



My American Dream of Education

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Dr. Martin Luther King, a fearless human rights fighter, delivered a speech “I Have a Dream” in 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. He said “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.” When I visited the Washington Monument in Washington D.C., I asked myself, “What’s my dream as a teacher? Do I still have a dream?” Five years ago, I was the youngest and the most enthusiastic English teacher of my school. As time goes by and teachers come and go, I’m becoming the most “senior” one among the “new” English teachers. The “new” teachers leave my school right after their two-year contract is due. Every two years, I feel I’m left alone in an environment where I can’t change at all. After the educational training to America, I feel inspired and recharged. I heard about the term “American Dream” frequently on media, but I didn’t know what it really meant until I actually visit the greatest country of the world myself. In this trip, I see the “American Dream” in schools, in classrooms, in the eyes of children. I see my “American Dream”, which I can make a difference in my classroom and my students. The followings are my dreams.

I have a dream that my students respect themselves and others.

Among the schools we visited in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York, they all had “respect” in the school motto (see Figure 1). I also found it showed repeatedly in the school motto of TAS (Taipei American School) when I visited there before. So, I asked myself, why is “respect” so important in American education? Then, I got the answer after observing the classrooms in America. The first class my partner and I observed was 1st grade Language Arts. The teacher greeted the students and asked what they did for the weekend. After that, she had the students greet others with a chant-“Five on top, five down low; you’re a friend, I’m glad to know (see Figure 2).” I was very amazed that the teacher always talked in a soft voice, and the students were all well-mannered. When it was getting a little chaotic, she only reminded them once and said, “I think Jack is doing a good job, because he listens to me carefully all the time,” for instance. The students instantly kept their voice down. Then, I realized that the teacher respected

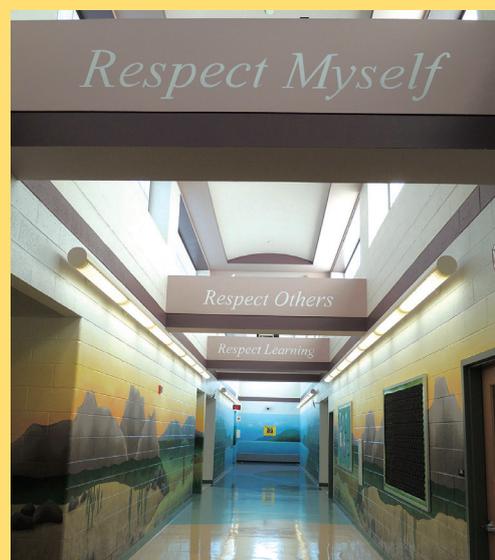


Figure 1. School motto of Centreville Elementary School, Virginia.

every student as a whole person, and the students respected her likewise.

After the observation, my partner and I discussed about how the teacher didn't yell at her students to keep them quiet, and she didn't use the microphone like we do in Taiwan. We need the microphone to fight back the high volume of students. Then, we found that there were plenty of posters and signs to remind the students what behaviors were respectful and disrespectful, so that they knew what they should behave (see Figure 3). As the principal of Centreville elementary school, Virginia, mentioned in the introduction of the school, the students were fully aware of the consequences of their behaviors, and they had to pay the price for everything they did. The misbehaved students would have to go to the principal's office to explain and were responsible for the consequences. The students knew clearly what they should do and not to do from the posters and school system (see Figure 4). On the contrary, in Taiwan, teachers seldom make posters to show what behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate. We expect students to know all the rules already. Once they do something wrong and get scolded, they don't know what they did wrong and may do it again in the future. Now, in my classroom, when my students make mistakes, I explain to them what they did wrong, and tell them who are doing a good job to set up good examples for the whole class, instead of pointing out their mistakes constantly without teaching them what right and wrong is.

