed to aspire to and expected to attend University after graduation. University was the natural progression for most students, however, thoughts of the future seemed to cease at that stage. Students struggled to articulate a clear plan for their future. Some students aspired to have a career in IT or to be a veterinarian. Many of the female students expected to get married and have children soon after University. Some students knew they did not want to end up living in our town as an adult, but they were unable to identify specific other locations where they wanted to live.

Understanding my students' lack of aspirations and expectations for the future helped me understand their behavior. Most of my students did not expect to leave Ukraine or to have a fancy job in the city. Even though we brainstormed reasons to learn English, my students did not seem to believe that those reasons were applicable to their lives. I sympathized with my students' lack of motivation to learn English because I had similarly low levels of pleasure in learning Ukrainian.

The overall level of English proficiency of my students was low, but rather than encourage and support one another, they laughed at and ridiculed each other's mistakes. Bullying seemed to be a widespread problem in our school, and one student told me that numerous students from our school transferred to the other school in town to distance themselves from unbearable bullying. In addition to the already low internal motivation

to learn English, students seemed reluctant to try during English class out of fear of making a mistake. I think students acted out because of frustration, boredom and to distract from their low-level of English proficiency. There were no formal punishments such as detentions and the students would progress to the next level regardless of scores, so there were no formal motivators to behave or study.

The life situations of students affect and form their habitus, “principles which generate and organize practices and representations,” (Bourdieu 1990: 53). Habitus’ combination of history, expected future and present influences the way people are socialized to behave (Barker 2016). My students found themselves in a unique transition group as the first generation born under post-Soviet independence. They grew up in a modern world with freedoms and access to internet which connected them to the Western world. However, these children were raised by parents who experienced life under the Soviet Union and who continued to struggle to make a comfortable living for their families. That affected not only students’ perceived norms of acceptable behavior but also their expectations for the future.

School Consolidation

In 2013, Chicago Public Schools underwent its largest ever school consolidation and restructuring (Caref, Hains, and Jankov 2014). The publicized \$78 million budget in funding to ease the transition for receiving schools was heavily used on administration fees leaving receiving schools ill prepared to handle the increase in students. The Chicago school consolidations disproportionately affected schools with high minority populations, large special education programs, and low household incomes. Schools received new

electronic equipment such as iPads for students and improved computer labs, but only twenty percent of schools had technology teachers and only thirty-eight percent of schools had librarians. Receiving schools were also inadequately staffed with special education teachers, nurses, and social workers to meet the needs of a larger student body.

One publicized reason for the Chicago consolidations were under-utilization of funds (Caref et al. 2014). With so many school locations, funds were reportedly unnecessarily being spent on maintenance and administrative staff for each school. Ideally, the school consolidation would mean fewer buildings and more funding spent directly on student needs. In reality, the consolidation meant over-crowding. When there were more community schools, open classrooms were used to meet the local needs for things such as school food pantries and free health clinics. After the consolidation, schools did not have enough classrooms or teaching staff resulting in high class sizes and a lack of space for extra-curricular activities. Overall, the Chicago school consolidations were costly with minimal benefits and seemed to cause unnecessary stress and havoc for all involved.

The school where I worked underwent a similar school consolidation process the semester before I arrived. About five other Peace Corps volunteers and I were assigned to teach English at consolidated hub schools. We met with Peace Corps Ukraine staff and they provided an overview of the school consolidation program including the benefits and the potential negative aspects of the program. The hub schools school consolidation project in Ukraine was initiated in March 2016 (Foundation for Support of Reforms in Ukraine). One school in each of the twenty-four oblasts (states) was selected as a pilot

hub school. The project intended to invest additional funding in hub schools for equipment, materials and training. Smaller rural schools near each hub school were consolidated to the hub school location. Former Ukraine Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk described the hub school program to communities as:

You create one anchor school, we supply buses, you repair the roads and you receive the amount of funds as much as ten schools. You raise salaries, you repair classrooms, purchase hardware. We do not take a [cent], leave all the funds at your disposal. Thus, we encourage economically to go through the process of truly successful and high-quality education. (Ukrainian Government 2016).

Among the reasons for consolidating Ukrainian schools included a reduced number of students in rural areas, a desire for higher quality education and the opportunity for more effective spending of funds (Decentralization of Power 2016; Kulture Kontakt Austria; Ukrainian Government 2016). However, even the smallest villages in Ukraine usually have a school and a church and it can be a sense of pride for the community.

Consolidating schools meant smaller communities lost a community asset and the teachers from closed schools may have struggled to find alternative employment. The main funders of the hub school project included the United States Government, Western NIS Enterprise Fund and Microsoft Ukraine (Western NIS Enterprise Fund 2016).

