

December 2012

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Recommended Citation

Sharma, Sue (2012) "Operation Outreach Promotes Literacy in Afghanistan: An Interview with Captain Bryan Schroder," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol44/iss2/8>

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Operation Outreach Promotes Literacy in Afghanistan

An Interview with Captain Bryan Schroeder*

BY SUE SHARMA

New friendships are blooming as we cultivate our international literacy connections through the work of Captain Bryan Schroeder, a Michigan principal; other deployed U.S. service members; and civilians through “Operation Outreach Afghanistan.” This outreach provides literacy supplies such as books, paper, pencils, and pens to children in Afghanistan. This interview with Captain Schroeder is the first of a two-part series providing Michigan educators with a glimpse at global literacy issues. The follow-up interview in the next edition of the *Michigan Reading Journal* will spotlight teachers in Afghanistan whose priority is supporting the literacy growth of their students, even in the midst of a war zone. Teachers are teachers the world around; their hearts’ desire is to meet the needs of their students the best way they can.

Please join me in welcoming Captain Bryan Schroeder from Camp Phoenix in Kabul, Afghanistan. Bryan is an honorary member of the Michigan Reading Association and one of our international literacy connections, extending the mission of literacy overseas in Afghanistan.

Sharma: Bryan, in addition to serving our country in the reserves, can you share more about your involvement with the organization Project Outreach?

Schroeder: Operation Outreach was started here in March 2010, and has grown in membership ever since it started. Membership in Kabul has grown to about 210 members. The membership is made up of Army, Marines, Air Force, and Navy personnel from the U.S. I became a member and am now the deputy director of the organization. I am responsible for setting up missions with schools and orphanages. For my first 4 months here I served as the logistical chairperson responsible for tracking all supplies that are donated, building school kits, and the collection and inventories of clothing that is donated. Our highest priority is providing supplies for the schools located in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Sharma: Describe an Afghanistan classroom. What does it look like?

Schroeder: Most Afghan classrooms are overcrowded and under-supplied. I visited a couple

of schools that are essentially a tarp held up by sticks with 20 to 25 students sitting in an area that is about 15 by 15 feet. Students sit on the ground (no floors) in the elements, and many days the temperature in the classrooms is over 100 degrees. It is simply amazing that children are able to learn in these conditions, but I haven’t witnessed anything other than students paying attention and trying to get the most out of what the teachers present. It is a common belief among the students that the only way they feel they will have a better future is to become educated.

Sharma: How have the children in Afghanistan responded to this literacy outreach?

Schroeder: The literacy part of our campaign is basically providing children’s books. Every student in Afghanistan receives some sort of English lessons. English is taught in almost all schools. Our actual interaction with kids is very limited because there is a serious security situation, so we can’t stay at a school too long because we put the students at risk. We stay only 30 to 45 minutes. Our number one mission is putting supplies in children’s hand so they can learn literacy. Kids take their education very seriously over here.

Sharma: What is the local language and how do you communicate with local community members?

Schroeder: As much as I provide to them and teach them, they teach me. The primary language is

* MRA President Sue Sharma conducted this interview via Skype. The accompanying photos were provided by Captain Schroeder.



Students in an open-air classroom.

Dari. They also have Pashto. I have an interpreter assigned to me at all times, but I try to pick up as much as I can as I go. The communication breakdown isn't too bad, and it is really nice to see an Afghan student come up to me and try to speak to me in English. You would be amazed at the number of students here in Afghanistan who can speak some level of developing English and can speak English at a very young age.

Sharma: How has working in these schools increased your cultural awareness and sensitivity to literacy needs in Afghanistan?

Schroeder: It has really opened my eyes, especially as a principal back in Michigan. It's really humbling to see the situations and environment these students have to learn in because there is no other option. It really helps me kind of reset what I need to push when I get back with my students, which is taking the opportunities that we are provided because we are fortunate to be in the United States. Take those opportunities and make the best of them. The cultural interaction is incredible. I am learning a whole new culture that I never had experience with. Generally, the Afghanistan people and students

are very kindhearted people. They would give you anything if they had anything. They are very kind, generous, and open to teaching people about their culture if others are open to learning about it.

Sharma: What has contributed to your ability to establish and maintain strong and effective working relationships with the people of Kabul?

Schroeder: I think the number one thing is respecting their culture. Their culture isn't worse than or better than ours. It is simply different from what we know. When you go with an open mind, you start to understand that they have some great things in their culture that we could benefit from, like a strong sense of family. As long as you go with an open mind and you respect their differences, they are very open to sharing their experience and teaching you. It has been extremely rewarding just having that interaction. I have been fortunate enough to have a lot of interactions with Afghans where I've learned a great deal about them. Hopefully, I have contributed a little bit to them as well.

Sharma: How has your professional experience working in a conflict-affected area impacted you?



Capt. Schroeder in a classroom.

Schroeder: I think the biggest thing is kind of like resetting your hard drive instead of our usual getting stuck in a rat race, running around and blowing things out of proportion. When you get to see how fortunate we are, it kind of resets your hard drive and you begin to put what is truly important first. It's just nice to have that grounding effect to go from. It is a really rewarding experience and helps me understand how fortunate we are to be Americans living in the United States.

Sharma: What do you see as some of the issues surrounding the development of educational institutions in transitional countries such as Afghanistan?

Schroeder: Some of the biggest challenges they have are the rate of exponential growth of populations in the major cities where coalition soldiers are based. In the last 8 years in Kabul alone they have seen the population go from 3.5 million to 5.5 million. It's basically because people are fleeing to where they feel safe. Kabul is where people feel safe, but the problem that this brings is that there aren't adequate infrastructure, schools, and supplies to support that kind of influx of people into a community. Currently, the schools run on three separate shifts per day. Each school's shifts only last 3 hours, then that group of students goes home, and a new group of students come for their 3 hours. It's hard for them, with as much as they know that their education is important, and yet that is all that can be provided from their local government. Schools

don't have enough time in the day and they don't have the structures and educated teachers to actually give students the instruction that they yearn for.

Sharma: What kind of recommendations or suggestions can you make that would apply to longer-term improvement in the quality of literacy education in Afghanistan?

Schroeder: I think it starts with the materials they have. Just like us, they are hands-on visual learners. They need these resources in their hands—children's books, paper, and pens, the things we take for granted. If they just have those things it really puts them leaps and bounds ahead of where they are currently.

We will continue as a coalition force to try and set a better situation for the children to grow up in. Because we all know, as they do, that the only way to really help a country move forward is to teach the youth to think for themselves and to be problem-solvers and advance where they are academically.

Sharma: How can educators in Michigan help support this project?

Schroeder: Educators in Michigan can support our efforts by sending children's books and other school supplies that we can distribute to schools in dire need of supplies and books. These supplies are important for Afghanistan to work towards improving their national literacy rates. The current national literacy rates are 43% for men and 12.6% for women. Every school teaches some English to the students, so children's books are always an area of need. It is Project Outreach's mission to provide opportunities to the children of Afghanistan. We provide school supplies, books, blankets, clothes, personal hygiene items, and recycled paper that we compress to make fuel doughnuts. Our first priority is schools. The national educational goal is to increase literacy, and supplies are the best way to assist them reach their goal.

Note on Donations: Readers who would like to donate books, school supplies, and other items, can send them to: Capt. Bryan Schroder, AES 866, Project Outreach, Camp Phoenix, APO Base AE 09320.



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