



The Professional Learning Community Building and Collaborative Work in USA Elementary Schools

Nell Lin, Guang-Fu Elementary School

It has been such a privilege to have the chance to visit USA public and private elementary schools! With this rare opportunity, we could enter the campus and the classrooms, observing the teaching, having discussion and exchanging ideas with USA teachers and administrators! I am deeply grateful to New Taipei City Educational Bureau for continuing this precious training program and the team leaders- Principal Chen and Director Lee for all their considerate arrangements. Without their wisdom, effort, guidance and help, I would never have this wonderful trip!

Being the Chief of Bilingual Teaching and conducting Bilingual Experimental Curriculum program in my school, I am also assigned to be responsible for the English Education. Although I am committed to my job and find it interesting, I am still confronted with some challenges.

Since One of New Taipei City English Wonderlands set in our Campus, we are very lucky to have twelve native speaking teachers from wonderland who teach 4 classes every two weeks at our school. Besides, we are part of Bilingual Experimental Curriculum program so we have two native speaking teachers teaching regularly in our school. We arrange all the native speaking teachers to co-teach with Taiwanese teachers in case they leave unexpectedly. Usually, they work well with each other but sometimes they do not. I would really love to learn how to bring these two groups of teachers together and help them become one team gradually and I would love to learn how to work with them to produce and practice better English curriculum suitable for our students, bring out the best achievement of our students.

Before going on this trip, I kept these two issues (you may call them-“desires”) with me and after this trip I really learned plenty of insights pointing out the future direction. My learning could be summed up with two concepts- Professional Learning Community building and collaborative work. Now, let me share my wonder trip and all my learning with you. Thank you for your reading!

The First School's Meeting Room

On October 5th, we visited the first elementary school- Centreville Elementary School in Washington, D. C.. When I stepped into the conference room, I could not help to whisper to myself- “It is brilliant!” They displayed the vision of the school and the detailed description about a graduate and all kinds of discussion rules in the room, which help the meetings move in the right direction and go in the right way.

Here come some pictures taken in the conference room, giving you an idea about the settings.

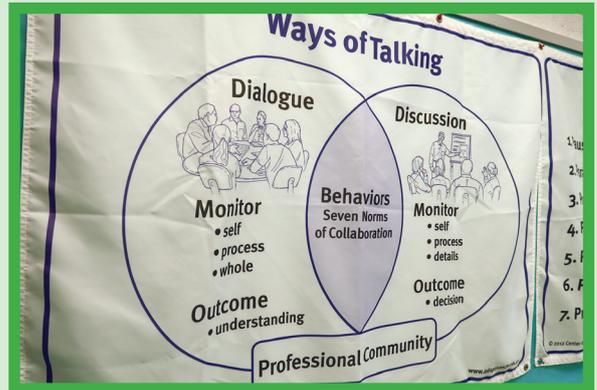


Who are we?
 What do we do?
 Why are we doing things this way?

Meeting Standards

1. One process at a time
2. One topic at a time
3. Balance participation
4. Understand and agree on meeting roles
5. Engage cognitive conflict

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The Seven Norms of Collaborative Work

1. Pausing
2. Paraphrasing
3. Posing questions
4. Putting ideas on the table
5. Providing data
6. Paying attention to self and others
7. Presuming positive intentions

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Group-Member Capabilities

1. To know one's intentions and choose congruent behaviors
2. To set aside unproductive patterns of listening, responding and inquiring
3. To know when to self-assert and when to integrate
4. To know and support the group's purposes, topics, processes and development

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PORTRAIT OF A GRADUATE

GLOBAL CITIZEN

COLLABORATOR

CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKER

GOAL-DIRECTED AND RESILIENT INDIVIDUAL

COMMUNICATOR

FC PS FAIRFAX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Global Citizen 

- Acknowledges and understands diverse perspectives and cultures when considering local, national and world issues
- Contributes to solutions that benefit the broader community
- Communicates effectively in multiple languages to make meaningful connections
- Promotes environmental stewardship

What might a *global citizen* look like for an EL at the elementary level ?