I am not certain why the school I worked at was selected as a hub school and whether they had to apply to be considered. One hub school report indicates that the primary donors of the hub school program participated in the selection of the twenty-four pilot schools (Decentralization of Power 2016). The pilot hub schools went into effect September 2016, prior to my first visit to the school, so I never experienced what the school was like prior to the hub program. My only insight into school life prior to the hub

program came from comments teachers and students made in my presence. I asked my English teaching partners about the hub school program and they did not know the phrase “hub school.” The teachers understood that students from other towns started attending our school and that our school received new electronic equipment such as smart boards and desktop computers. I am not sure to what extent the teachers understood the national school consolidation program or that our school was part of the program. In addition to the new equipment, there were physical indicators of the hub school program in our school such as an USAID sign immediately within the front entrance and USAID stickers on the back of desktop computers.

During my first six months at site, I observed many aspects of our school’s consolidation which may be viewed as flaws in the system. Students who lived in neighboring villages were often late to the first class due to late buses. The buses did not operate in bad weather conditions, which meant students who took the bus to school were absent on snowy and icy days. When I offered activities such as English club after school, on weekends or during the summer, students from neighboring villages could not attend or had to leave early to catch the bus. On numerous occasions my English teaching partners commented on the difficulties of teaching consolidated classes. My partners said that students from neighboring villages did not receive a quality education at their previous schools, so they were not at the same learning level as students from our town. After consolidation, the teachers had larger class sizes with a wider spectrum of student abilities. In contrast, a student told me they always heard that students from villages were not smart, so they were surprised upon first meeting that the village students excelled

during math lesson. When I worked one-on-one with students from the villages I found that many of them had high levels of English knowledge compared to other students, they simply did not participate in class. From what I observed, my teaching partners did not attempt to develop multi-level lessons in the classroom or to bring all the students closer to the same level. It appeared to me that my partners focused on teaching the students who actively participated in English lessons and who demonstrated an adequate level of English speaking ability.

Similar to the Chicago school consolidations, my school did not seem adequately staffed to handle the increase of students. We had one nurse to serve all students first-through-eleventh grade, which could have been feasible based on the size of our school, but the primary school and secondary school were located at least a quarter of a mile apart. Our nurse had to split her time between the two locations. We had a technology teacher to help students use the desktop computers and other electronic devices our school received during the consolidation, but we did not have enough devices for a full class-set. Our computer lab had ten desktop computers, but an average class had twenty students.

The hub school program was new to Ukraine, but school consolidation programs have existed for centuries around the world (Cox and Cox 2010; Barter 2014; Mei, Fang, and Yuanyan 2013). Across all countries, the justification for school consolidation is often a cost-effective increase in quality of education. In theory, school districts will save money by focusing resources on fewer schools and students will receive a better education because the school will have better equipment and the teachers will have more

professional development opportunities. Also commonly witnessed across all school consolidation programs are the negative consequences such as emotional stress on students who must change schools, longer commutes to school, larger class sizes, less individual attention to students, higher dropout rates and weakened community identity (Cox and Cox 2010; Haibo 2013; Young 1994). Although each school consolidation program has distinct results, many studies have found consolidation programs are not as effective as intended at reducing costs and increasing educational attainment (Cox and Cox 2010).

RECOMMENDATIONS

I expected serving as a Peace Corps volunteer to be challenging but it was difficult in ways different than I imagined. I felt conflict between my roles as a PCV, an English teacher and as a foreign aid worker. As a foreign aid worker, I reflected on my community development studies which conclusively highlighted the importance of focusing on community wants and needs. I struggled to find a balance between Peace Corps' focus on me providing my school with new teaching methods and processes, and my personal aversion to forcing my own beliefs on a foreign community. The other English teachers at my school studied English and education at University and had worked for years as English teachers. They also understood the local culture and education system much better than I. I never felt qualified or justified to tell my partners to change their teaching methods to more closely reflect what I was used to in the American education system.

I felt that my community was better suited for a development volunteer, and I remained unconvinced as to Ukraine's need for TEFL PCVs. To receive a TEFL PCV, schools were required to have at least two English teachers and PCVs were required to always partner teach. Clearly PCVs were not filling a need for English teachers. Our role was to bring new ideas to the classroom. This worked well in some schools, but I had little faith in the sustainability of our work. I questioned whether teachers would continue new teaching methods after PCVs finalized service. Ukraine has the resources to thrive. I think there are deep cultural reasons within the nation preventing it from achieving its full potential. I think Community Development, Youth Development and HIV/AIDS volunteer projects are better suited for Ukraine, although those volunteers may say otherwise. In my community, I would have preferred to focus on community development or youth development and done English clubs and teacher trainings as secondary projects.

