

Create an effective teaching-learning environment

By Yensu Lin Yong-Ping Elemetray school

New Taipei City educational bureau has been making a lot of efforts on raising elementary students' English level: They increase English hours, provide lots of workshops and programs to upgrade English teachers' professional competence... However, I believe that there are still some structural factors which influence students' learning performance, among them, an effective, teachers-students friendly environment is an important one. During this trip, I found the schools that I visited all provided a more effective teaching-learning environment than we did in Taiwan. Here, in this memorandum, I try to do some analyses and comparisons. But, it's not necessary to accept and to copy all of the methods they use, since there are some cultural and social factors which should be counted in. I'll take Northwest Elementary school and Belmont Middle School as examples in this report. Teaching-learning environment here includes not only some tangible conditions, for example, school buildings and classroom decorations, but also factors that work behind and exert certain influences, like school schedule, educational resources, programs and strategies that the school has provided.

Well-disciplined students

An effective teaching-learning environment must allow teachers to teach and students to learn. To ensure the goal to be respected, it is considered that any behavior that disrupts teaching and learning should not be allowed. Witnessing from the whole visiting trip, one of the many important factors of the effective teaching-learning environment that I've seen, is the "well-disciplined and self-controlled" students in the classroom. Before my visit, I had some sort of stereotyped impression of American schools: students must be very noisy, full of energy, and had chewing gums in their mouth while teachers were lecturing. When I was on the spot, to my surprise, I found that students were very well disciplined and quiet. In these schools, classroom management is emphasized from their kindergarten's time, you can see posters and slogans in the hallways and the classroom walls, speaking the core value of the school, that instructs and encourages students to behave well. They use lots of visual supports, not only for the academic purpose, but also as a kind of reminder for the discipline control.



Poster in Northwest Elementary School



Poster in Addams Junior High, green light indicates the entrance

The constructions of these two schools are quite different from Taiwan's: Though they may both have playgrounds, their playgrounds locate outside the buildings, ours are often surrounded by the buildings . Their classrooms are mostly equipped with no windows leading toward the outside so that students can be more concentrated to their courses. Some of the classrooms have restrooms inside, teachers use “pass”, that is ,when students have to leave the classroom during the class, they must get the permission from the teacher and take a “pass” with them, so that the teachers can always assure students' safety and supervise students' conduct.



Different “ pass” for students

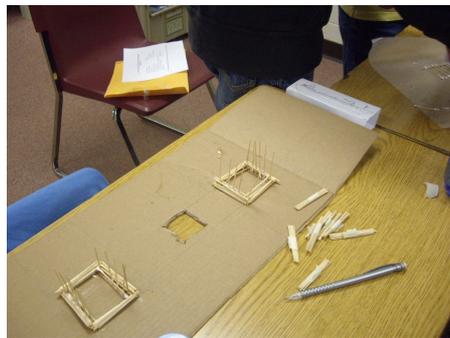
I found that the school I visited emphasizes a lot on students' discipline, they establish basic conduct rules to control students' behaviors. These rules are written in students' handbooks, become a guideline for teachers and students. The students who don't respect those rules could be expelled from school. School environments and the conduct codes which help the classroom management are part of the factors for a successful teaching-learning environment.

School schedule

School schedule also play an important part in creating a successful teaching-learning environment. Northwest Elementary School begins at 8:00 in the morning and finishes classes at 2:30 in the afternoon. (Bellmont Middle school finishes at 3:30) Each class is about 40 to 45 minutes and there's no break time in between, but they have a longer (about 20 minutes) recess after the lunch time. Students can do exercises in PE class. It seems that “learning” is the most emphasized objective in school. Students are generally aware that their main goal in school is to study. This also helps to create a good teaching-learning environment. On the other side, the students in Taiwan like to make the most use of their 10-minute's break (especially the lower and middle classes). The result is that they have to take some time to switch his mind back again on the next learning material, though some of the theories insist that children are unable to concentrate during a long period of time, I think it should be taken into account in teacher's teaching program that the ten minutes' break is not the only solution.

