



A Supportive Learning Environment

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Being an English teacher in the elementary school in New Taipei City is very wonderful. The Bureau of Education of New Taipei City and English Curriculum & Instruction Consulting Team of New Taipei City provide a series of courses as well as workshops for English teachers to brush up their teaching skills. After we finish the well-organized teaching development courses step by step, we'll still have the chance to advance ourselves by applying for the short-term international training program. Luckily, I was selected as one of the members of New Taipei City Educators Delegation in 2015 and felt honored to be able to visit 7 schools including 6 public schools and 1 private school in Virginia, in New Jersey and in New York.

When I stepped into these well-guarded American schools, I found that although these schools belong to different school districts, they have one thing in common- they try their best to create a supportive learning environment for their students. Various layouts of schools do mold different learning atmospheres. Just as William and Kathleen (2012) said, "A healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment enables students, adults, and even the school as a system to learn in powerful ways." In this essay, I will share my observations which will be divided into two sections. One is related to mascots, mottos and rules and display windows of schools while the other is about the decoration of outdoor classroom, classroom arrangement, carpets, classroom library, classroom helper system, morning meeting/messages, posters and string decoration.

School

1. Mascots

The rug on which there was a flying eagle with keys drew our attention as soon as we entered the Centreville Elementary School. Then, the picture of many students riding on a yellow school bus with an eagle behind the wheel impressed me a lot. As a visitor here, I could immediately understand the school's values and vision because of this mascot. Similarly, other schools we visited also chose different animals to be their mascots such as a cub for the Cub Run Elementary School, a tiger for the Howell Township Adelpia School and so on. As we know, different mascots represent different schools because each mascot-no matter it is a symbol, a character, a name or a logo- can promote school spirit and unite a community including students, teachers and parents in a positive way.

2. Mottos and rules

Every school must provide a safe and supportive learning environment for every student. In order to achieve this goal, every school develops its' own mottos or rules

describing how students are expected to treat each other. In the Greenbrair East Elementary School, students are taught to follow three mottos: “I will respect myself,” “I will show respect for other people” and “I will treat our schools and environment with respect.” As for PS 173q School, its school rules include four aspects, communication, learning, respect and safety. The posters of school mottos and rules are displayed not only on the school bulletins or walls but also in every classroom to remind students of the importance of them. As long as all students follow the school mottos or rules, they can enjoy a positive environment which supports learning.

3. Display windows

The design of display windows is also a great way to create a friendly and caring environment which may indirectly influence students’ learning. Take two display windows in the PS 173q School as examples. Most American schools will carefully decorate their schools during various holiday seasons to allow students to emerge themselves into the holiday spirit while walking in the school buildings. The period we stayed in America was near Halloween. Although, every school we visited had put up decorations for Halloween, the decorations in the PS 173q School appealed to me the most. In addition, in order to bring the world to the students in PS 173q School, the school introduces not only books related to China, Japan and so on, but also some special things representing every country. America is referred to as a melting pot because it welcomes people from many different countries. This is not just a slogan; the school puts it into practice by the layout of the display window.

Classroom

1. Outdoor classroom

A facilitative learning environment should be a place that students are conscious of being respected as well as accepted. Here teachers try their best to make their classroom more inviting by decorating outdoor classroom with all students’ pictures, drawings and worksheets rather than just few excellent students’ works. They respect and accept everyone’s uniqueness and make them feel very welcome in the class.



2. Classroom arrangement

Different arrangements of students' desks and chairs serve different purposes. In Taiwan, most teachers arrange desks in multiple rows with multiple seats facing the 'front' of the room. However, in America, teachers arrange their class in various ways such as the style of hollow square which means a quadrangular table arrangement with all students facing the center of the room, the style of U shape and so on. Moreover, the shape of the desk is no longer restricted to square. It could be round, rectangle or even hexagon. In this way, the teacher will feel more flexible when it comes to adjusting the class arrangement to meet diverse needs.