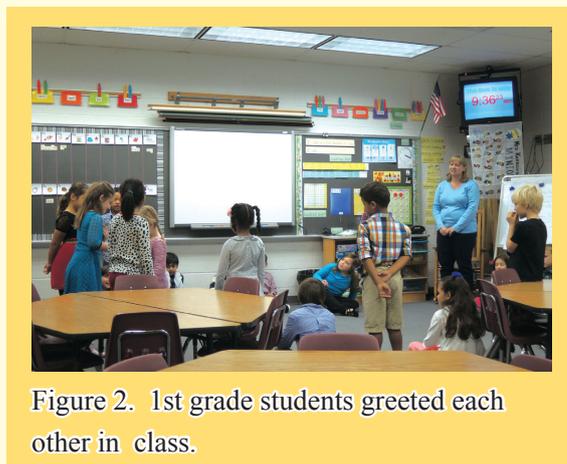


Figure 2. 1st grade students greeted each other in class.

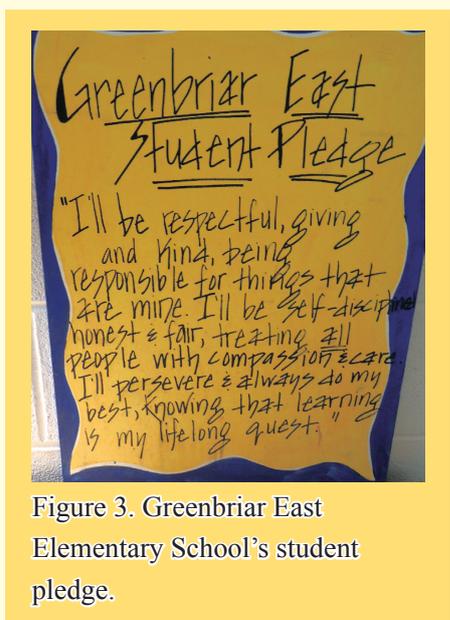


Figure 3. Greenbriar East Elementary School's student pledge.



Figure 4. Class rules and posters of school motto of Centreville Elementary School.

I have a dream that my students read independently.

Reading is a crucial part in American education. In the elementary schools we visited, all the classes had their own libraries and the teachers taught them how to read

independently. There were lots of posters and diagrams of reading strategies, teaching them how to learn more from the book in the classroom (see Figure 5). In the school library, there were puppets from the famous stories, such as “The Cat in the Hat” and “The Wild Thing.” There were also theater and rocking chair for teachers to read stories to the students, which made the reading environment comfortable and relaxing (see Figure 6 &7). In the lower-grade Language Arts class, the teacher read the story to the students sitting on the rug, creating a cozy atmosphere to read, the students were highly involved in the story and asked questions while reading. Then, the teacher taught phonics or vocabulary from the book. After that, students could read their books on their own, which were selected based on their reading level, and the teacher could help the students with difficulties. In higher grade class, the teacher talked about the author and the introduction of the book with the students, having them make predictions and read the story at home. The students could share their thoughts on the book with their friends afterwards. After reading, the students could work with their group and write about the story, because they were prepared with the reading skills.

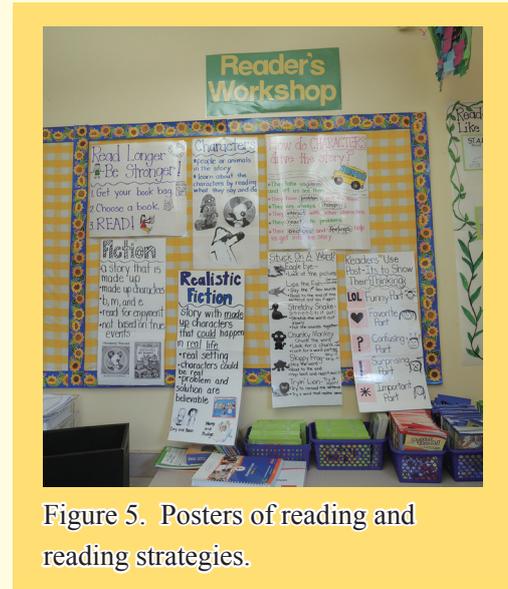


Figure 5. Posters of reading and reading strategies.



Figure 6. Puppets from the stories of Dr. Seuss.