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior experience living abroad; may have observed various solutions to environmental problems being faced • Home culture is different than school culture, already learning to adapt and go between "two worlds" • Makes meaningful connections in more than one language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning the school culture • Learning the host country's culture • Understanding community problems

How do we bring English learners cultures into the classroom to support a global perspective?
Think about instructional strategies, advocacy, mentoring, resources, etc. 

Collaborator 

- Respects divergent thinking to engage others in thoughtful discussion
- Demonstrates the ability to work interdependently within a group to promote learning, increase productivity, and achieve common goals
- Analyzes and constructs arguments and positions to ensure examination of a full range of viewpoints
- Seeks and uses feedback from others to adapt ideas and persist in accomplishing tasks

What might a *collaborator* look like for an EL at the elementary level ?

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home culture may place high value on working together • High focus on relationship building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having the "right" English to participate in a conversation focused on academic topics

How can we support meaningful collaboration inclusive of ELs in our classrooms?
Think about instructional strategies, advocacy, mentoring, resources, etc. 

Creative & Critical Thinker 

- Engages in problem solving, inquiry, and design of innovative solutions to overcome obstacles to improve outcomes
- Uses information in novel and creative ways to strengthen comprehension and deepen awareness
- Demonstrates divergent and ingenious thought to enhance the design/build process
- Express thought, ideas, and emotions meaningfully through the arts
- Evaluates ideas and information sources for validity, relevance, and impact
- Reasons and through weighs evidence to reach conclusions

What might a *creative and critical thinker* look like for an EL at the elementary level ?

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to express ideas, thoughts, and emotions through art, music, movement (non-linguistic representation) • Uses information in novel and creative ways to strengthen comprehension and deepen awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expression of ideas, thoughts, and emotions may be difficult due to stage of English language development

How do we support English learners engagement in critical and creative thinking?
Think about instructional strategies, advocacy, mentoring, resources, etc. 

Communicator 

- Applies effective reading skills to acquire knowledge and broaden perspectives
- Employs active listening strategies to advance understanding
- Speaks in a purposeful manner to inform, influence, motivate, or entertain listeners
- Incorporates effective writing skills for various purposes and audiences to convey understanding and concepts
- Uses technological skills and contemporary digital tools to explore and exchange ideas

What might a *communicator* look like for an EL at the elementary level ?

Strengths	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of two or more languages • Participate linguistically in a variety of socio-cultural contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idioms and other culturally specific expressions • More receptive language than expressive • Acquiring vocabulary

How do we provide opportunities for English learners to strengthen their communication? (reading, writing, speaking and listening)
Think about instructional strategies, advocacy, mentoring, resources, etc. 

Principal Young Sharing about Building Professional Learning Communities in his School

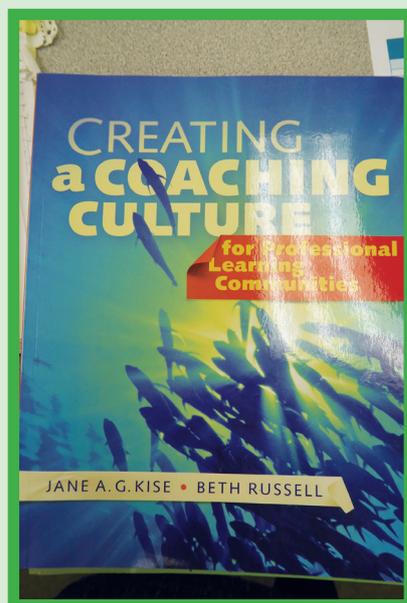
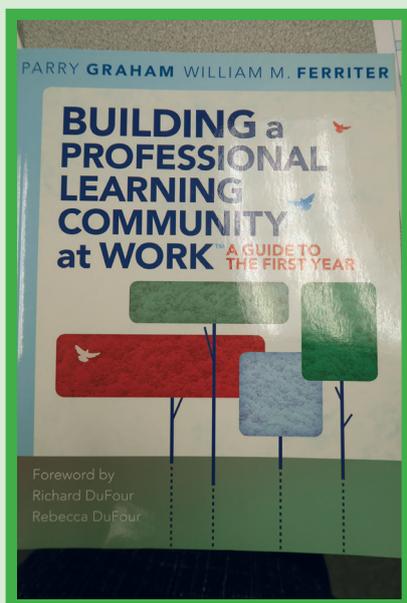
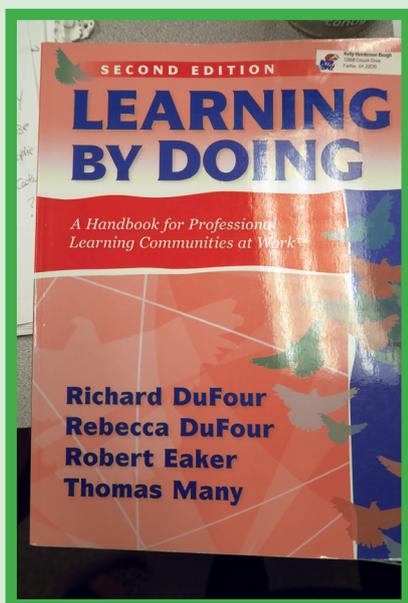
When I read the posters on the wall, two words caught my attention- “collaborative” and “collaborator”. The reason why I pay attention to the word is because I read books about “Learning Community” written by Professor Zuo-Teng-Xue and joined the related workshop in these two years. In the book- “Learning Community” and related workshops, I notice that the writer and the lecturers use the word- “collaboration” to demonstrate their major idea-