3. Carpets

Carpets are essential to America classrooms. Students would spend most of their school day on them. Frank (2009) said that a carpet enhances learning because of its contribution to healthy, safe as well as comfortable indoor air. During many periods of class activities such as a morning meeting, storytelling and so on, teachers tend to ask their students to sit on a rug close to them. This transition between students' desks and a carpet can help students lower their anxiety and fatigue on learning. Furthermore, it can also help students build a more intimate as well as solid relationship with their teachers.



4. Classroom library

One of the distinguishing features of a classroom library in America is that a bountiful collection of books it has. Beside, it is well-displayed and accessible to every student. Teachers also put a lot of effort into classifying books into different levels. More than that, teachers would take students' levels into consideration when providing each of them with a suitable reading bag. In class, they would also emphasize the importance of choosing a just right book which has only one or two difficult words in a page to their students.

“When students read for pleasure, when they get ‘hooked on books’, they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the ‘language skills’ many people are concerned about.” Krashen (2004: 149)

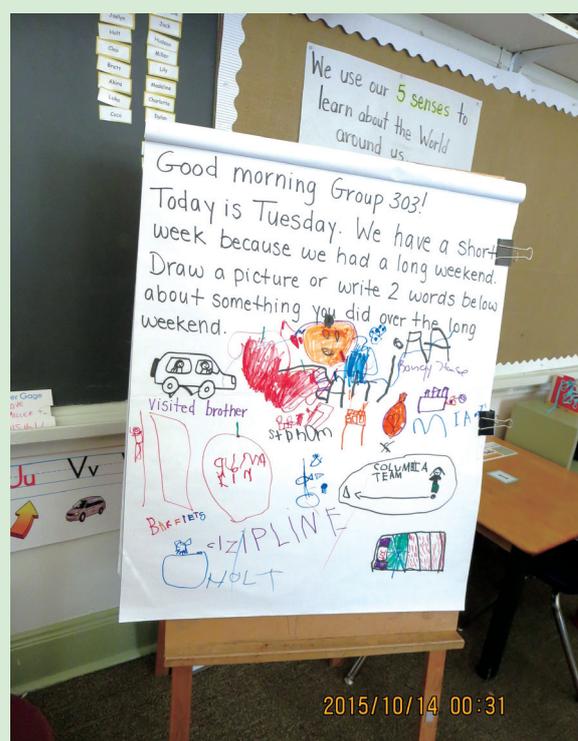
Teachers want to create independent readers so they pay much attention on their classroom libraries and apply many strategies to encourage their students to develop a lasting interest in reading.

5. Morning meeting/morning messages

I still remembered that as we visited the first class in the Centreville Elementary School, I found something very interesting. The schedule showed that the class started their school day with a morning meeting. Then, I found that every teacher in the following classes we visited all began his class with a morning meeting and left some morning messages on a poster or a whiteboard. I wondered what it was and how it worked in the class so I did a little research. As what I observed, the teacher sitting next to morning messages and his students would form a circle. Then, as Roxann and Carol (2014) concluded that greeting, sharing, group activity and morning message were four important components of a morning meeting.

“Morning meeting is a microcosm of the way we wish our school to be –community full of learning, safe, and respectful and challenging for all.” Roxann and Carol (2014:4)

What teachers want to do is to create a respectful, trust, collaborative, and supportive learning environment for all significant students.



