

Autonomous Educators and Learners in Indiana

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The professor of Columbia University, J. Charles Alderson, once said: "The people who implement education policies are the most important." The trip to Indiana sponsored by New Taipei City really opens a window for me to learn from the educators of Indiana. As we all know, politics can be a very important influence on educational developments and their deployment. However, micropolitics can be seen as ways of maneuvering within institutions which are themselves not political, but financial and educational. Indeed, politics with a small 'p' includes not only institutional politics, but also personal politics, which can influence language education both in daily matters, and in projects for innovation and change. Therefore, in this report, I would rather focus on micropolitics, the agendas and motivations of individuals within organizations, and on their actions. My intention is to use AUTOMATIC **as an acronym** to describe the extraordinary educators in Indiana, and how they inspire me in my teaching belief and methodology.

AActive responsibility~ Dr. Tim Long

Dr. Tim Long, Superintendent of the Jay School Corporation, has been recognized for his efforts to increase intercultural learning opportunities for Hoosier students. On the two-week journey, we learned about the creative elements of the educational system in the U.S. because of Dr. Long's valuable speeches and active assistance. "Our world is shrinking very quickly," Dr. Long said while traveling to Indianapolis. "Any school that does not have a global component really runs the risk of not preparing students for the future." He always actively put the responsibility on himself, and reminds every teacher that cross-cultural competency will be an increasingly valuable skill in today's global world. Dr. Long should not only be commended for his efforts to expand the international horizons of Jay County's students, but also achieve the credits for setting a role model of active educator for us.



Understanding and unique couple~ Larry and Alice

Without Larry and Alice's help, my visit to Jay County won't be so enjoyable and fulfilling. My host family, Larry and Alice are both retired educators from Jay County Corporation. Their son, Mr. Paxson, is the principal of Judge Haynes Elementary School. The well-educated and unique couple, who have been married for forty nine years, credit a few key relationship rules with keeping love in their marriage. The first priority is making time to care for each other. The second rule of thumb is to look for the good in each other rather than being critical. While staying at their dedicated home, their interaction is filled with understanding, love, caring and respect. They do not only share with me the thumb rules of happy marriage, but also teach me that everyone can be a life-long learner by reading to learn, reading for pleasure and volunteering to the community service. With the great honor of being their daughter in Taiwan, I will make a commitment to manage my home and my classroom like their home, is mostly filled with praise and encouragement for my own kid, my students and the parents as well.



Trustworthy administrator~ Principal Paxson, Judge Haynes Elementary School

“Without trust, there is no risk-taking, no commitment, no empowerment, and no collaborative teamwork.” The psychologist Buzotta wrote in 1998. The principal of Judge Haynes Elementary, Mr. Paxson ‘s trustworthy leadership makes him an extraordinary principal. During the observation days in the school, I can feel the positive interaction among teachers and administrators. The teachers trust his professional ability to do the duty well or his judgment about the direction the project should be following. They have also been both supported and inspired to work to the best of their abilities. I know this rule can apply in my classroom too: The more trust you engender, the more students will be committed to the mission, goals and bottom-line results.



Opportunities for reading fluency~ Mrs. Mitchel, second grade

Mrs. Mitchel strongly believes that strong systematic instruction in the early grades should be preventive in nature; that is, by explicitly teaching



students the important reading foundational skills carefully sequenced, the need for intervention will be diminished. In order to enable students to extend and apply their skills as they encounter increasingly complex content in the upper grades, Mrs. Mitchel periodically assesses students' general reading ability, which is what a timed oral reading fluency test measures. As she can listen to a student and determine through timing and tracking word accuracy how well the student actually reads. While providing students more opportunities not about reading faster but about reading better, Mrs. Mitchel also attends to a student's expression of reading. The ongoing assessment and feedback can guide students read better. No wonder the second graders in her class smile with confidence while being assessed!

Motivational Strategies~ Mrs. Lee, third grade

Mrs. Lee shared with me that in particular, small group instruction is especially beneficial for English learners. The group size and teacher focus allows her students to have more opportunities for academic and oral language usage and can focus on particular syntactic knowledge and morphological skills. She has used the strategy for some time and enabled students to more easily read and write in English. In a small group setting students can receive primary language support as needed, and then they are willing to read confidently in front of the whole class. Not to mention, her bright personality provides students with a good role model and support. She also manages her class with literacy- rich environment and home-like atmosphere to make students fall in love with learning.



Achievable goals~ Mr. Saxmon, fifth grade; Mr. Pinkerton

In the classes of Mr. Saxmon and Pinkerton, reading in the content area poses special challenges and involves new vocabulary and text comprehension for students. Their instructional time dedicated to social studies, mathematics, and other content areas also include practice applying the skills and strategies students learned during the reading block. In the primary grades, students should have opportunities to apply their growing



decoding knowledge, learn new vocabulary, and apply their comprehension skills and strategies to content across subject areas. Therefore, they provide opportunities for classroom discourse and interaction that are well-designed to enable students to develop communicative strengths in language arts. By starting this process, their students will be better able to understand and learn from subject matter texts.