Programs that meet students' need

In a class, students with different English levels is one of the big problems here in Taiwan. This kind of problem is unavoidable and universal, and all the educators have been attempting to mend this gap. The school that I visited believed that each child is an individual with unique ideas and needs, so they must have appropriate learning opportunities that will meet their individual needs and fully develop their potentials. They made a lot of efforts on helping the struggling students, especially on their basic language skills. Northwest Elementary School adopts the “ Title One ” and the “ 21 century” programs, while Belmont middle school divided students into four groups for the language art and math class, giving different courses according to their levels. I want to focus on “ Title One ” because I spent more time in the learning problem room, and could provide more details on it.



Learning by doing- With toothpicks and cardboard, students are trying to construct a solid bridge.

What is Title One?

Title one is part of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation that provides supplemental federal funding for low achievement children in schools. The Title one program provides extra academic support and learning opportunities for children that are the most in need in meeting Indiana State's academic standards, especially in language art.

Northwest Elementary School has 380 students in total, with 120 students participating in Title one program. The ranging of students are based on three data: 1. Teacher's evaluation 2. Student's reading level which is based on the Reading Count program 3. DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills)– an assessment that can provide analysis data on students' language art ability. Students who receive the Title One services should go to the learning problem room 30 minutes per day to have an additional instructions. There are 3 teachers, each of them takes charge of 5 students and receives different students every 30 mins. They design different activities which correspond to the students' level. The lower level students will focus on their basic skills like phonemic awareness, alphabet principle and the accuracy and fluency of intonation, the higher level students will focus on the comprehension of vocabulary and sentences. Teachers use interesting activities or card games to increase students' motivation.

Here are some examples:

1. Practice of intonation by using different punctuations:

- 123!
- 45,
- 6?
- 789,
- 10!
- 11 12.
- 13 14!
- 15 16 17 ?
- 18 19!
- 20.

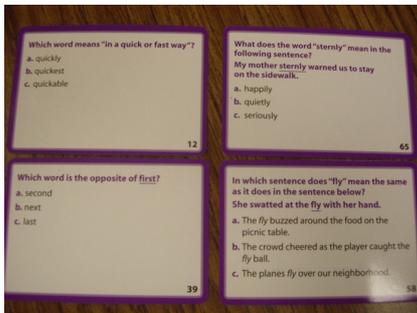
Teacher asks Students to read aloud these numbers and change the intonations according to the punctuation.

2. Vocabulary building: Teacher arranges some letters in the form below.

- M A E S
- I O A E
- T S Y J
- H I I F

Teacher asks students to find out as many words as possible in these letters during certain period of time. When time's up, each student reads aloud the words they find out .

- 3. Use the picture book “Yo! Yes! ” to practice their intonation.
- 4. Using interactive card games to work on their homophones, synonyms and parts of speech.



Card games which are used for the “Title One” students

Students of Title 1 program have to pass two tests a year to know if their literay ability is improved or not. A detailed data will be analysed and reported. In addition to Title1, Northwest Elementary takes measures to help the teachers and to meet different students’ needs: They have resource room for the learning disability students, emotional and behavior problem room for the physical and mental retarded students. Instead of putting all the students in a same classroom and teaching the same material, they try to give every child a chance to provide a safe and effective teaching-learning environment for students and teachers.

Charmed for Success

When I was in Northwest Elementary School, I saw students wearing some kind of necklace which was very cute and special. Students were all very proud of it. Which I knew it later, it was called “charms”. The goal of this “Charmed for Success” project is to raise student’s motivation and engagement by honoring student’s good performances.

At the beginning of the school year, students will receive a 24 inch beaded chain, students would have chances to collect their charms once they are recognized by their academic achievements, character education, attendance and student participation...They don’t have to wait until the end of the month or year, but can receive the reward for their effort and hard work immediately. I think this is very helpful and which will encourage students to unleash their potentiality. Immediate feedback also plays an important role in creating an effective learning environment.

