

An Observation on American Education

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I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to take part in the Joint Taiwan-East Central Indiana Teacher Cultural exchange program in May 2011. I met so many wonderful people during this trip. The teachers, students, officials, and all the school staff I have met are extremely helpful and nice. There are so many people who have contributed to make this exchange program possible. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Long, the superintendent of the Jay School Corporation. He is one of the people who were always around. In fact, he guided us through the whole cultural exchange passage. He is energetic, compassionate and considerate. I am deeply grateful to



Tomas Jerles, the principal of Redkey Elementary School. **Principal Jerles and me**
As a major coordinator, he actually took care of everything during and after this trip. He and his wife Julia were also my lovely host and hostess. Their generosity and hospitality made me feel just like home during my stay at their house. We had a wonderful time together. It's the beginning of a new friendship. Finally, I would like to thank the executive staff at Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Chicago: Director Rose Chen, Senior Cultural Officer John Lin, Program Coordinators Yu-Ching Liu, Josephine and Wendy. Without their great efforts, this exchange program would not have been materialized. Our learning experiences would not have been so fruitful.

Notes on Geography and Culture

I studied for my master's degree in New York City many years ago. At that time, I lived in Queens (a suburb of NYC). My experience was quite limited to the area between my school and the suburban neighborhood. Once in a while, I did travel to the north (for example, to the Niagara Falls) and to the west coast. However, I have never been to the Central part of America. This time, through the teacher exchange program, my wish came true. I was looking forward to this trip to Chicago and East Central Indiana. The state of Indiana is located in the Midwestern. Jay County, the school district we visited, is located in the east central of the state of Indiana. Most of

the county is flat land. During this trip, I was assigned to observe two schools in Jay County - Albany Elementary School and Redkey Elementary School.

From the moment I saw the school bus of Redkey Elementary waiting in front of the hotel in Chicago, I was thrilled. Everything was such a new experience to me. After leaving Chicago, a couple hours later, I started to feel the rural atmosphere around me. It is spring in Indiana. The green fields



are so vast and flat. It is totally different from where I came from. I live on an island with mountains at the central part of the island. We do not have tremendously flat land. With a very dense population, the space every Taiwanese has is pretty limited. People in Taiwan usually live in apartments, except the country dwellers. Indiana is totally different. People live in houses. They have large space (indoor or outdoor) and enjoy relaxed tempo in life.

The people and students I met in Indiana are also impressive. They are sweet, friendly and very willing to show their care and love for each other. I remember one poster I saw on the wall at an elementary school. It is about a marathon in the community for the support of the breast cancer campaign. The poster asked students to sign their names if they ever participated in the race and survived in the end. I was deeply touched by those signatures. It told me that American students not only learn knowledge at school but also are encouraged to act out their love for the society.

What astonished me about American food is the amount of it. I still remember the breakfast we had when we arrived at Chicago. The pile of pancakes in our plate grasped everyone's attention at once. What a big breakfast! This was my first cultural impact. In Taiwan, we usually have small amount of breakfast. But here, having breakfast means a real business.

School and Classroom Observation

During the trip, we visited several school districts in the state of Illinois and Indiana. Frankly, the first impressions of the school buildings surprised me. School buildings in America are very different from those in Taiwan. Our schools are usually formed by several multiple-story buildings, a playground and a track field. Unlike American schools, our schools have more open space. In general, our schools are

larger than the American ones. It is probably because we have more students per school. Some schools even have more than one hundred classes. Quite the opposite, American schools are often on a small scale. A school usually has only ten to fifteen classes. Schools are usually formed by just one single-story building. Students basically do everything inside the building, except recess (that is the only time they can go to the playground). Their gym is also in the building. (Note: We in Taiwan had P.E. classes in an open field.)



The classrooms in Indiana elementary schools are bigger than those in Taiwan. Their students have more space than ours. There are very few windows in a classroom. Even when you notice the windows, they are always closed. Students won't have a chance to look out of the windows and get distracted. However, in Taiwan, there are lots of windows on both sides of the classroom. Our students easily get distracted during class.

There are lots of posters in the classrooms, bathrooms, hallways and buses. They are displays of school or class expectations, such as 3R behaviors— Responsibility, Respect, and Right Choices. Teachers also put on lots of colorful, encouraging posters in the classrooms. They serve the same purpose – they remind students either of what they should have learned or of what approaches they can apply when they encounter problems.



All the time I was wondering why it was so quiet at American schools. After I observed a class of the third grade at Albany Elementary School, I realized why. What matters might be the frequency of recess. American schools have only one recess (10 minutes) in the morning and a lunch break (20 minutes). When students went out for the recess, they always lined up and followed the direction under their teacher’s guide. No one was running or shouting while walking. It was exactly the same procedure when they took lunch break in the cafeteria. Students were used to the one-recess schedule and always kept quiet in the hallways or in the classroom. The quietness did help students concentrate on their learning. As a result, none of the teachers need to use a microphone. Teachers often spoke in a firm and soft voice to students. They used positive words to encourage students, like: good job, good question, wonderful, you made a good choice, fabulous, etc.