the teachers need to work collaboratively, prepare the lesson and form teaching community while the students need to learn collaboratively and form learning community.

After finishing the class observation in the morning of that day, we were having a meeting with the directors and Principal. I tried to ask about the topic-collaborative teaching because I thought if they put it on the wall of conference room, it should be important for them. Once the Principal Young heard the word- “collaboration”, he responded right away- “It’s hard!” and then he talked about his own implementing experience. He said several years ago, he noticed that people would not work with each other naturally in education, at least in the US. Anyway, here came a turning point. He attended a conference and met Doctor Richard Dufour and Rebecca Dufour, who were building profession learning community in schools successfully and benefiting students’ learning hugely. He said he asked Doctor Dufour, “How long it (building professional learning community) takes you?” and he answered, “Eight years.”

Although realizing it is hard and takes a long time, Principal Young decided to take the action- building the professional learning community. He began slowly by showing the teachers the videos, reading books and articles, discussing this. Also, he was looking for a core team of people who believe in it as well and he was part of this team. He said never doubt a small group can change the world. However, he talked about sometimes the teachers would pretend that they collaborate but they never share the best stuff. Anyway, they have already worked on it for five years and it is worthy because when all the teachers works together, the students receive high quality education. Later, he recommended several books about profession learning community (PLC) and gave books to us generously.

(Writer’s Note: Principal Chen shared some information about learning community with me during the trip. He talked about that actually Professor Zuo-Teng-Xue went to USA for education observing, gaining the idea of collaboration and bringing it back to Japan, now to Taiwan. That is the reason why I heard and read the words- “collaboration” so many times in USA education fields since it is the original place to develop and cultivate collaborative teaching and learning.)



The Very Basic Ideas about PLC (Professional Learning Community)

In this paragraph, I am going to share some inspiring ideas about PLC I found on the internet. I googled the key word- “PLC, Dufour” and found many clips. I listened through clips as many as I could and tried my best to type some paragraphs down because the contents and questions are really fascinating to me. You could also find the paragraphs are presented in first person because I excerpted the original speech without rewriting so you could have the really original ideas from the lecturers. (Writer’s Note: I found that there are subtitles for each clip while I was almost finishing the listening and typing! It was too late for me to find it but I am pretty sure it is good news for you! By the way, the subtitles sometime are not 100% accurate so trust your ears!)

• Foundational Concepts and Practices (By Richard Dufour and Rebecca Dufour)

▶ The Historical Review

Think back of the original schools that were created in the United States, what were those schools? It was that one teacher responsible for the education of those students. As we grow a bit, we couldn’t get all the kids in one room school anymore, we begin building bigger schools and we make those schools up of one room school houses where each classroom, in a fact, function as that isolated teacher, still work in a one room school house...