Peace Corps warns volunteers of the emotional instability they can expect and it held true for me. During my first year living in a foreign country my frequency of experiencing loneliness, frustration and low self-esteem seemed to increase drastically. I experienced loneliness in the United States, but the loneliness of feeling you have no one on your entire continent was a different level of loneliness. I was not only in a new profession, but everyone around me spoke a different language and didn't seem to trust my decisions. In moments where I felt like my community did not support me, I questioned why I gave up my previous life. For anyone thinking of applying to Peace Corps, it is important to imagine the reality of putting your life as you know it on hold for

twenty-seven months. For anyone debating doing long-term foreign aid project, I stress the importance of learning the local language and understanding the local culture. My lack of language skills was a major factor in my experience of loneliness and my struggle to accomplish meaningful work. I had to rely on my partners to translate for me which was inconvenient for everyone, and it caused time delays and misinterpretations. My limited language skills prevented me from developing meaningful relationships with students and mentoring them the way I would have liked. For anyone thinking of teaching English as a foreign language, I recommend learning about the local education culture and views on English language. If learning English is not valued in society, then teaching it as a foreign language may present difficult challenges. I also think EFL teachers should have requirements beyond being a native speaker, such as being educated in linguistics or secondary education. Teaching is not an easy job and it only becomes more difficult when your students speak a different language.

After one year of service, teaching became increasingly natural for me, but I did not develop a passion for teaching English. However, I was surprised by how much I thoroughly enjoyed working with youth. I often felt like my only friends were the first-grade students who ran to me with open arms screaming my name every time they saw me. The generosity and love I received from my students provided moments of clarity on challenging days. I often got frustrated by students' lack of desire to learn English and I questioned my purpose for working at the school. Then a student would offer me their last cookie or would give me their latest art project, and it would remind me that I had a

larger purpose and a greater impact than simply teaching English. My goal became to show my students love and respect, and to make our time at school more fun.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-seven months in a foreign country is challenging, but it also provides for incredible opportunities and experiences. Throughout my service, Peace Corps Ukraine staff were always prepared and eager to support volunteers. I am grateful for the training and assistance I received through Peace Corps Ukraine, but I question whether it is necessary to have TEFL volunteers in Ukraine based on the number of Ukrainian English teachers already in schools.

Ukraine is strongly influenced by its history of control by foreign powers. As a primarily collectivist society, Ukrainians are generous and helpful even with strangers. There is a desire for change which can be seen in political protests around the country. Efforts have been made to reduce corruption, but corrupt behavior seems to be a natural part of the culture.

There are many flaws within the Ukrainian education system that mirror the overall national culture. Although there are many Ukrainian teachers trying to make a difference, for change to happen focus needs to be redirected from obtaining acceptable grades to gaining knowledge and obtaining a quality education.

Teaching English as a foreign language and team teaching was incredibly challenging. I respect and am grateful for my partners, and the other teachers, who choose to be teachers and who spend their careers educating youth. It is important for EFL teachers

to have skills beyond being a native-speaker. Teaching a foreign language involves more than conversing; it requires planning, creativity and endless patience.

In my limited experience, school consolidation was an inconvenience whose disadvantages outweighed benefits. Teachers of the receiving school were burdened with larger class sizes and transfer students faced obstacles in traveling to school and extra-curricular activities. If possible, maintaining community schools is most beneficial to all involved.

Although being a Peace Corps volunteer presented me with unprecedented obstacles, I am grateful for the opportunity and will forever cherish my experiences living in Ukraine.

