

Students' Language Empowerment In Indiana

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The development of education plays a very important role in a nation's prosperity. The goal of school education is to cultivate students who are able to think independently and interdependently, to solve problems on their own, and to form the habit of a lifelong learning . Language proficiency, which is primarily composed of high quality performance in reading and writing, is critical to the previously mentioned goal. That's why all countries (both developed and under developed countries) compete to assure themselves that their next generation has good language (especially English) proficiency.

USA is one of the leading countries that have developed lots of modern pedagogies and have good experiences in language teaching and learning, especially when the language is their mother tongue. I'm honored to have had the opportunity to stay in Indiana for several days. During my stay, I had learned a lot about how language learning is functioned by visiting Randolph Central Corporation schools, by observing how to conduct English reading and writing classes, and by sharing opinions with the teachers in those schools.

Indiana is an agricultural state .This state is economically disadvantaged in comparison with some wealthy states. For all this, the Indiana government

emphasizes the importance of high quality education. During my stay in Indiana, all the superintendents were holding the council for educational reforms. Two of the important issues of the educational council were that the government would cut budget for ineffective schools (or even the Department of Education might be forced to close the most ineffective schools) , and that teachers' wages could be decided partly by the performance of their duties instead of the years of their experiences in teaching.

While in Indiana, I visited 4 of the Randolph Central Corporation schools - the Willard School, the Deelfield School, the Drivers (Middle) School, and the Becker School(K-G2). Through constant classroom observation and talking to the teachers, I had a better idea of how the language empowerment is achieved by cooperation and teamwork between the government and schools. Herewith, I'd like to share my opinions from a holistic viewpoint, consisting of the government's policies, school operation, classroom management, classroom teaching , and learning support systems (or what they call "the special aid").

1. **Government's policies** : The government is carrying out some programs for improving students' language performance. One of them is called "Accelerated Learning Program"-each of us has a preferred learning style - a way of learning that suits us best. If we can realize the rhythm of our

learning, then we can make better plans for a successful learning, and we can learn more easily and quickly. It's a self-dominated or so-called differential learning. Accelerated program is designed primarily for the evaluation of reading comprehension. The government provides grade 3 to grade 5 students with several sets of readers as additional reading materials, and teachers would discuss together to decide how many readers and what readers are for kids to read every semester. After the students finish reading a reader, they'll go on the accelerated test on the computer. It's a test for reading comprehension and most of the questions are composed of yes-no ones and multiple choices. Students can have such a test on the computer any time as long as they are done with this reader, so it's common to see some kids sit or lie to read their readers; while others are having their accelerated tests.

2. **School's Operation:** Schools play the role of the executor of the government's policies and the teaching supporter. In Indiana, the school's daily schedule is as follows:

The school usually begins at 8 and ends at 3. After the morning's individual studying (usually for teacher – student communication, free reading, or life counseling) , all the students give the pledge of the Randolph

Corporation Schools (I remembered two of the sentences as “ Treat people right and do the right thing”). Then the first class starts. Knowledgeable subjects, like English, math, science, social studies, etc. are arranged in the morning, and in the afternoon, students have PE, music and IT class to relieve the body and mind. According to the school’s schedule, there isn’t any recess between the classes. Students go to restrooms, prepare the stuff for the next period, or switch to another classroom when bell rings. The only break time is lunch time, lasting for 20 minutes. Besides, there’s one thing quite different from schools in Taiwan, students are not supposed to stay when school is over, for most students take school buses to school, and the buses have to leave on time.

The administrators and staff in schools are responsible for budgeting for school years and finding more financial support, for making a holistic plan for teaching and learning. Administrators hardly intervene in teachers’ teaching , unless teachers ask them for help (e.g., have some misbehaved students in the principal’s office). When school was over (at about 3 o’clock), I was surprised to see all the principals in the four schools standing in front of the gate busy talking on the radio intercoms to make sure every school bus coming and going on time. I was also surprised to find the students didn’t do any cleaning (except for cleaning their

own desks and chairs), the custodians did all the cleaning. (because the custodians took responsibility of cleaning, they were not responsible for school's security, visitors were controlled by electronic sensor systems.) This is also quite different from that in Taiwan.

Though there's a lot for us to learn, I found we do better than American schools in Environmental Protection Education. They supplied customers and visitors with paper towels in all public places (airports, hotels, restaurants, and schools). I saw lots of used paper towels thrown away everywhere in restrooms. Americans indeed waste many resources.

3. **Classroom management:** Teachers in Indiana seldom worry about the classroom management, for the students discipline quite well. According to my 3-day classroom observation, most classes in the elementary schools went very well. Most students were willing to participate in the discussion during class. After the teachers asked a question, more than half of the students would raise their hands to answer, but they wouldn't speak until they were allowed to, and most students were listening carefully to what their classmates had said before they gave an additional remark. When the students were told to work in groups, they discussed in appropriate voices and worked hard. I hardly heard the teachers say, "Be quiet!" during class. I

