

# MY LEARNING TRIP TO IOWA

## JYH-LING SHIAU, ANKENG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



First of all, I would like to express my deep appreciation to the Taipei County Government for giving me this opportunity to visit the USA and explore my vision. This trip has definitely had a strong, positive influence on my approach to teaching.

During my stay in Iowa, I was aware of the high expectations the Taipei County Government had for us; I also had a desire to learn some new teaching methods and philosophies which could assist me in designing my English teaching so as to help students receive a better English education.

Secondly, I am very grateful to my host family. Mr. Rusty Martin and Ms. Kay Meyer opened their house to me with hospitality and passion.

The host dad, Mr. Rusty Martin, works for the Research Office in the Iowa State House, therefore I had the honorable chance to visit the State House guided by Rusty directly. It is an extraordinary building, beautiful and historical. On our tour of the State House, Rusty showed me the Supreme Court Chamber, the Grand Stairway, the G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) Banner, the State Library, and the Chambers of the Iowa Senate and the House of Representatives. The most exciting thing was to climb the stairs to the top of the roof—three hundred stairs altogether. When I reached the top, I could hardly breathe. However, I had the chance to capture the whole view of Des Moines from the top of the State House, which is very beautiful.

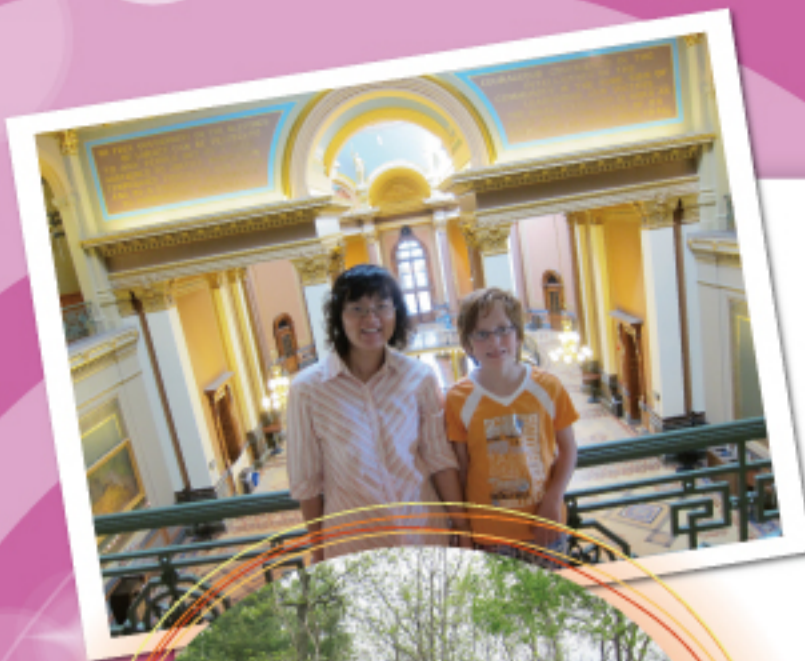
The host mom, Ms. Kay Meyer, introduced me to another kind of life—that of handicrafts and farming. She made the garden fence with her own hands, and even built a hen house in her backyard. She is very creative and capable.



Every day my host family prepared delicious food for dinner, and then we would have long conversations to exchange and share our views on social issues, politics, and our different customs. I enjoyed the conversations immensely, which let us get to know each other's country better.

Rusty and Kay even took me to some BBQ parties with their neighbors and families. All of them are very talkative and friendly to me as a visitor.