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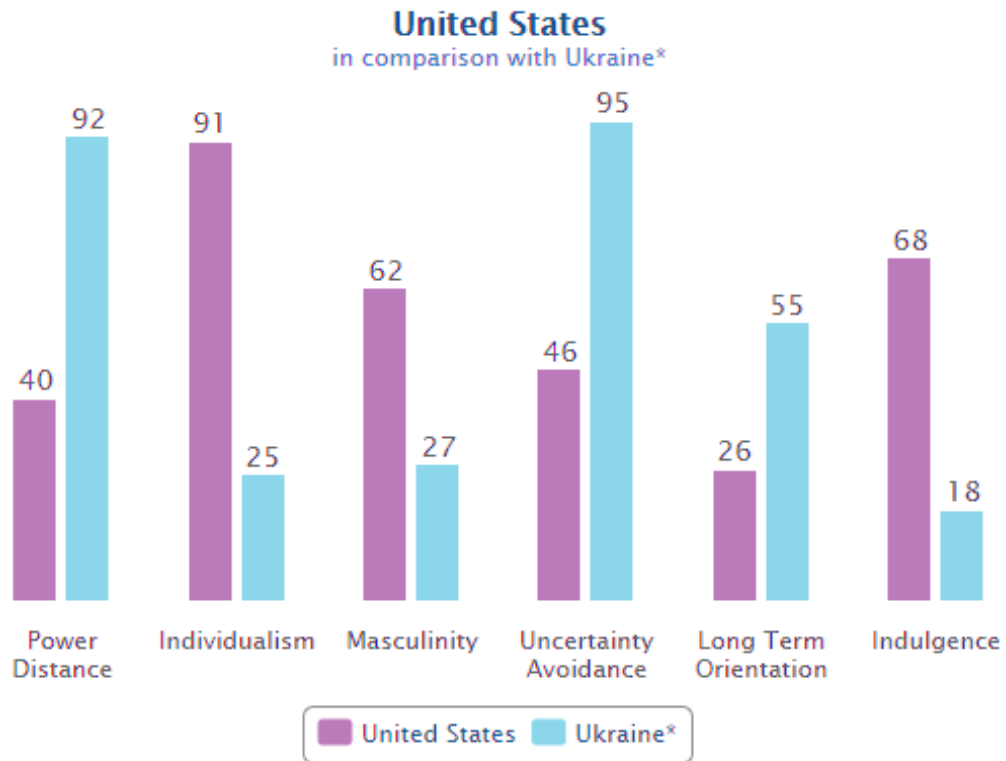
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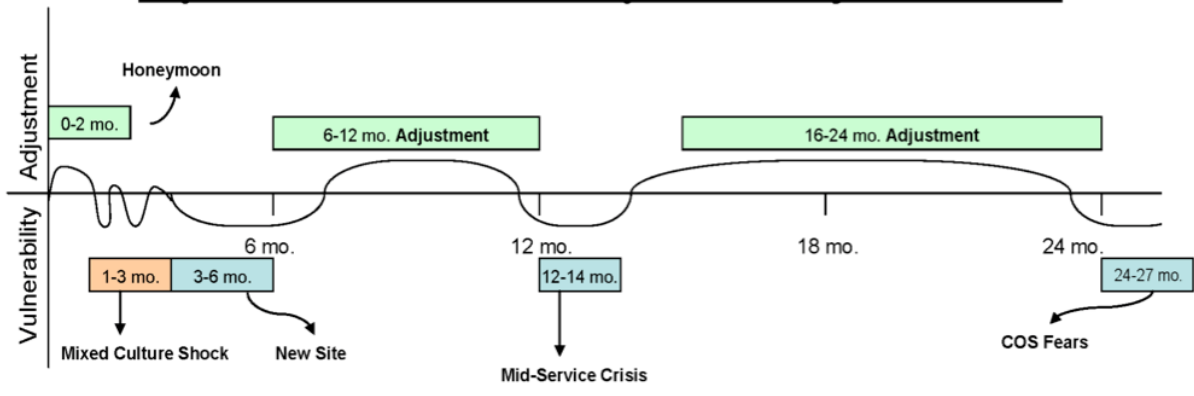
Appendix A: Culture Comparison of the United States and Ukraine¹



¹ Compare Countries [www.https://geert-hofstede.com/](https://geert-hofstede.com/)

Appendix B: The Peace Corps Volunteer's Cycle of Vulnerability and Adjustment

Cycle of Vulnerability and Adjustment*



Departure

Emotional Issues: denial, unreal expectations, loss, confusion, and excitement
Tasks: Ritualize "Good-byes" and "fit everything in"

Arrival (month 1-2)

Emotional Issues: fatigue, reactivity, overwhelmed, frustration, helplessness, anxiety, fearfulness, health, euphoria, regression
Tasks: getting immediate needs met; getting a comfort level in culture; dealing with worry/doubt

Engagement (month 4-8)

Emotional Issues: seeing the world in "black and white" excitement/fear, anger/fascination, depression/joy, work/fun, anticipation/regression, loneliness/new friends, idealization/prejudice
Tasks: cultural connection; dealing with guilt/blame re: privilege and affluence; trying to find a comfort level; work;

Acceptance (month 11-14)

Emotional Issues: fitting in; establishing a routine; sadness; feeling competent; withdrawal; disappointment
Tasks: connections; mastery over aloneness; developing competency; dealing with desperation and feeling different; beginning to feel normal

Return (month 18-21)

Emotional Issues: thinking about going home; denial; unreal expectations; fear/panic; grief/loss; aloneness; anticipation
Tasks: saying "good-bye," making plans for the future; dealing with grief and loss – putting it all together

*Compiled from information from the Office of Special Services