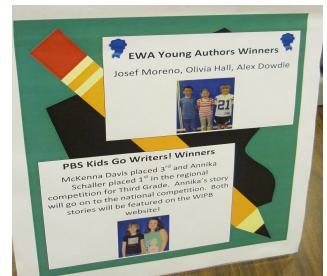
Time-sensitive Instruction~ Mrs. Oswalt & Mrs. Stout, fourth grade

The dedicated teachers can use time wisely. Their instructional time during reading always includes whole class and small group differentiated instruction and literacy stations. By structuring learning time this way, the whole class instruction provides an efficient and equitable way to initiate instruction, while the small group instructional time enables the teacher to focus on specific skill needs and intensify instruction based on student progress. What I learn is by learning to differentiate instruction effectively, a teacher can often meet the needs of a range of learners within the regular classroom. An effective teacher who offers differentiated instruction can ensure all students become or remain proficient readers. How important it is!



Interesting component~ Ms. Grey

Ms. Grey herself is a literacy lover. As she knows, successful readers are more engaged with the texts they are reading than less proficient readers. Engaged readers are more apt to use their strategies to understand what they are reading because they are interested in the topic, and this in turn means they will learn more vocabulary, learn more content, and read more. In order to help her students become engaged and successful readers, she adds interesting component into her reading class, which is making books. Students can experience the precious hands-on activity by choosing their own topics, designing the book cover, drawing the illustrations and writing the story. Her students do not only win several awards, but also have their books published. She really lights the fire of reading in students' hearts.



Cooperative teaching~ Mrs. Roberts & Mrs. Johnsonbaugh

These two special teachers work as reading recovery teacher and speech language pathologist. They both emphasize more explicit and systematic instruction than a core or supplemental program. When implementing an intervention program for the k-2 students, it is important to determine if the program is sufficiently comprehensive to work along with the core reading program. Their professional knowledge and patient trait help them keep the mission in mind: Intervention programs are not intended to be permanent replacements. The program is to instruct students intensely for a designated period of time to catch up early foundational skills such as phonemic awareness or phonics, and in order to return them to the core program.



Applying autonomy in my classroom

“Learner autonomy” can be defined as the capacity to take control over, or responsibility for one’s own learning. Teacher-learner autonomy, by analogy with previous definitions of language learner autonomy, might be defined as the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others. They share the same components of “Six Pillars of Characters”: Trustworthy, respect, fairness, responsibility, caring and citizenship. The people we met in Indiana all act with the great virtues and willing to contribute themselves to the community. They are the great examples of **autonomous** and life-long learners for students in Asia, where students and parents seem to concern more about how to have higher test scores. Therefore I decide to find a way to help students gain more achievement both on reading ability and writing test.

First, as we all know, students in higher grades have increasing interests outside of school and express greater independence than do students in lower grades. Because of this, keeping them engaged and motivated is very important. Researches of autonomy also have focused on the issue of motivation with students. Teachers should use the intrinsic motivational value of learning to encourage learners to be more active and independent in their own English language learning. Knowing that students in the upper grades need to have opportunities to read materials that relate to their lives, choose their own texts from a



set of teacher-designed selections, and engage in deep and collaborative discussions about what they read, I choose the authentic material, the most popular singer Justin Bieber's introduction, to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation.

Second, I also learn that explicit instruction in comprehension strategies is an important delivery method for many students. To be explicit, instruction must include teacher modeling and explanation, guided practice and independent application. Teaching students comprehension strategies requires multiple practice opportunities. Students need to be supported as they learn new strategies in order to internalize them. Thus, as a teacher, I must —scaffold reading instruction, gradually increasing the opportunities for students to transfer and apply the strategies they have learned to new and varied texts. I introduce the 5W1H Question Strategy which higher graders have heard in Chinese to help students find out the key points of the reading article.



At last, as a music-goer myself, I integrate the pop song singer, Justin Bieber's introduction into the reading comprehension strategy-5W1H. The positive atmosphere and warm like a spring breeze bring exciting smiles on children's faces. With the clear strategy in mind, students not only can write their self- introduction "Ray of Sunshine", but also discuss how they can be the best persons. The increased intrinsic motivation, learner autonomy and responsibility for English language acquisition can really help learners in Taiwan have positive attitude to face learning pressure.



Conclusion

I can't express my thanks in words, how much I appreciate the persons who help us to have the delightful exchange experiences. The two-week learning experiences in Indiana have become the most precious memory in my life. What impresses me the most is "Character counts."



The community does not only offer excellent diversity for opportunities in education and culture, but also create the friendly atmosphere for teachers from Taiwan. As I can see, Mayor Hosier, Dr. Long, Mr. Principal Jerls and Paxson, Mr. Paxson and the teachers whom I interacted with, all of

them have a strong sense of belonging towards the community, and make great contributions as much as they can. That is really a great proof that education can cultivate the excellent quality of citizens. The visit to Indiana helps me truly understand one thing. The primary purpose of education is not to teach you to earn your bread, but to make every mouthful sweeter. Even though the situation of Taiwan's education is difficult ahead, we should have faith and passion in what we are doing. It doesn't matter what subject we are teaching, we still can pay love forward to our children. And remember to tell them "Let's make positive contributions to our community!"

References

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