think it's because Americans value much self discipline and public morality. Parents and teachers remind students of the fundamental moralities of life (respect others in particular) again and again when they are at home and in school. However, in Taiwan, students don't have the habit of listening to others, they usually murmur or talk with others in private. When our students are asked to make comments in the presence of others during class, they keep silent instead. Besides, teamwork in a class sometimes seems like a disaster - noises, irrelevant topics, and uninterested students in the group, etc. There's still a lot of space for us to improve our classroom management. Except for student discipline, I appreciated much about their classroom arrangement. The classrooms are abundant in all kinds of inspiring decorations - students' works (compositions, reports, arts, and handcrafts, etc), news release, the honored, message board, motto and phrase, and teaching resources (like the steps of writing, phonics, or maps). There is also a reading corner with readers in every classroom. To my surprise there was not much modern information equipment in the classroom-old computers (the same type computers were used in computer classrooms, too), overhead projectors (I could hardly see projects or electronic whiteboard equipped in an ordinary classroom). Maybe that's common for rural schools, because of

the financial embarrassment in rural areas, but not for urban ones (in comparison to the Burriss Laboratory High School of Ball University, they will give each student an ipad2 next semester). Here, I'd like to thank New Taipei City Government to keep supplying rural schools with modern equipment and take good care of the disadvantaged students in rural schools.

4. **Classroom Teaching:** According to my observation, classroom teaching in America is quite common and traditional – here I mean the teachers who I observed didn't use many teaching resources or skills to conduct the teaching . Though the teacher didn't shift from one teaching method to another, the teaching still went well. As what I said previously, students there were well-disciplined so that the teaching procedure could go smoothly. A reading class usually followed the procedure: reading the text (chorus or by turns) - teacher posing questions - student answering questions-teacher interpretation – group cooperation or individual work (usually with an answer sheet) / self - studying activities – student performance – teacher comments. Nevertheless, I still found some experienced teachers that had arranged their class very well. During the forty-minute teaching, class was fun and full of challenges, and students

showed great interests in learning. For example, a first grade teacher taught her kids to be familiar with some basic consonants by way of short chants like “rabbit, rabbit, /r/, /r/, /r/”, and flash lights (when teaching the word “light”). One teacher used paper fingers to teach her students how to write a friendly letter including the five parts- H-G-B-C-S (Heading, Friendly Greeting, Body, Closing, and Signature.). And another teacher ended a lesson with a drama. All the creative teaching inspired me a lot.

Another thing I observed is that most tests were held on Fridays - teachers gave many copied papers for the students to answer, not very difficult questions, just some questions to test students’ vocabulary or grammar proficiency, and their reading comprehension. The test didn’t take students much time to answer. Students could hand in their answer sheets freely and went on another learning activity. The teacher wouldn’t demand that students had to finish and hand in their answer sheets within a limited time. The students could take their time answering questions. So the students here didn’t seem as stressed or nervous as our students when facing tests. In addition, students had little homework to do after school. Most school work needed to be done during class. According to their teachers, most of their parents didn’t take it part of their responsibility to supervise their children’s

homework.

5. **Special Aid:** Learning Support System has being carried out in all the schools in the USA for a long time, earlier than President Bushes' educational slogan "No Child Left Behind". Since the Minster of Education in Taiwan is going to reform the present system of the make - up teaching model for the disadvantaged students (for the slower students in academic performances in particular) in the 100 school year, I pay more attention to the special aid program there. The special aid program is offered for both disabled students and the slow ones. In elementary schools, the special aid program (sometimes Title 1) is designed for G1 to G5 students who are slow in certain subjects like reading, writing, and math. The special aid courses last 30 minutes a period, 5 days a week. Neither tutors nor subject teachers work as special aid teachers, there are another 3or 4 certificated teachers with some well-trained, paid volunteers (maybe parents or substitute teachers) in charge of the courses. The government provides teachers with all the teaching resources, including pre assessment, teaching materials, and post assessment so they can make the best of their time to help the slow students to catch up the other classmates as soon as possible. In the beginning of the semester, the special students (here I simply mean those

who need to attend the special aid class) have to take the assessment on the computer (all the questions in the database are developed by the education authority), then they go to the Title 1 Classroom during class. He or she could go back to the normal class as long as they pass the post assessment and the special aid teachers' evaluation. I think the process of evaluation is quite objective, and the students in need can get useful assistance, for the participant population is strictly controlled. In Taiwan, we're going to do the same thing as what they did in the USA - we have developed the database of special aid, Chinese reading with writing, math, and English included. From this September, only the last 35% students in rural schools and the last 25% in urban schools need to take the special class. I believe that we can find out the students in need more effectively and objectively, and supply the right students with more financial and learning resources.

Herewith, I'd like to thank New Taipei City Government for giving me the opportunity, Principle Hu, Principle Chen, and Miss Lee for all the documental work and communication. And I want to thank all the staff of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Chicago, the superintendent of the Indiana Department of Education , Dr. Bennett, and Dr. Long - they arranged all the delegation itinerary in detail and considerately. I also have to thank Mr. Jerles, and Barbara to accompany us all the

time. Finally, I'd like to express my deepest appreciation for my host family, Mr. and Mrs. Kiser. I would never forget their consideration, the warmth they gave me and the wonderful experiences when I stayed with them.

The trip to Indiana surely brought me a wonderful experience and unforgettable memory. I would say I really learned a lot from the educational and cultural exchange. There must be a lot of excellent concepts and practical skills for me to apply in my teaching. I would do my best to reflect on what I had observed and make a reasonable judge, and then I would decide what to take and what to avoid to make my school better and more effective.



Picture 1: Gary, Gris, and me in Art Festival, Brown County.



Picture 2: Reading Corner in the Library, the Willard Elementary School.



Picture 3: The Magic Faucet in the Deel-field Elementary School, Do you know how to make water come out?



Picture 4: The Principle of the Deel-field Elementary School, Sue, and me.