▶ Why PLC (Importance of PLC)

- ✓ there have never been a greater consensus about what it’s going to require of educators in order to improve students learning in all of their schools, virtually all of the leading educational researches in North America and all of our professional organizations have agreed that our best hope for improving school is to focus on developing the capacity of the people within the schools.
- ✓ It just been an international study.....when they (the researchers) look at the highest performance school system in all of the world and they said that one thing that those systems had in common was understanding that the system can only be as good as the people within it. So in those high performing system, there was a conscious effort made to develop the capacity of those people.
- ✓ To understand that the only way we are going to improve school is by improving the quality of the instructions the students receive every single day through the collective effort of their teachers and school leaders.

▶ What is PLC

- ✓ It is an ongoing process. It is a never ending journey of continuing some improvement. It becomes the way we do things.....
- ✓ Collectively, we’re exploring new concepts, new ideas, we are building and share knowledge on what we know today to be best practice in term of education and

then we are testing out that learning and that action research at our own setting to see whether or not that concept we study or that practice we all agree to implement, does it work? Does it work for us, for our kids?

- PLC Keynote (By Rebecca Dufour)

- ▶ The very first and most important again of the big idea is we have to embrace learning as our fundamental purpose so we make a shift away from our traditional focus on teaching to a focus on learning.....
- ▶ Teaching without learning is not teaching at all, it's just presenting, so is our focus on teaching or is our focus on learning in the classrooms.....
- ▶learning is the fundamental purpose, then the conversations within our school will be very specific and they will shift away from that traditional focus of the teachers sitting in the classroom, looking at the lesson planning document, trying to decide, what am I going to teach, how will I teach it, how much time will I spend, what material will I use to teach it, that conversation shift away from individual teacher grappling with it to a team of teachers, who teach the same course, teach the same content, who share students across a great levels.
- ▶they're working together and they're delving not into the questions of teaching but rather into the questions of learning.
- ▶ ...questions are like.....
 - ✓ What is it we want our students to know and be able to do?
 - ✓ What is the very specific skill and concept and dispositions that the every student must require in order to be successful, not only this year, but when we send them up to the next year?
 - ✓ What do we want them to learn and how will we know they have learned?
 - ✓ How will we work together to frequently monitor each and every student's attainment of those central skills?
 - ✓ What if I taught it the best way I know and some kids still didn't learn it, what are we going to do collectively and collaboratively to give those students more time and more support?
 - ✓ What about the kids that already know it? Are we extending and enriching their learning to help them move to the next level as well?

Those are the questions that drive the work of members of professional learning community.

- The essential elements of PLCs—clarity of purpose, precision in use of concepts and language, learning through doing as part of teachers’ daily work, interdependent action through teamwork, and a results orientation that focus on the learning of every student.
- Members of PLCs are action oriented: they move quickly to turn aspirations into actions and visions into reality.

The Training Session about Collaboration in Park Avenue Elementary School

When we went on our journey to New Jersey, we were very lucky to join the Leader Teacher Workshop in Park Avenue Elementary School. One of the sessions was about collaboration and the lecturers are Professor Suzanne Carbonaro and Thomas Chiola from Rider University. They talked about many important concepts about collaboration. Here are five essential lessons for collaboration:

- Letg-o my ego (The first and the hardest ^-^)
- Practice does not mean perfect/ Practice makes perfect
- Share and share alike
- Holding tight is very safe and very small
- Team work dose not equal collaboration

They also shared an inspiring and touching video about this topic with us. If you are interested in it, here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmQVNE-MbKI> (The power of collaboration: Dr. Shelle VanEtten de Sánchez at TEDxABQWomen).

They also emphasized the concept of collaborative inquiry. The cycle of inquiry is:

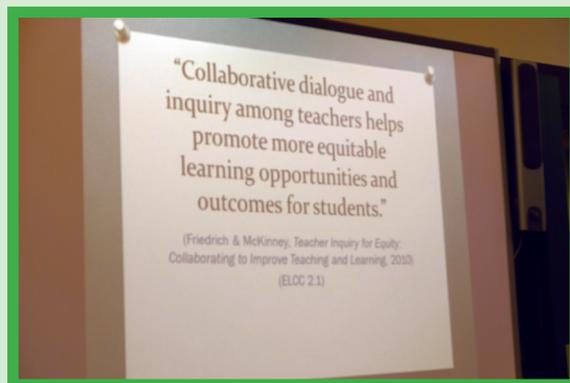
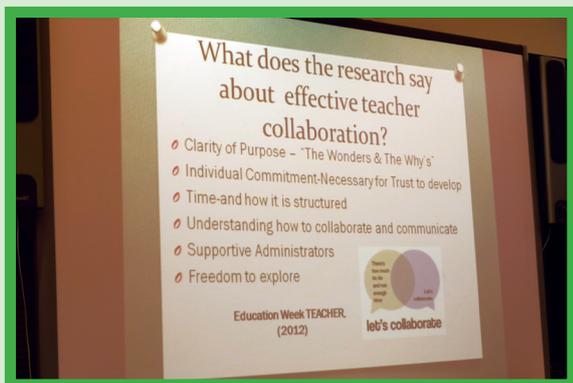
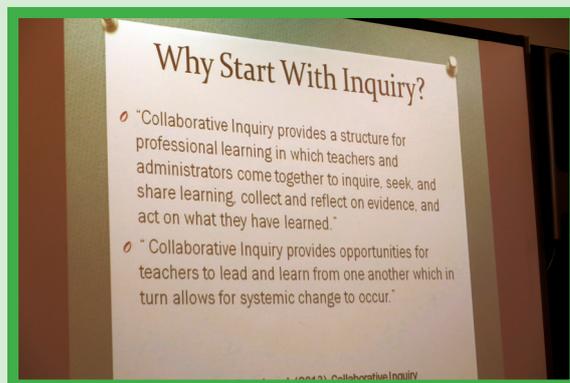
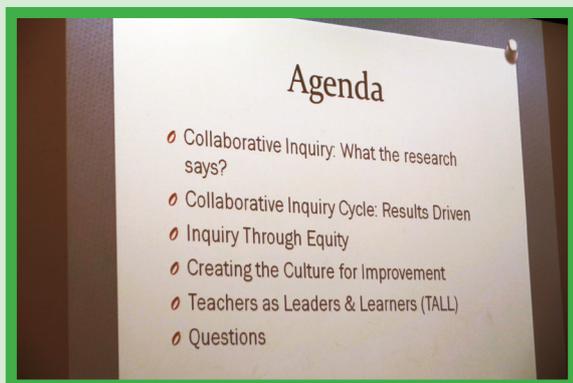
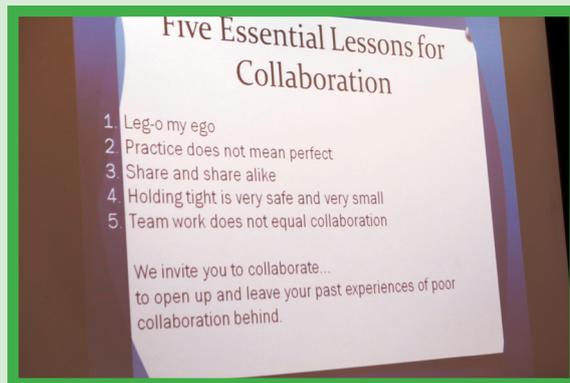
- Essential Questions: If we ask the right questions
- Information: ...And collect and analyze data to help us answer those questions
- Knowledge: ...And use current research and shared experience to make meaning of those data
- Action: ...And apply that meaning to improve systems, programs, and classroom instruction
- Results: ...Then we will see increased student learning and improved student achievement
- Essential questions.....