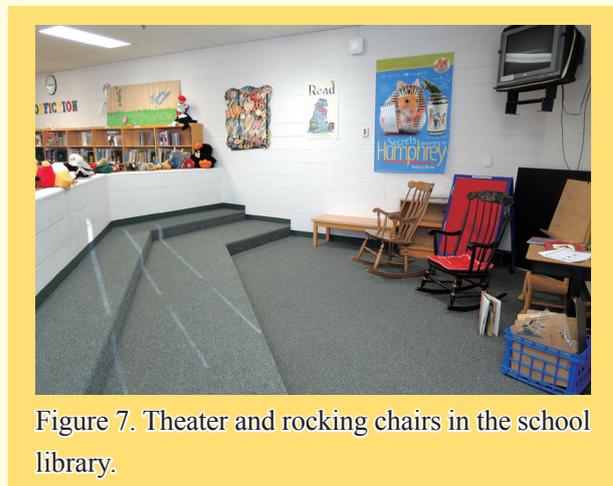


Figure 7. Theater and rocking chairs in the school library.

Phonics, vocabulary, sentence patterns, and tenses were taught through reading. In Taiwan, we use text books to teach them separately, but I discover the students have a hard time applying their prior knowledge when they read picture books. We teachers often used bottom-up method when teaching vocabulary and sentence patterns, whether than top-down method like the American teachers did. After I saw how the American teachers taught reading in top-down method, I discovered my teaching method was bottom-up, and my students had difficulties when it came to reading longer texts. Now, I decide to use top-down method when teaching texts, having the students read the text first, then find the vocabulary

and sentence patterns. They learn how to scan and skim for important information when reading the text. In addition, I find that I leave very little time to have students read picture books, because there are lots of things to teach on the text book already. I should make more time for students to read picture books so that their vocabulary and reading skills can be expanded. I hope one day that my student could read independently and enjoy reading like the American students do (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Students read independently in the class.

I have a dream that my students can be makers.

In many classrooms we visited in America, I found that there were lots of hands-on activities for students to think and make things. For instance, in PS 173q elementary school, New York, we visited a 1st grade wood craft workshop. The young students made wooden musical instruments by themselves. They measured and cut the wood, which applied their math and hand making skills. I was very surprised that the teacher let them do everything by themselves. In Taiwan, teachers are afraid that the students get hurt while using sharp tools, so we avoid activities need cutter knives or saws. Taiwanese teachers teach theories and have students memorize everything for the exams, but also kill their creativity at the same time. I read the book “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” by Amy Chua, describing the author’s efforts to give her children a traditional and strict Chinese upbringing, which was very different from the free and self-esteemed American upbringing. The book generated a huge response in America, and raised a battle between the “American” mothers and “Tiger mothers.” The author, Amy Chua, said that Asian students are straight A students at school, however, when they start working, their influence are rather weak in American society, because they are less creative and confident than “American” students. After the trip, I finally understand that why American students excelled in creativity and production. The teachers design the lessons that students can apply what they had learned in class, therefore, they have the ability to create and solve problems. For example, I visited a 5th grade Social Studies class. The teacher first asked the students where they wanted to move to in America and why. Then, she showed some videos of different states of America encouraging people to pay a visit there. Students were very interested in the videos. After that, she had the students discuss with their group on how to promote Virginia, their hometown, and they had to make a video for it. Instead of just showing the videos for fun, the teacher wanted them to really think, discuss, and make a video together. The students not only learned the knowledge of Social Studies, but also learned how to communicate and work with others. When I get back to school, I realize that I should have my students do more, rather than listen more. The autonomy of learning belongs to the students, not the teacher. Though hands-on activities take time, it’s very worthwhile that students know what they’ve learned is useful, and they can apply their multiple intelligences while making. Meanwhile, other learning skills are also developing as they create and solve problems. Like Hsun Tzu, the ancient Chinese

philosopher, once said “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” (see Figure 9 & 10)



Figure 9. Dolls made by recycled paper box and fabrics.



Figure 10. Building blocks castle in the class room.

I have a dream that my students are happy and confident.