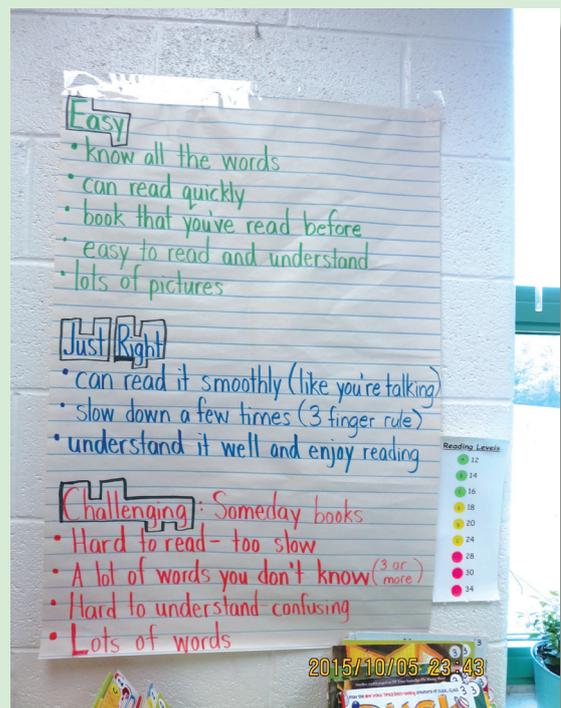
6. Classroom helper system

In order to involve all students in the class and give students a sense of belonging and responsibility, teachers would take a great advantage of the classroom helper system. Possible class jobs may include a key manager, a door holder, a classroom janitor, a librarian and so on. Each student would take turns serving as a different class helper. Classroom helper system is appropriate for different graders. Also, it is an effective way to help students cultivate their sense of duty, promote their positive behavior and make each member in the class feel warm and welcome.



7. Posters

Most scientists agree that 75% of what we know depends on our vision. Educators know that posters not only can brighten up the classroom but also can facilitate learning. Therefore, teachers all like to use posters to help their students to memorize what they taught. Taiwan is no exception to this trend. However, I found the presentation of posters were slightly different from what I saw in the classroom of Taipei American School, where I took part in the advanced training program. Most of the posters hang in the classroom are not ready-made posters. They are made by teachers themselves to help students review what they have learned, to teach them how to do things and so on. Likewise, every American elementary school classroom we dropped in was filled with posters and differed from what we had in Taiwan's classroom. The posters I observed could be classified into two groups, subject and informative posters. Subject posters related to the curriculum students are learning are also common in Taiwan. In my opinion, teachers in America preferred informative posters used to inform or educate students to do something. Take one as an example. It said that if I finish with all of my stations, I can read a book at my seat or bring any work I still need to complete back to my desk to work on. The other was about how to write a book step by step. In America, they focus on teaching children how to do things rather than giving them an answer to train their ability of problem-solving. In addition, unlike Taiwanese teachers, who like to display ready-made posters, American teachers like to make



their own posters sometimes during the class. Most of the time, the teacher and students are engaged in the process of making a poster together. It is wonderful to teach students that the whole class is a sharing community and that learning is everyone's business.

8. String decoration

Usually, if Taiwanese teachers want to make their classrooms look more appealing, cute or welcoming, they would display seasonal decorations or some outstanding students' artworks on the walls or bulletin boards in the classroom. We all know that we can reinforce and motivate students or model the way you expect students to follow by displaying students' works. However, the more excellent works we emphasize on, the less inconclusive, diverse and stimulating learning environment we offer. Not limited to the walls or the bulletins, American teachers make good use of every space in the classroom even the ceiling to hang all students' works. Using strings to decorate a classroom seems rare in Taiwan but actually it is very simple to make to encourage students at different levels. What we emphasize is to respect everyone's uniqueness and to create a highly effective learning environment.

Summary

The idea of how to build a supportive learning environment has been lingering on my mind since I started being an English teacher. A supportive learning environment as we know will promote positive and active engagement in learning. We as educators try our best to create such a facilitative learning environment. As a teacher in Taiwan, I know some of the methods we applied to our classes to have a good learning environment for our pupils. However, I am very curious about how other advanced countries deal with issues on how to build a supportive learning environment for students. Therefore, I feel honored to have this opportunity to visit many schools in America and to observe teacher-student classroom interaction. I do benefit a lot from this experience and understand there are some differences between the east and the west on the same educational issue.

In conclusion, American schools choose a mascot people recognize, set up school appropriate mottos and rules and use display windows which aim to propagate a multicultural perspective indirectly to enhance supportive learning environments. Similarly, in order to create a place where students feel respected and accepted and willing to learning, teachers also make a lot of effort. They start decorating outdoor classroom with all the works which students introduce themselves to others. Then, arranging their classroom to meet various needs, having all students circle on the carpet to make them feel relaxed, making good use of the classroom library to foster independent reading, adopting classroom helper system to build students' sense of responsibility, holding a morning meeting to interact with students, displaying many posters and hanging all students' works by means of strings are some techniques they use. All of the above mentioned are valuable references for us to build a more supportive learning environment for our future generation.

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