

Trip Report for the Visit to California, USA

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First, I would like to thank my school and the New Taipei City Bureau of Education to give me the opportunity to visit California during school year. This trip is a unique experience for me. During this visit, I participated in regular elementary school classes and lived the real American life with my home stay family. These activities would never take place on a leisure trip. My report is going to focus on the two major aspects of my journey: ABC adult school language program and teacher training sessions, and Stowers Elementary School in-class observation and cultural experience.

1. ABC Adult School Language Program and Teacher Training

I spent the first week of my trip in ABC Adult School sharpening my English skills and reviewing my teaching knowledge. My day constitutes of morning language program and afternoon teacher training. The language program emphasizes on re-visiting all the essential English skills and offers me the freedom of attending the topics I am interested. I participated in most advanced level classes. These classes focus on daily use English. The instructors used newspaper and California Driver Regulation to bridge English and daily life. To me, it is an interesting and effective method. I can still remember most of the new words and phrases I acquired from the classes.

The Teacher Training sessions cover a variety of shallow but useful English teaching topics and methodologies. The topic that benefits me the most is “intonation.” Because my students and I are not native speakers, even though we use correct English, most of the time, we cannot convey our intention or meaning perfectly. In class, the instructor carefully guided the class the correct intonation for different scenarios and effortlessly went through crucial intonation elements such as word stress and content words. Now, I have the ability to express myself better and to educate my students the art of involving emotion in their spoken words.

2. In-Class Observation Note

2.1 A Brief Introduction of Stowers Elementary School-Kindergarten

Being the only teacher intern to observe the kindergarten class in Stowers Elementary School, I was awed by what I saw in the kindergarten class. The class was conducted in a completely different fashion compared to the ones I knew in Taiwan, so before I dive into my observation details, I would like to explain the differences of kindergarten in Taiwan and in the United States. In Taiwan, the kindergarten system accepts children from age of 4 to 6 ,and these students are divided into different grades based on their ages. Every single child in the system is all called “kindergarteners.” The kindergarten system is to train the students to be accustomed to group learning environment, so academic learning is never the primary goal of these children in class. On the other hand, kindergarten in America is designated for children who are going to become first graders the next school year. Schooling for younger kids is called “pre-school.” The major difference between kindergarten and pre-school is that kindergarten has specific curriculum standards assigned by the State. Kindergarten teachers must report their students' learning results to the state periodically. Pre-school practices loose learning goals and often times is less strict than kindergarten in graduation standards. In general, California kindergarteners learn easier math and English but in a more methodical system compared to the “kindergarteners” in Taiwan. No wonder people call the American elementary school system “Grade K-6” because the academic learning starts in kindergarten.

The class I observed in Stowers Elementary-Kindergarten is a relatively big class with twenty-seven students. This class was led by Miss Foster who has taught in Stowers Elementary for seven years. She is experienced and popular among students and parents. Because Stowers is in the same school district with the prominent Whitney High School, it attracts many middle to upper class families who wish to start their children early on the path of success and eventually send them to Whitney High School, the most competitive high school in the United States. As a result, with all the involvement from these affluent families,

the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) for the school district becomes very powerful. It is capable to provide strong supports to the school through various school activities. Moreover, as a magnet school for international studies, Stowers Elementary broadens its curriculum by incorporating internationalism teaching in the curriculum design. Students have many opportunities to develop insight into globalism through diverse activities. Overall, Stowers Elementary School earns rating of a top school because of the foundation of its special curriculum design, strong parent devotion and above-average students.

2.2 THEMATIC CURRICULUM DESIGN

Similar to the Taiwan kindergartens on the diverse curriculum, the kindergarten in Stowers Elementary also organizes learning activities with different themes. In addition, students start to learn about other foreign countries since kindergarten. For instance, to get to know the country “India,” students practiced to draw the national flag of India and greeted teachers in simple Indian languages during lunch time.

In the week of my in-class observation, Miss Foster just wrapped up the curriculum theme “We’re a Family” and started the next theme “Five Senses.” To surround the students with the concept of “Five Senses,” Miss Foster first dedicated a corner in the classroom to displayed toys and books related to the topic. In the aspect of linguistic art, she led students to read a five-senses poem in the morning and asked students to take turns sharing objects with assigned first letters. This sharing activity help the students develop their oral ability and confidence to speak in public. She also combined the five-senses experiencing activities with Halloween elements. For example, in the activity called “Five Senses Grab,” Miss Foster prepared five kinds of food for students to grab and guess; the types of food for the game were: olives, spaghetti, corn syrup, chips and jelly. Students had to touch and grab the food behind a towel then reported their answers to the assisting parent. During the guessing process, some students thought the activity resembled the game of “horror box,” so they refused to try, but finally they all finished the task after they conquered their fear.



