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# *The Story of a Growing Partnership Between the George Fox University College of Education and the Ramallah Friends School*

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The following is a story of the first step in a growing collegial partnership between two Quaker institutions: George Fox University (GFU) and Ramallah Friends School (RFS). George Fox University began functioning in 1891 as Pacific Academy, a preparatory school. Friends settlers who had located in the Willamette Valley community of Newberg, Oregon desired a school for their children (George Fox University-History, 2017). At present, the University has grown into a thriving institution serving undergraduate and graduate students in Newberg and other sites across the state of Oregon. One of the core themes that both faculty and students at George Fox University foster in their work is local and global engagement (George Fox University-Core Themes, 2017).

Ramallah Friends School began functioning in 1869, when it was founded by American Friends to provide Palestinian youth with an education guided by Quaker values (Ramallah Friends School-About Us, 2017). Currently, Ramallah Friends School operates as a flourishing Lower School (Kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade) and Upper School (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) serving Christian and Muslim students together under the auspices of Friends United Meeting. Ramallah Friends School is recognized as one of the leading schools in Palestine and is the only school in the West Bank that is an International Baccalaureate (IB) school, accredited by the IB program at all levels of the school.

## **Background**

In the Spring of 2016, a collaboration between these two institutions began when three GFU professors from the College of Education traveled to RFS to work with the faculty. Joyce Ajouny, director of RFS, asked Scot Headley, Dean of the College of Education at GFU, to develop a professional development program that addressed teacher needs in implementing the IB Middle Years Program (MYP) at the middle school at RFS.

When approached with the request from Ajouny, Scot, who has extensive experience in conducting professional development in foreign countries, sought out faculty with MYP and staff development experience at the middle school level. Professors Keelan LoFaro and Lynette Elwyn, both middle school specialists, were selected for this team. Keelan has experience teaching middle school with the MYP and conducting professional development on using the MYP. Lynette has extensive experience conducting professional development with teachers at middle schools. Scot, Keelan, and Lynette represented a range of experience with international travel, from visits to the Middle East to no previous international travel. Keelan and Lynette planned a professional development program proposal and accompanied Scot to Ramallah at the end of March, 2016. Prior to the trip, Riyam Kafri, RFS Upper School Principal, reviewed and approved a draft program of activities for the professional development.



Figure 1: Picture of the inquiry process hanging in the hallway of RFS.

### Theoretical Framework

Knowing that we were working cross-culturally and that our work would be focused on MYP implementation, our team chose a conceptual framework that was a combination of cultural humility (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013) and the inquiry process (Marshall, Smart, & Horton, 2011).

### Cultural Humility

The guiding cultural humility principles that we hoped to employ in our work were: life-long learning and intentional relationships (Hockett, Samek, & Headley, 2014). In using a cultural humility approach, we hoped to explicitly model that we did not see ourselves as the outside experts on the MYP, coming in to tell the teachers what to do. Instead, we wanted to identify and honor what we could learn from the teachers to make our time together a true collaboration.

We used thank-you notes as a way to communicate the intention of collaboration through life-long learning and intentional relationships. That is, whenever we visited a classroom for an observation, we left a hand-written, detailed, thank you note. The note included descriptions of what we had learned from the teacher and their students during our observation.

### Inquiry Process

The inquiry process as shown in Figure 1 is a critical component of the MYP approach to instruction (IBO-Programs, 2017) and we wanted to offer a model of this approach in action. The inquiry process involves a number of steps, each one leading to another in a cyclic process. One of the main principles of the inquiry process is that it starts from the learners' curiosity and interests as they tune in, shown at the top of the image in Figure 1.

According to Marshall and Smart (2013), effective professional development allows teachers to bring their own context and experiences into the work. Thus, our aim in using an inquiry process to complement the cultural humility approach was to develop and implement professional development that would allow teachers to start from their own experiences and so develop a meaningful and lasting experience. We hoped to avoid a common pitfall of professional development of simply talking about what to change and why but not supporting teachers on how to implement change (Cole, 2004).

### Overview of Professional Development

Following is an outline of how we incorporated both cultural humility and the inquiry process into our planning and instruction of the professional development experience for teachers.