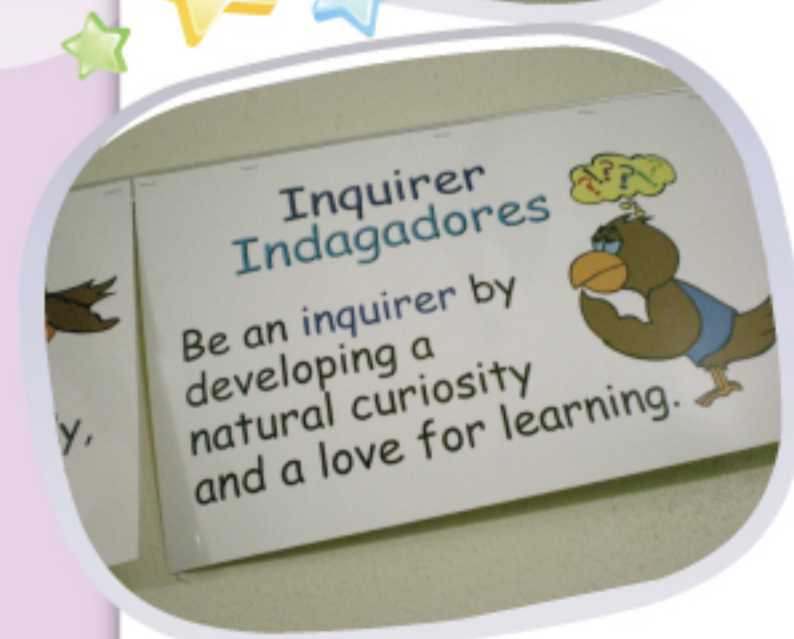
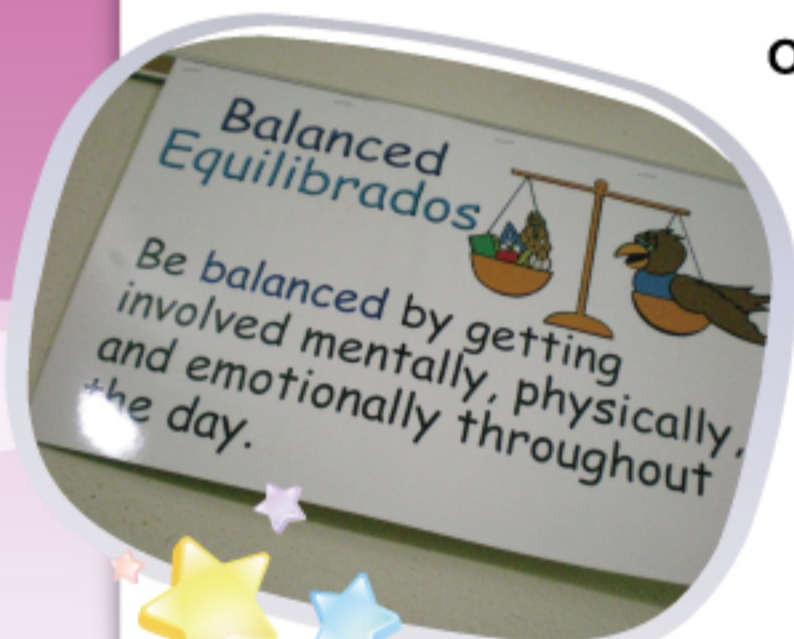




During my stay in Iowa, the most surprising thing to me was the open-minded attitude and their hospitality. I remember once Kay and I went to a plant shop. She bought six bags of clay, and put them in a shopping cart to go to the parking lot. On our way to the parking lot, an Iowan came to us. He explained that his car was parked next to ours, and asked if we needed any help lifting the bags into the car. We said that we were fine, but he was still worried and asked us again. I was shocked as he was so nice and willing to give a helping hand, just like my host family. They opened their house to me, and shared their lives with me. I felt so warm and touched.