Reading Intervention and Reading Recovery

On this trip, I decided to focus on reading strategies. When I heard Redkey Elementary School had a special reading program called “Read 180”, it suddenly caught my attention. The whole program was sponsored by Scholastic Publishing Company. It was aimed for the fourth and the fifth graders at Redkey Elementary. The teacher began the class by providing instruction in reading skills, vocabulary, writing, and grammar to the whole class. In between, students broke into groups and rotated

through three workstations for small group and independent learning. They rotated every twenty minutes. One group used the software on computers independently. They practiced reading, spelling, vocabulary, and writing. The second group built fluency and reading comprehension skills through independent reading. The teacher engaged in small-group discussion with the third group. Then, the teacher ended the day with whole-group reflection. This was a classroom designed for engagement — with technology, with text, with their teacher, and with each other.

“No Child Left Behind” no longer remains just a concept in Indiana. It was literally put into practice at schools. Schools use assessment data to monitor students’ progress frequently starting from the first grade. Based on students’ need, schools provide grade level instructions and intervention program to help individual students academically, social-emotionally or behaviorally. Many schools adopt a school-wide multiage structure. It allows schools to divide the instruction into groups of students. At Albany Elementary, they called it “Title 1” curriculum. It is an in-class or pull-out program. It was designed to give at-risk students supplemental instruction in reading and reading-related areas as well as mathematics. With the in-class program, the special education teacher went to different classes and stayed at each class for a period of time every day. During that time, students who need help formed a group with the special education teacher doing literacy or mathematics activities. Other students in the same class break into groups: some work with their teacher, some do independent reading activities (such as pair reading), some work on the worksheets or listen to audio books. As for the pull-out program, students in need go to the special education teacher’s classroom. The teacher and her/his instructional assistants worked with the students two hours daily Monday through Thursday. They provide more individualized attention to the students and meet their needs. They use literacy activities, guided reading groups and technology to build students’ self-esteem and confidence.



A reading aid used in “Title 1” class

At Redkey Elementary School, there is a special program called “Reading Recovery”. The program has been led by RRCNA (Reading Recovery Council of North America). It is a research-based early intervention for reading. Before conducting the program, teachers have to take a full academic year of training. It helps first grade slow learners who have extreme difficulty in learning to read or write. Teachers give these children three to four tests a year. The contents of the tests include letter identification, word test, concepts about print, writing vocabulary, and hearing sounds in words. With Reading Recovery, children worked one-to-one with a highly trained teacher doing thirty minutes daily lessons. The components of the daily lessons are fluent writing (three to four words child knows and can write quickly), fluent reading (one to two familiar books), running record book (check of new book read yesterday), word work (using magnetic letters), writing (at least one sentence), introduction of a new book (building background and discussing unfamiliar concepts) and reading of new books. In the meantime, teachers give reading strategies and prompts to parents. The strategies range from level 1-4 to level 13-15. In this way, parents can be great helpers. Reading Recovery program levels children’s literacy from level 1 to level 20. Once a child reached level 20, he or she may discontinue the program. According to RRCNA, after 12-20 weeks of daily lessons, three fourth formerly slowest students reached grade level expectation.



Applicable Teaching Strategies

From what I observed, the strategies carried out in reading recovery program are very useful for my teaching. For enhancing the student’s spelling, Mrs. Couch at Redkey Elementary used magnetic letters or word chunks. By repetitive practices of spelling, the student got familiarized with sounds in words. For checking the student’s self-monitoring, she tried not to interrupt her student’s reading even when the student made a mistake. In this way, she might see if a child noticed something was wrong. Could he or she self-correct it and make it right. For practicing writing, she asked the student to write a sentence on a piece of paper. The sentence was drawn from the book the student read that day. Then, she cut the sentence into pieces word by word. The student had to read them accordingly. Later, the student unscrambled them into a complete sentence. Mrs. Couch gave the student an envelope and put the small pieces

of paper in it. She asked the student to take it home and glue them on his work book. These are all practical, efficient strategies. I'm looking forward to applying them on my class and making my students better learners and good readers.

I will have posters showing my expectations of my students in my future classroom (I do not have a classroom now).

- Be respectful
- Be responsible
- Make right choices
- Be yourself
- Read loudly
- Read daily
- Reminders about how to read
- Speak softly in the classroom

Summary

Finally, I would like to thank the teachers I observed at Albany Elementary: Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Hannah, Mrs. Royal and Mr. Huber; also the teachers at Redkey Elementary: Mrs. Gibson, Mrs. Flynn, Mrs. Miskinis and Mrs. Couch. Thank you for showing me the immense possibilities in teaching. From what I observed, I learned so much. Follow your steps, I will make good use of what I have learned. I will try my best to make my students good English speakers and good learners.

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