

Teaching on the World's Frontiers by Marti Smith, 2002

Isabelle's work as a home-school teacher overseas blesses two missionary families and brings another heart and pair of hands to their ministry

Across the courtyard from Trent and Vivian's "main house," five and sometimes six American kids can be found each afternoon, supplementing their local education at Miss Isabelle's one-room schoolhouse. They leave their shoes on the steps and enter the brightly decorated room. Two of the ten-year-old students start a fire in the stove or plug in the electric heater. Isabelle's desk looks like any other teacher's desk, and many of the books she uses could be found in a classroom back home in America, but these kids have never attended an American school. They and their parents are part of a church-planting team in a Central Asian city.

Attending a local school six days a week fills mornings for the older ones, while the two youngest attend the equivalent of kindergarten. Going to the neighborhood school with their neighbors helps them live well-adjusted lives in their host country, while "English school" helps them keep up with kids their own age in their home country and ensures they will be ready for college when the time comes. Popular home-schooling resources from Sonlight Curriculum ease preparation and planning for English school, which requires 15-20 hours a week in the classroom. Isabelle has the rest of her time free for team and ministry activities and keeping up on her own language learning.

More Freedom for Moms

The team goes above and beyond to show appreciation to their teacher, a pleasant single girl in her twenties. If Isabelle and her predecessor Karen had not come, the children's mothers would carry the heavy burden of home schooling. Many moms do. But a constant flow of neighbors, local believers, and other guests make it nearly impossible for the two to give their kids the kind of attention home schooling requires. In addition, discipling the women leaders is a crucial part of their team's ministry as church planters, and requires a commitment to language and culture learning. That takes time and energy.

So, "rather than taking two women out of action," as a teammate explains, "We've gained the services of a third!" Jessica and her husband appreciate Isabelle's contributions to the team as much as the families whose kids she teaches.

Considering the Alternatives

Sending their young children to an international "missionary" school is not an attractive option for the team families. It is just too far away. Besides, living in a world where they primarily identify with other foreigners would take away from the family's commitment to be integrated into the local community. The local schools are adequate but cannot prepare these kids for higher education back home. With today's technology, education by extension might seem another option, but like many parts of the developing world, Central Asia lacks the reliable phone service and high-speed Internet connections to facilitate this.

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"So, when we came, I was expecting to home school them myself," says Katherine, mother of three. "I thought I'd set aside a little classroom area and that it would just take a couple of hours a day. But that's not how life is, here. Unless I lock the door (which sometimes works!) we were just too interrupted. As a mom, I couldn't be there as much for my kids as a teacher can: I have to answer the door and am distracted thinking about putting my laundry out on the line or having to start dinner. That's what the kids said when Karen first came. 'She doesn't get up and answer the door every five minutes! She's there with us!'"

Struggling to find someone to take on this role, the team did not expect more than a one-year commitment – but they wanted that year to provide good exposure to cross-cultural ministry for whoever came. They were also wary of taking someone on who would be a burden to them and not connect with the local community.

"As we got further into the work we realized we needed someone who would have a real vision for our ministry and an interest in and love for the people we are working with. Both Karen and Isabelle have really bonded with the people and lived with local families. That has made things so much smoother!" says Vivian.

Note: Names in this article have been changed for security reasons.

Isabelle's Story

Not only is this model a good one for the kids and their families, it fits the desires of Isabelle's heart as well. Already on the road to the Muslim world, she heard about this opportunity through her church, which supports several members of the team.

"I was trying to get work experience in my field, economics, before going to graduate school; I hoped to end up in the Middle East eventually, maybe ten years from now. In the evenings, I worked with the kids' program of an adult Bible study ministry."

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"I'd only met Karen, the first team teacher, once or twice, but she sent me an e-mail saying she'd been thinking about who would be good to take her place and my name popped in to her mind. So she wrote and asked me to think about coming out."

"For the first week I didn't tell anyone I was considering this. I just thought and prayed about it. But when I told my best friend, her eyes got big: She knew it was perfect for me. I wanted to work with Muslims and with kids. I liked teaching, but not in big groups. I had considered a teaching career but did not like the classroom setting. And I wanted to be in a pioneer area working with unreached peoples. Plus I'd been praying for this particular team for about a year!

The biggest shock factor was the time frame: It was April, and if I came I would be leaving in June or July. During that time I had to get everything settled in America, raise money, and get ready to go. But it happened!"

Immersion in the Community

"When I came, I didn't know what to expect. I'd never been in an overseas mission context. I didn't know what to look for or what questions to ask when I went through the home office. I knew I'd be teaching the five kids, living with a Muslim family, and learning language so I could feel at home here. I didn't have very many expectations beyond that."

Partway through her first year she joined the team as a long-term member, but since the beginning, Isabelle had hoped to stay for at least two years to reap the benefits of immersion. She knew living cross-culturally and diving into the local culture would be draining.

"Every single area of my life was different the first year. I had to integrate into a team, dress and eat so differently and learn a completely new language. But this year immersion is not sapping me. Now it's energizing me and giving me the coping skill to do well and even thrive here. You think you will get wet on the outside and then get out and dry off, but it's more like ink than water; it soaks into you and becomes part of you."

Katherine, who serves as the "principal" of the one-room school, says placing limits on how much time and energy Isabelle gives to teaching has been essential to this immersion process. Planning and grading time are kept to a minimum, and when the kids have time off local school, English school usually closes down as well so Isabelle can have a break. She is also given the freedom to participate in all team events and included in decision-making.

Now in her second year, Isabelle has begun ministry in the local language as well. She meets weekly with a local believer for Bible study and seeks other opportunities to reach out to friends and neighbors.