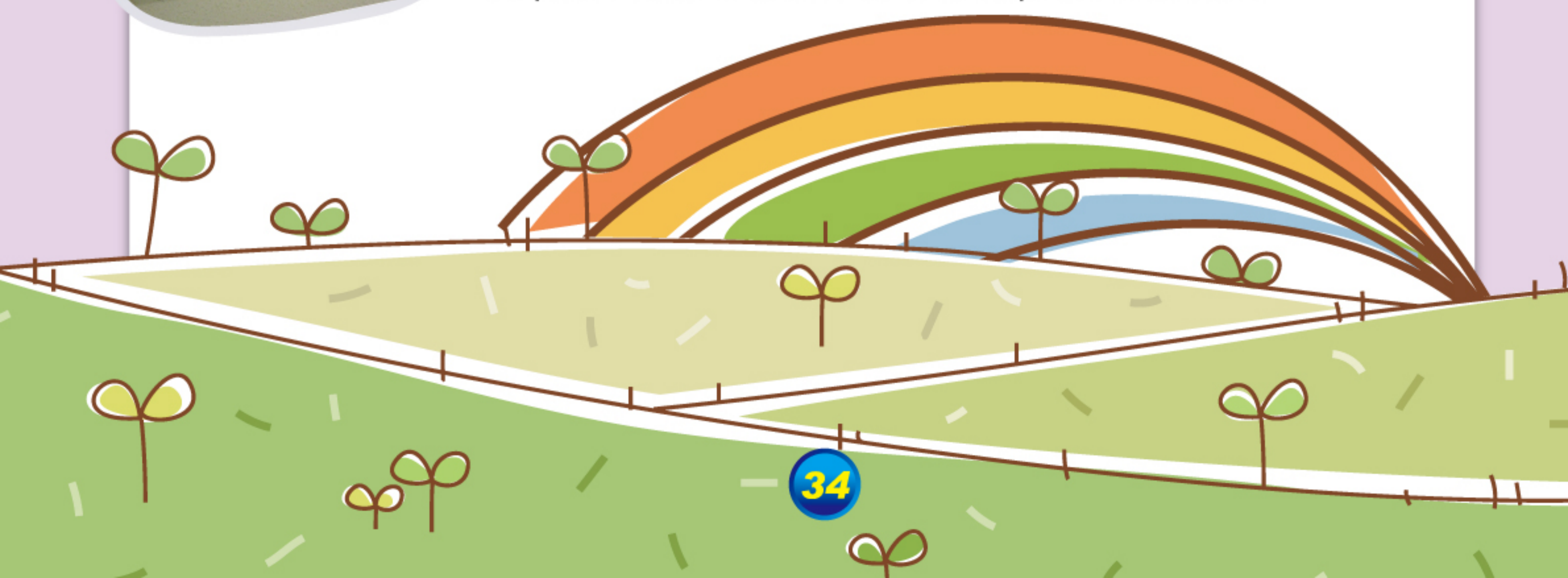
## THE IB PROGRAM AT HUBBLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

We visited Hubble Elementary School for the first week. This school has adopted the IB (International Baccalaureate) Program to be its educational curriculum. There are six themes in this program, and teachers are guided by these six themes as they design units of inquiry. The six themes are: who we are, where we are in place and time, how we express ourselves, how the world works, how we organize ourselves, and sharing the planet. It dealt with people with people, and people with the environment, and the world.



The six major skills in the IB program are social skills, research skills, thinking skills, communicating skills, and self-management skills. The IB program promotes the education of the whole person, emphasizing intellectual, personal, emotional, and social growth through all domains of knowledge.

The aim of the IB program is to develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.





## HOW I USE THE “SOAR AWARD” SHEET

While I was in Hubble Elementary School, I found the students to be very well-behaved and open-minded. It impressed me so much that I did not hear any noise or shouting in the classrooms or hallways. There was no running in the hallways, students always raised their hands before their names were called, and students always talked to visitors in a polite manner, etc.

Gradually, I noticed that almost every teacher used the “Soar Award” sheets in his classroom. On the “Soar Award” card there are twelve major positive attitudes listed. Whenever students behaved well, teachers would tick the specific attitude box, and hand the card to the student as an extra point. Once the student had collected a certain number of cards, he would receive a gift from the principal in his office. That is quite an honor for the students, so the students tried hard to collect as many cards as possible.

The attitudes on the “Soar Award” are: Appreciation, Confidence, Creativity, Empathy, Independence, Respect, Commitment, Cooperation, Curiosity, Enthusiasm, Integrity, and Tolerance. They are important qualities a student should have. Hence, I designed my own card after I returned to Taiwan. I made an “An-Keng (our school name) Soar Award” sheet. On the top of the list there are twelve attitudes I hope my students can have. I replaced some attitudes with easier synonyms for the students to better understand them. Meanwhile, I also added the Chinese translation.

In order to let my students understand the meaning of the attitudes, I gave them an explanation sheet, “the Learner Profile Self-Assessment”, which I was given at Hubble Elementary School. It has very clear definitions for each term, all written in easy English. This will be really helpful to my students. For example: “Risk-taker—I try new things and I am not afraid to make mistakes,” and “Thinker—I use my brain to think and ask questions.” In addition to the definition, I also recorded a sound file on my teaching Web site so students can practice pronouncing the terms at their convenience.

While I was explaining the attitudes to my students, they were very interested in reading them. I started to hand my students a “Soar Award” sheet, and tick the relevant box when I saw somebody with a good attitude. I also encouraged them to share the attitudes with their parents. Surprisingly, something amazing has happened to my class. My students asked me when they could obtain the award cards again, and under what circumstances. I can see that they are eager to get more, and it has a strong impact on them.