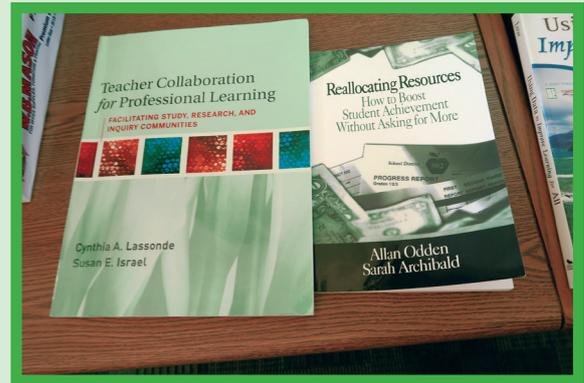
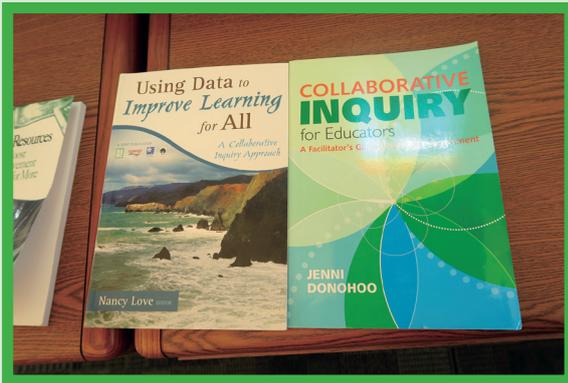
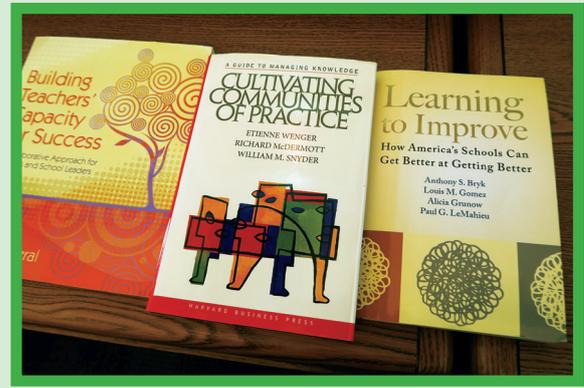
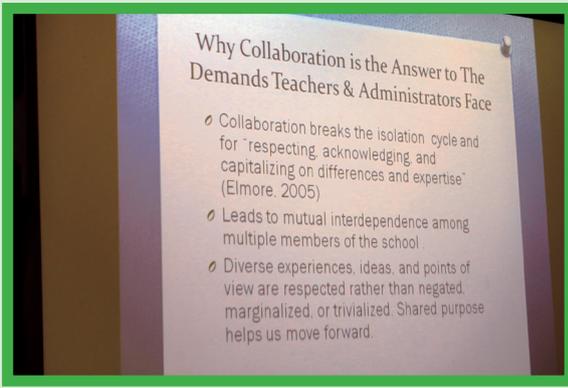
Next, they give us five elements of effective teacher collaboration:

- Clarity of Purpose – “the wonders and the why’s”
- Individual commitment- Necessary for trust to develop
- Time- and how it is structured
- Understanding how to collaborate and communicate
- Supportive Administrators
- Freedom to explore

For the lecturers, collaboration is as innovation and Suzanne also talked about the level of the preparation of the principal effects the result of school collaboration and the students' achievement, which is her latest research topic.

Below is the picture of our group member, Connie, who was sharing her teaching ideas with the USA teachers in the workshop and the rest pictures are excerpted PPT slides in the session and the related books Suzanne and Thomas recommended.





My Interview with the Administrators and the Teachers and Observation of the Environment around Collaboration

Because I had the inquiry in mind, once I had time to speak to the administrators and teachers, I would ask how they collaborate and cooperate in planning lesson or doing other things. From everyone's response, the idea of collaboration seemed very natural to them and it is the way they work.

- In Centreville Elementary School in Washington, D.C.
Through talking to the homeroom teachers and the ESOL (English for Speaker of Other Language) program teachers, I could feel the strong bonds between them or they could not talk about student learning that way. The ESOL program teachers teaches ESOL students form different classes. They said they need to build tight relationship with homeroom teachers so they could understand and diagnose the learning of the ESOL students accurately for providing the students with the most suitable lessons.
- In Adelphia Elementary School in New Jersey
From the decoration of two second grad classrooms, I found the Math teaching posters presenting the same points and ideas and being put on the same spots- just in front of the teachers' desks! When I talked to one of the teachers, she told me that they meet every day before the students come in, discussing their teaching for the day.

- In The Fresh Meadow PS 173 School in New York
I heard an amazing collaborative teaching between the homeroom teacher and the assistant principal from our group members. They were assigned to one homeroom teacher's classroom and this homeroom teacher went out for a while because it seemed that he/she needed to deal with one incident. During that time, one assistant Principal happened to be in the classroom so he/she continued the teaching naturally and handed over the class back to the homeroom teacher when he/she returned. It was almost a seamless takeover and it happened between a teacher and an administrator! I was amazed by the story and expected that there must be mutual trust, a lot of collaboration and cooperation under this phenomenon.