### Understanding the purpose: "Tuning in"

Knowing that our time together with teachers at RFS would be spent within the context of the implementation of MYP, the principal and the MYP coordinator at RFS identified several key objectives for our PD program.

These objectives included:

- a) determining individual and grade level progress toward MYP;
- b) presenting key concepts related to interdisciplinary planning and teaching; and
- c) reviewing assessment concepts and strategies.

As mentioned, we viewed this visit as the first step in a journey of collaboration and not as a one-time opportunity. We also knew that as Westerners immersed in Western media reporting on the Middle East, we were potentially bringing with us preconceived notions about what the needs of the school and teachers might be. Therefore, before we traveled to RFS, we worked slowly and patiently to investigate the needs and progress of the school in relation to each of the objectives previously listed. We also wanted to be careful to try to learn about the needs and progress of the school as expressed not only by the administration, but the teachers themselves.

We planned our first activity to be centered on the teachers' experience and expression of their needs. Additionally, we were attentive to the fact that collegial collaborations take time because trust and relationships must be built (see Barth, 2006). In order to address both the professional and personal side of our work with teachers, we decided to conduct four primary activities during our time at RFS: a) large group meetings, b) grade level team meetings, c) classroom observations, and d) individual meetings.

### **Planning the logistics: "Preparing to find out"**

In preparing for the trip and planning, we wanted to better understand the culture and staff with which we would be working. We communicated via email and Skype with people living in Ramallah. Our main source of information was Elizabeth Todd, who had

served as a professor at GFU and at that time worked to connect Northwest Friends to RFS.

Elizabeth helped us determine a number of important components including the hopes of the director and administration; logistics of the scheduling of day to day work while we were in Ramallah; travel details such as getting to and from the school; and an increased awareness of cultural norms that might differ from our experience or expectations.

### **Starting with teacher curiosities: "Finding out"**

Upon arrival at the school we conducted the first of the four primary activities. In an opening meeting with the full group of about fifty MYP teachers, teachers shared their own needs, successes, frustrations, expectations, and wishes for MYP implementation. Teachers worked in grade level groups within the large group meeting to discuss, share, and record their ideas onto posters. As teachers worked together, we were available to provide direction and assistance, or help and clarify as needed.

Afterward, we collected their papers, which provided important information to guide our next steps (Hockett, 2012). That evening when we met together as a team, we were able to evaluate whether what we had outlined prior to arrival would in fact work for the teachers. The meeting notes revealed that each grade level team had specific needs they wanted addressed.

### **Planning based on curiosities: "Sorting out"**

We worked with the principal and MYP coordinator to create a schedule for our other primary activities—grade level meetings, classroom observations, and individual meetings. The schedule would

ensure that we were able to connect with teachers, affirm their successes, and meet their needs. Prior to leaving for Ramallah, we had gathered a wide variety of resources related to the MYP from teachers in the United States. The diversity of the resources we brought turned out to be essential in our ability to cater to the specific needs of different grade level staff members.

### **Implementing based on curiosities: “Going further”**

Over the next four days we conducted classroom observations, met with teachers one on one, and delivered sessions in grade level team meetings. Overall, we observed and met with about thirty teachers, and participated in four grade level team meetings. Following an observation or individual meeting with a teacher we made sure to leave the handwritten thank-you note. After the grade level team meetings, we sent follow-up emails addressing any remaining questions. In these emails, we also expressed our gratitude for their valuable time to collaborate and learn with us.

### **Coming back to curiosities: “Making connections”**

At the final large group meeting, we gave the MYP teachers a survey soliciting their feedback on the effectiveness of our time together. We received about forty surveys at the end of the session. The survey responses represented views from teachers from all MYP grade levels (6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade) and all departments (English, Arabic, Math, Science, Art, World Religions). We found the following main themes:

- Teachers felt their hard work and commitment to their students had been recognized. Teachers shared how grateful they were for the thank-you notes following the observations.

- Teachers felt that the way we used our time with them showed we had heard their voices. Teachers commented that they felt the time with us had been valuable to them.
- Teachers wanted to see more examples of what we were working on. Teachers mentioned wanting more MYP interdisciplinary unit examples with common assessments.

Based on the survey feedback, we felt that we were on the right track toward accomplishing both our personal and professional goals for this initial trip—to provide professional development that was meaningful to the teachers and develop relationships with the faculty.