At that moment, I observed how “positive feedback” can influence a child; the more specific the feedback, the better. Students like to be encouraged and inspired. As teachers, we can tell students what good qualities we see in them, instead of continually trying to correct their bad attitudes.



Due to the good feedback from students, I plan to use the “An-Keng Soar Award” sheet for class management and character education in the coming semester. Some of my colleagues are very interested in the sheet and would like to adopt it, too. We look forward to seeing attitude changes among the students.

## HOW I APPLY LEARNING CENTERS

During my stay in Iowa, I observed that teachers used the “Learning Center” method for language teaching. The whole class was divided into several groups. The different groups worked on different assignments at the same time. However, the whole class was still very quiet and everybody was working hard.

After coming back to Taiwan, I designed a Learning Center teaching plan for my fourth grade students. It is a review class for lesson five of the textbook. I prepared six worksheets and planned to divide the class into six groups. The following chart was my plan:

- Activity 1: Two students form a group and do a role play (vocal only) based on the contents of pages 50~55. Be dramatic. Rotate the roles.
- Activity 2: Two students form a group and fill-in the correct dialogue drills on a comic drawing. (The dialogue has been removed from the picture for the students to fill-in.)
- Activity 3: Classroom English. Two students form a group. One shows a flashcard, and the other says the correct classroom English based on the flashcard’s picture. In the second round, one student can use body language for the other to guess.
- Activity 4: Review phonic combinations ‘-ue’ and ‘-uit’. List all the related ‘-ue’ and ‘-uit’ words on the sheet, and ask the whole group to read them out loud together. Then ask each student to take turns individually reading the ‘-ue’ and ‘-uit’ based poem.
- Activity 5: Two students form a group. They play an “Information Gap” game by asking each other questions and filling out the form. The pattern is: “Do you like \_\_\_\_\_?” “Yes, I do. / No, I don’t.”
- Activity 6: Two students form a group. They test each other’s ability to spell the new vocabulary words. When they succeed at spelling all of the words correctly, they can play cards.



Grouping is a very important issue here. I have tried to pull out the upper level and lower level students, and divide them evenly into each group. Therefore, the advanced learners could help the slow learners as they tried to complete the activities. The grouping was prepared in advance, and students were assigned to their groups at the beginning of class. I was in charge of group six to help students with any spelling problems.

When the students participated in this type of activity, they were curious and enjoyed exploring the tasks. As I planned, the upper level students tried their best to assist the lower level students. Every group focused on its task. After four minutes, groups rotated to the next table. It was a good method for reviewing. However, training is a crucial factor in practicing this "Learning Center" approach. Due to their excitement and unfamiliarity with the activities, my students made a lot of noise, and some students tried to interrupt others during the process. I suppose more manners training before beginning this project would improve the quality of learning.

## **GROUP LEARNING OF LETTERS**

There is a phenomenon in Taiwan that students' English levels vary within one class. Some parents have their children attend "cram schools" so they can learn English at a faster pace than it's taught in the regular public school curriculum. Thus, when the public school English teacher introduces new material in class, some students are already very familiar with what is being taught, while others are just seeing it for the first time. In my second grade class, I have faced this situation. The challenge to me was to meet the needs of both groups of students so the class wouldn't be too easy or too difficult for either group.

Grouping is one method to deal with this situation that came to mind. Again, I separated the whole class into two groups. Group A was the team which needed more practice with letters, while group B was the team which could extend their knowledge of letters. After I introduced some letters to the class, I assigned group A an assignment to practice the letters; students had to write each letter six times. The assignment for group B was to make dictionary pages for the target letters. The dictionary pages should include the upper and lower case of the letter, two vocabulary words for each target letter with the first letter of the word capitalized, and a drawing and Chinese translation beside each vocabulary word. This activity usually worked well, with everyone striving to complete his assignment and enjoy the result.



## CONCLUSION

I would like to give my deep appreciation to the Iowa Department of Education, all the teachers and staff at Hubbell Elementary School, my host family, and the Taipei County Government. All their effort has made this learning trip so unforgettable and beneficial.

I will extend my learning and observation into my classroom teaching, and share my experience and knowledge with my colleagues so our whole teaching team can benefit from the trip.