The Five Senses Grab



The food behind the towel



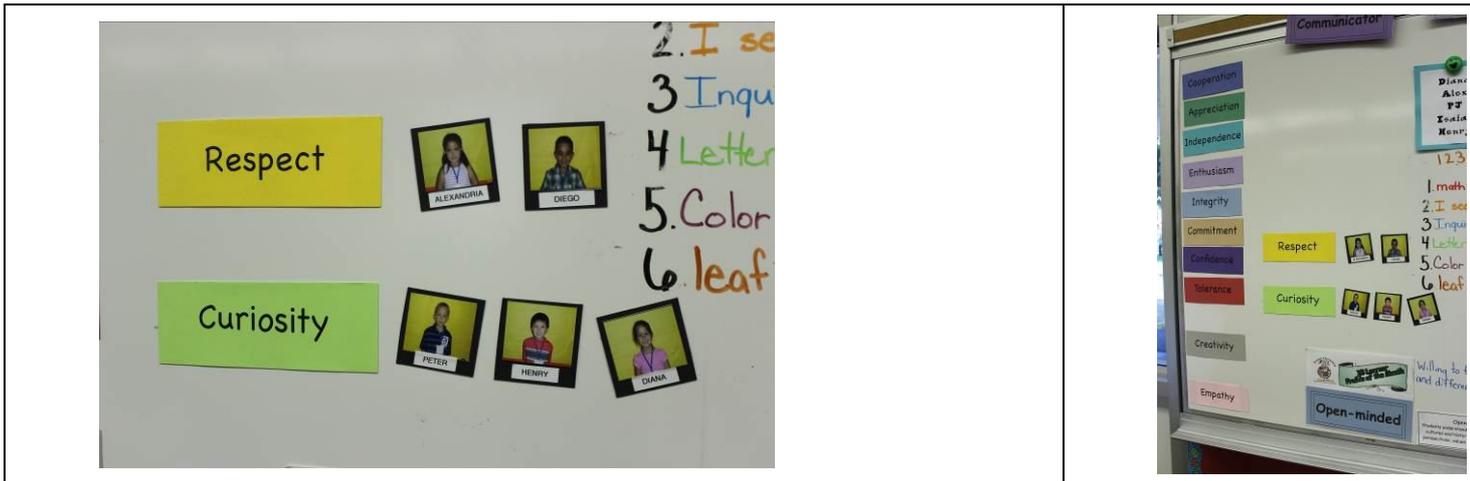
The corner to display five senses related books and toys



Five Little Senses Chant

2.3 IB ATTITUDES, CHARACTER EDUCATION AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

The twelve core ethic values in Stowers Elementary School are based on the IB Attitudes: Creativity, Confidence, Curiosity, Cooperation, Commitment, Appreciation, Respect, Tolerance, Integrity, Intelligence, Empathy and Enthusiasm. Students have practiced these values in daily life since kindergarten. To implement the character education in class, Miss Foster made colorful flashcards of these values and put them on the whiteboard. She constantly reinforces the idea of acting upon these values when an opportunity is present. Let's



2.3.1 DEVELOPING SCHOOL IDENTITY THROUGH ADOPTED SONGS

To construct students' school identity and principles, the kindergarteners have to sing the following songs with actions after they recite the Pledge of Allegiance. These songs are adopted by the school teachers with catchy and familiar tunes. Students like to sing these songs and memorize the content easily.

Stowers School Song

We are students here at Stowers.
 We learn to read and write.
 Best of schools will be our slogan.
 We work with all our might.
 Can't you hear the school bell rining?
 Time to start the day.
 Can't you hear the children shouting?
 Stowers school hooray, Hooray!

IB Songs and Chants by Diane Kamiyama

Communication Song (tune: Oh My Darling)

Let's communicate!

Let's communicate!

Say what's on your mind.

Express your inner feelings

And you'll be doing

Just fine!

Principled Song (tune: Are You Sleeping?)

Let's be principled!

Let's be principled!

Honest and fair

Honest and fair

Always tell the truth,

Follow the rules,

Show that you care!

Show that you care!

2.4 Cultural Diversity in Classroom

Even I had only one week of time for in-class observation, I witnessed the unfortunate event of racial discrimination in class. The incident started with an Indian student told an Africa American student that he doesn't work hard is because the color of his skin. The African American student's parents complained to school after the child repeated the conversation to them. As a result, the teacher spent tremendous amount of time on pacifying the children and the parents without solving the actual problem. In the discussion with me, my hostess who is an experienced kindergarten teacher advised me if the same incident occurs, invite parents and the child at fault to have a formal talk with the principal, so everyone would understand the severity of discrimination and does not make the same mistake in the future.

3. Cultural Experience with the Home Stay Family

In addition to in-class observation, experience the American culture in my home-stay family is another great memory I brought back with me.

My hostess is a Japanese American who was grew up in Hawaii and married a Caucasian; however, under the influence of her family, she still keeps her Japanese roots particularly in the family eating habit. In their house, it is common to see symbiotic relationship between the American and Japanese culture. Most important of all, they showered me with all the hospitality and made me feel at home. Luckily, I was in time for Halloween and tagged along with my host family for the once-in-a-year “trick or treat.” Seeing the actual event is more exciting than reading about it in books. By following the host family to each candy-giving house, I had a chance to glimpse into the typical American indoor decoration and people’s daily living habit. This is another wonderful experience I enjoyed during this trip.



3. Conclusion

If I have to describe what the trip means to me, then I would define it as a journey to “re-discover English.” When I learned English and how to teach English, I practiced all the rules by book. This is also the downside of the English education in Taiwan. Since English is not the primary or official language, teachers and students treat English like just another social science subject in school. English never made its way into daily life. From my perspective, this is exactly where our English education fails.

During this trip, I witnessed English being used in all aspect of life down to break time chit-chat between two students. The ABC Adult School classes reviewed all my English classes whether it's about English or teaching English. It also revealed what is missing in my English classes. By throwing in these critical elements such as “intonation,” I can help my students improve their English skills to be more like a native speaker and less resemble a robot. The in-class observation taught me efficiency improvement through tool utilization. Over time, teachers tend to trap in the fallacy of curriculum recycling and forget to tailor the curriculum to serve their students' needs. Miss Foster indirectly let me know the importance of curriculum adaptation when students pose different challenges.

Finally, I want to thank the Bureau of Education again by letting me participate in this trip. I had the opportunity to bridge the difference between my English teaching and American teaching style, and also take their forte to fix our defects.