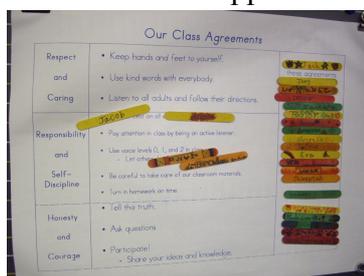


Necklace used in “ Charmed for Success” project

To sum up, due to the short stay in Indiana, the observations that I made may certainly be partial and short of theoretical support. Some comparisons might be improper since the conditions of two countries are not equivalent. But I believe that we still can learn from these educational and cultural differences, and find out an appropriate approach of our own.

Culture Shock

As I mentioned previously, I am really impressed by the well-behaved students in the schools I visit. They do have a free spirit to express themselves, but there are certainly some guidelines which require them to observe properly. One of the examples is that, though they don’t have to wear uniforms, they still have some dress code which emphasizes on wearing appropriately according to the circumstances (ex. No slippers, no tank top at school, pants’ length is about to their knees or longer...). I want to share some words that I quote from Belmont Middle School’s Student Handbook with all of our teachers, which says: “One of the most important lessons education should teach is discipline. While it does not appear as a subject, it underlies the whole education structure.”



Classroom agreements chart which can have an immediate feedback toward the well-behaved students

Another unforgettable experience is seeing the Amish people with my own eyes. I saw the way they dwell, type of their windmill, their special costumes and horse buggies too. And I had a general understanding of their lives. For me, they are just people existing in movies or novels before I came to Indiana. Thanks to this trip, they just came alive and appeared in front of me: An Amish girl was in the class that I visited, I saw the real horse buggy on the road. A lot of Amish sat around me while I was eating in the McDonald's. This real contact is much more impressive than any descriptions in the textbook. Though I do feel pity about some of their way of living and some regulations that they have to stick to, it's really a precious cultural lesson to me.



The Amish family and their horse boggy

As a world-leading country, we believe that the USA is modern and highly developed in many ways. But I don't appreciate their food culture. First of all, they eat a lot of high-calories diets which is not healthy, and the flavor is too sweet and salty for me. Furthermore, the size of the food is tremendous for us—Salad is just like two small hills, pizza is as thick as a cake, the pancakes are as big as a man's face, not to mention the unlimited refilled drinks...we just can't finish all and the staff of Taipei Economic & Culture Office have to take the leftovers to go or it will be a big waste. Excess is all I can say regarding their consumption habits.



The thickest pizza that I've seen the first time in my life

Another fact which surprises me is that America is not an environmental-friendly country at all. We all know that the Americans consume a big part of Earth resources, so they should contribute more to the environmental protection. On the contrary, recycling is not popular in the schools or restaurants I went to and the materials of containers are not eco-friendly products. They don't use thermos bottles, still drink lots of bottle water, use plastic cups and plates and throw them away after

using them. I'm so proud of the recycling education in our school, we're doing much better comparing to them.

Acknowledgement

Finally, I'd like to express my deepest appreciation to all the people who help me to make this trip so successful and interesting. They are perfect organizers and coordinators. I am also impressed by the hospitality of these friends. We are all strangers in the beginning, but they just treat us like their family members. Dr. Long, who is not only a successful leader but also a welcomed "carrier", entertainer, whose humor and generosity make our stay in Indiana so cheerful and fulfilling. Principle Jerles, another soul figure of this visit, accompanies us all the way and gives us the warmest reception in his big house with his wife Julie. Mr. Sirk, Mr. Carty, Kathy, all the staff in schools that we visited, driver Barbara, are so friendly and willing to give all the help that we need. Most of all, I'd like to thank dear Colleen Fuhrmann and her husband Elton, with whom we spent some wonderful days together and I really learn a lot from her. And, all the staff in Taipei Economic & Culture Office fix up the itinerary in Chicago for us. All of them are really good hosts, Director General Shen, Josephine, John, Wendy, Yu-Ching...are so considerate and sweet. They just do their best to make us feel like at home! "Seeing is believing", I benefit a lot from this trip. And the most important reward is all the friendship that I earn.



My hostess teacher Colleen and I in Berne