Here come four pictures. The first one was taken in Centreville Elementary School. You can find this is one-on-one teaching and it is part of their ESOL program. The ESOL teachers and the homeroom teachers need to work closely for the biggest benefit for the ESOL students. From the second and the third pictures, they were taken in two different classrooms in Adelphia Elementary School. You can find the posters put in front of the teachers' desks are pretty the same. As for the fourth picture, it showed the gate of The Fresh Meadow PS 173 School. It is a Blue Ribbon school, which means their students' achievement is extraordinary.



My Reflection and the Small Changes I am Going to Make.....

In all of the schools and education fields we visited in these two weeks, I can really feel the core value beneath is student learning and the strong pursuit of teaching profession and proficiency. No matter it is PLC or collaboration, the ultimate goal of all the initiatives is to improve the capacity of the teachers, administrators and bring out the best performance of the students.

With all the learning and help from every educator I met in USA, I would work hard to make a difference even it may be just a little difference in the educational fields. Here are some changes or initiatives I am planning to start with myself, in my school or with other school teachers.....

- Starting with myself and challenging myself, try my best to accept the native speaking teachers, getting to know their culture and needs since they are after all the minority in the campus, and remind myself that we need to work as a team for the benefit of the students. Moreover, study more about English curriculum design and assessment by myself and try to form a small PLC with my native speaking co-teachers.
- Promote learning and collaborating atmosphere, using every chance I have to spread out the concept that the native speaking teachers and Taiwanese Teachers are one team, learning, working and teaching for the same purpose- helping our students to learn English well and effectively.
- Try to share the PLC concepts and practices I have read and seen in USA with all the English teachers, including Taiwanese teachers and the native speaking teachers, and encourage the teachers who teach the same students to build the PLCs of their own.
- Encourage English teachers to read through the New Taipei City English Learning Guide Line again, clarifying the English learning goals, gathering the data about the different graders learning and discussing the specific objectives for each grade.
- Promote a new form- “Collaborative Teaching Journal” instead of the previous one- “Native Speaking Teacher Teaching Observing Sheet” which we ask Taiwanese teachers to fill out every week. The reason why I want to use the new form to replace the previous one is because there is a teaching performance checking list on it and sometimes it would be kind of leading Taiwanese teachers to score the native speaking teachers’ teaching performance, which is not contributing collaborating atmosphere. Therefore, I am planning to ask them to write a new kind of document- “Collaborative Teaching Journal”. In it, they do not need to check anything but write about five parts- (1)teaching objective, (2)key points of the discussion with the native speaking teachers about curriculum design, instruction and assessment, (3)the practice of the instruction, (4)the students' respond and performance and (5)their reflection about their collaboration and the teaching. This journal should be written around answering to one

core question- what and how do we do to help our students with different leaning needs learn effectively? Also, I hope that the writing point of view could shift away from an individual to a team, such as shifting away from “Native Speaking Teacher James did a good job!” to “We did a good job!”

- Rearrange Taiwanese teachers and the native speaking teachers seats in our teacher office to have them sit together. With this arrangement, they could talk and communicate with each other without spending time moving around the office and the native speaking teachers could have company around as well.
- Display the vision of our school and the rules of collaboration discussion in the conference room as reminders, helping the effective discussion to occur. Let the attendants’ attention and discussion focus on reflecting on teaching practice, students’ prior knowledge, learning goals setting, determining instructional strategies, differentiation of instruction, a variety of methods to maximize student engagement, design of assessment, student performance, searching for evidence of student learning and identifying student misunderstandings.
- Cooperate with the Chief of Curriculum in my school to arrange the teaching schedule so every small professional learning community could have the same period to meet and discuss in the next school year.
- Share the curriculum managing insight I have learned from this trip with the teachers who are in charge of New Taipei City Bilingual Experimental Curriculum Program in other schools.

In the book-”Learning by Doing”, I get an idea that there is no precise recipe for school improvement. We need to figure out different strategies for each specific school. However, I believe the idea of the slogan “Together, we can achieve more.” works everywhere. Let us work together and help the students in every New Taipei City school achieve more in English learning!