### **Synthesizing what was done and moving forward: “Taking action”**

Following the final meeting the principal asked us to share with her our overall observations. These observations came from field notes that we took while we were in classrooms doing observations, while we were in grade level and individual meetings with teachers, as well as during conversations with administration and teachers.

### **Strengths**

We identified a number of strengths at RFS. Below is the list we presented to the principal and board for RFS.

1. Mutual respect in the classroom
2. Student engagement
3. Real life application of content that is moving the MYP implementation along
4. The principal is dedicated, passionate and committed to the school and teaching staff
5. There appears to be strong teaching evident at all grade levels (multiple strategies, good use of time, frequent check for understanding and formative assessment, collaborative learning, and differentiation)
6. The newly implemented personal project program was quite strong, and under able leadership.

## **Areas for Improvement and Recommendations**

Teachers seemed to be working in isolation, particularly on MYP related strategies of instruction. We saw a need for collegiality and more coordinated planning time. Thus we recommended a move from professional development to professional learning, and move from individual learning to community learning (Barth, 2006). We noted that a focused MYP implementation plan that included all staff was needed. We recommended that the plan include stages of implementation to make it more manageable for teachers.

We heard from teachers that communication between grade levels and between teachers and parents was a challenge. We recommended fostering teacher leadership as both instructional leaders and points of communication. We had two overall recommendations as well which were to incentivize innovators, and create pilot programs for instructional change around MYP implementation.

## **Encouragement and Gratitude**

As with any staff development, it is important to identify and recognize strengths within the program and staff. Before our travel to Ramallah we were already aware of several program strengths at RFS, including a unique and very positive approach to meeting the needs of special education students. Additionally, we were impressed with the school's mission and vision. In keeping with Quaker educational priorities, RFS places high value on excellence in education, developing the whole person, helping each person to recognize his or her responsibility to society, and equality. As described on their website, "It is upon this foundation that Friends School's students grow to be strong and sensitive members of

their families, their community, and the world in which they live" (Ramallah Friends School-About Us, 2017). Thus, our expectations for our experience with teachers at RFS were based partly on what was already known to us. We were hopeful that our time at RFS would lead to a deeper understanding of specific organizational strengths, which we intended to recognize before any specific MYP related recommendations would be made. Also, we approached our visit with a sincere interest in learning about elements of successful RFS programs, which could potentially be implemented in our own schools and communities.

Considering all of our experiences, our time at Ramallah Friends School was rich with meaningful conversations and experiences. Teachers, administrators, volunteers, parents, and students willingly shared their perspectives, concerns, and needs with us. Classroom visits were fascinating, whether instruction and activities were conducted in Arabic or English. We found that RFS teachers, although stretched to meet expectations within specific time limitations, were very resourceful and demonstrated unwavering dedication to their students. Students proudly carried remarkable personal projects across campus, chatting enthusiastically about the day's activities. It was an environment characterized by learning applied to real life situations. We are tremendously grateful for the opportunity to experience firsthand such a remarkable learning environment on the other side of the world. Our connections with Ramallah Friends School staff and students have changed the way we view our own schools, and ourselves as educators.

Within this particular context, the theoretical framework of cultural humility and inquiry directly link to our time at RFS. This

experience helped solidify for us that we should never assume what we have heard about a region or a people. It was when we were open to being life-long learners and building intentional relationships (Hockett, Samek, & Headley, 2014) that we began, and only began, to understand people and their lived experiences. Additionally, using the inquiry process (Marshall et al., 2011) allowed us to put preconceived notions aside and ground our collaboration in the teachers' experience rather than just our own. Both of these are lessons that we will take home and share with the teacher candidates we work with in the College of Education at George Fox University.

Reflecting on our visit to Ramallah, we are encouraged and inspired by the unforgettable experience of being there. There is a deep reservoir of mutual benefit in cross-cultural collaboration such as that which exists between Ramallah Friends School and George Fox University School of Education. Faculty and students in both institutions reap the rewards of discoveries made in a context different from their own. We at George Fox University have experienced firsthand how cultural humility and the inquiry process help to establish true collaboration. We are grateful for the opportunity to build upon the collegial relationship with Ramallah Friends School, anticipating future benefits for students in both locations and beyond.

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