As I observed the classrooms in America, I found that students were attentive and enjoying their learning. Though students had no recess in the morning, they could go to the bathroom or have some water freely if they informed the teacher first. They concentrated on learning in the morning, and had P.E. (Physical Education) class or played on the playground in the afternoon. I was very surprised that they didn't have recess in the morning, and they still paid full attention on learning. I realized that maybe having too much short recess between classes may cut off student's attention and interfering learning. We have 40 minutes for each class and 10 minutes for recess in Taiwan, but many students don't have time for bathroom or drink some water, because they have to finish or correct their homework, let alone having enough time to check out a book at the library or play on the playground. I think it's a good idea that students can concentrate on one thing at a time, so that they can really focus on their learning and have a good time playing like children should do. As the old proverb goes “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.” Taiwanese students work very hard at schools and cram schools. After school, they play online games for fun, instead of physical sports games. In contrast, American students have enough time to play at school, and they have little homework (compared with the amount of homework of Taiwanese students). Therefore, the parents can take them outdoors to go camping or fishing on the weekends. Furthermore, I also find that the American students are more confident and outspoken. The reason is that American teachers encourage them to express themselves and respect each student's individuality. It's fine to be yourself as long as you respect yourself and others. Compared with the free-spirited and respectful culture of America, in the culture zone based on the Confucian culture, individuality is underestimated and ignored in Taiwan. We have to be humble and quiet all the time to be a good person, while it's the opposite in American. Self-esteem and confidence are highly valued. You need to fully express yourself and be proud of who you are. America is a multicultural country consisted of people from all the over world. Hence, embracing diversity is part of Americans' lives, for they live and work with people from so many different cultural backgrounds. However, in Taiwan, we don't appreciate or respect people from diverse cultural backgrounds as much as American do. As

a teacher, it reminds me to respect every student's cultural background and individuality. We should treat every student as a whole person and respect who he or she is no matter what. We also have many students whose fathers or mothers are originally from foreign countries. It's our job to teach each student to respect one another wherever their parents are from, and love the country where we were born and raised. (see Figure 11&12)

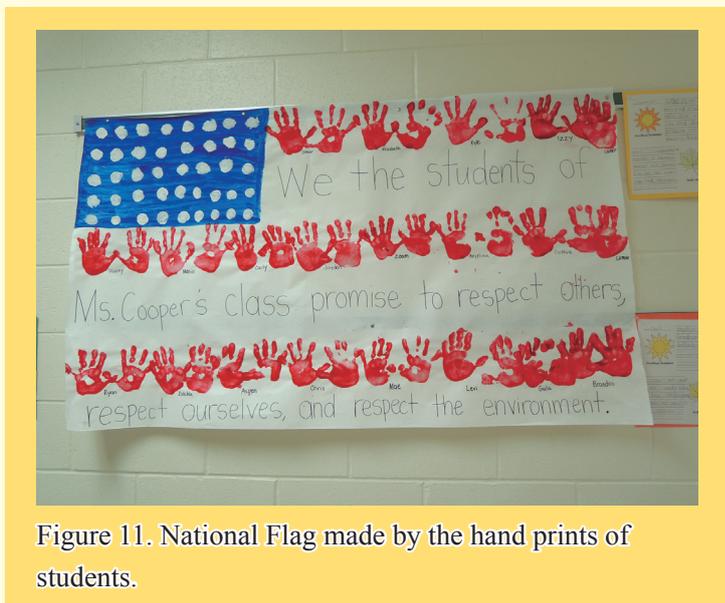


Figure 11. National Flag made by the hand prints of students.

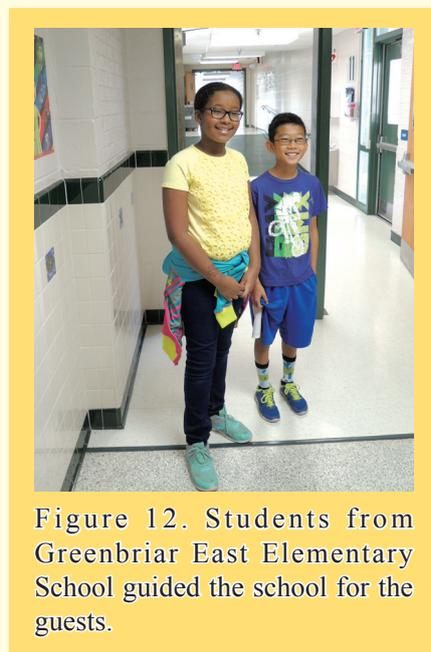


Figure 12. Students from Greenbriar East Elementary School guided the school for the guests.

Finally, I hope that my dreams are not just dreams. Even though making changes take time and efforts, and the obstacles are always there, I know my dreams will come to a reality one day as long as I never give up trying.