"The most successful models I've personally observed," writes a Christian worker from another field, "were the tutors who stayed long enough to become part of the ministry themselves. A short-termer who comes to 'help' can actually 'hinder' if they burden the family with dependence – if they don't know the language, can't get along independently, always need consideration and transportation, and depend on the family for all their social needs."

Other church-planters see how well things have worked for Trent and Vivian's team and what a great job this is for Isabelle. They wonder, "Could we do it too? Is there someone out there God could be preparing to come teach our children?" Just as Karen recruited Isabelle, Isabelle is hoping to recruit other new workers to serve in the same way. An emerging mission agency in Latin America now makes recruiting a team teacher a requirement for outgoing teams with kids.

Although having a "team teacher" is only one of many ways to educate missionary children, it is one that has not been applied widely enough. If you think this might be for you, make sure to check out the programs listed at the end of this article. Pray and ask God to open the doors and raise up more people like Isabelle to fill this unique ministry role!

Kathryn and Vivian agree on certain traits that have made Karen and Isabelle happy and effective in the role of team teacher.

A Good Team Teacher Is ...

- **Someone who likes being with kids.** You don't need professional training for this kind of position any more than the moms who home school elsewhere do. However, an aptitude to work well with kids is essential. So are the abilities to work independently and be flexible. "With kids at all levels, I have to switch gears quickly and live with interruptions," explains Isabelle.
 - **Someone who shares the vision.** Isabelle shares her team's commitment to church planting, and her desire to bond with the local culture has helped her put down roots in the city. Though Karen only came for a year, she too connected well with the local culture. "I don't know much about others who have done this kind of thing, but I imagine it would be hard if you lived with westerners in a protected environment," says Isabelle. "If you don't learn the language you will only have foreign friends."
 - **Someone who can do well in an intimate setting.** The atmosphere is also more informal than schools back home, something Isabelle sees as a benefit. "The kids like to give massages: I have all these little fists beating on my back while I read them history!" she says. "Sometimes the kids take turns coming to spend the night at my house. They see me as a friend, not the kind of teacher you would be embarrassed to run into at the grocery store."
- In addition, Isabelle has enjoyed close relationships with the parents, who are also her teammates and friends. The parents, not Isabelle, set the direction and many of the policies of the small school: Isabelle has to honor and respond to their wishes in their children's education.
- **Someone who has a vital relationship with God.** Both Karen and Isabelle have expected difficulties and not been chased home by them. When they hit rough places, they go to God for perspective and work through it, with the help of supportive teammates. Their willingness to lay down their careers and identities, as their teammates have, has been blessed by God.

So, how is this all working out for Isabelle? She says she is grateful for the opportunity to minister to these

kids, spend time with the moms and other teammates, and be part of the church-planting ministry. Read over her shoulder as she writes to her friends in the States ...

Letter Home

Dear friends,

From what I can judge, "Miss Isabelle's English School" is going well. One day as Kayla and I sat together to do her reading lesson, Kayla exclaimed, "Miss Isabelle, you are the greatest teacher in the whole world!"

Then she paused with a thoughtful look on her face. "Well," she added, "I guess God is the greatest teacher, because no one is greater than God ... okay, and then Jesus would have to be after him, but after that ... well, then maybe Paul, the disciples ..." I quickly stopped her, not wanting to see how far down the list I'd be!

A few weeks ago I rounded up several of my students to go to the library to work on research papers. Ian ran ahead of us to flag down a taxi, but although he waved frantically, none of the drivers believed a young boy could have enough money to warrant even slowing down. Finally I stood behind him where he couldn't see me. Subtly I, too, gestured. The next taxi pulled over, and Ian ran towards it – thrilled that he finally got one!

Lately as things have been developing in life here, I too feel that God has been bringing opportunities I could have never secured for myself. Two girls from a nearby village are staying with me part-time. I wasn't sure how the situation would turn out, knowing Hope was a believer and Sarah was not. Then, Tuesday, Sarah received Christ through another local believer! She continues to hunger for Christ and his Word. One of the things that is so unique and attractive about this work is that you get to see people read the word of God for the first time ... to encounter Jesus Christ having never heard about him.

It's so hard to believe almost two years have passed since I came! I go back to America for a break this summer. I look forward to catching up with you and sharing Mexican food and iced mochas! Lately I've felt my mind getting tired with so much to do and so many people inviting me to visit, etc. Yet I do know that God will provide. It is obvious that he has created me to do exactly what I'm doing right now.

Fully given, Isabelle Green

Is This Model for You? Making Connections:

Currently the best way for teachers to find teams – or teams to find teachers – is through personal relationships, for example through the local church. No clearinghouse or international organization exists to connect potential teachers with missionary families. There are, however, several helpful resources.

Wycliffe Bible Translators sends out teachers to work with their home-schooling families in a variety of ways: in small “one-room schoolhouse” settings, living with a family and tutoring their children, itinerating among several families to teach for shorter periods of time, or consulting out of a resource center. Some positions require trained, experienced teachers; others can use non-credentialed volunteers who meet other criteria.

Frontiers has program that places nannies and home-schooling assistants with Frontiers teams for a summer or longer. When asked recently Frontiers had 30 openings and only ten candidates! Other agencies and their teams may have similar openings or interest.

Parents charting or changing their course should be aware of SHARE International, which provides resources, support, and coaching in making decisions about their children’s education. SHARE focuses on serving teams and families working in Europe and the former Soviet Union and has connections beyond the region.

Cooperative and international schools in cities around the world are always on the lookout for teachers and administrators. Reach many of these schools through the Association of Christian Schools International.

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