

The Training Course in the USA

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As the saying goes" When one door shuts, another opens!" I got a

second chance to apply for the training course in America. "Awesome" is the word I could think of for this entire trip. I finally figured out why many people would spend millions of dollars sending children to America. It is truly a "paradise" for kids to study, full of encouragement, self-pride and respect.

Students' behaviors were quite acceptable. They could sit tight for arrangement, such as self-silence reading, working in pairs and groups. They didn't interrupt the teachers or other learners. They would raise their hands before they voiced their opinions, including asking any questions. They also asked for permission if they wanted to do anything, like sharpening their pencils.

I was so impressed that the homeroom teachers acted so patiently, modeling the good behaviors. If a student made any noise, the teacher would simply say, "That's not appropriate. That's not acceptable. Is somebody talking when I am or I'm about to say it? Can you be ready? Why will you interrupt me like that? What am I doing right now?" or "My job is to teach you, your job is to listen. That should be in your backpack, sweetie." They always hold students responsible for their behaviors.

They also constantly checked students' understanding by asking "Everybody with me so far?" Teachers express their thanks from time to

time, saying "Thank you for being so quiet waiting for me. Thank you for raising your hand, etc." If a student really excelled, teachers would say "Give yourself a pat on the back. God job! Nice! Neat! or Way to go!" All that simple yet important expression would just make their day. And all students were happily involved in the lesson plans, truly a win-win situation.

This training course consists of two major parts—school district training lessons and class observations. They will be stated as follows.

I. The training lessons in the school district office

On the Wednesday's morning session, District Program Specialist, Amy Moss shocked me with the process of students' reading achievement. She brought it out that if a student is strong in phonemic awareness, then he/she can be a strong reader as well. And phonemic awareness should be focused on before teachers head on teaching phonics. Though stunned, I felt so relieved that I attended the work shop in the morning. I always teach phonics first. I connect the sound to letters immediately. I don't engage the students in the phonemic awareness at all. Maybe that's why I can't get the slow learners to pronounce "bag," though the segment of the sounds have been taught so many times. The correct order is phonic teaching should be the name of the picture, then the sound

of the picture and comes the spelling of the picture.

In Hacienda La Puente, the process of phonemic awareness will be continued from K-3. With four years of training on the part, of course, students can have a solid foundation of how the English language should be pronounced.

From these training lessons, not only did I learn how to engage learners into the forty-three sounds in English language, but also I learned that teachers can not just teach when they feel right, they have to teach something that has been proven to be right.

I also got the idea of "the six principles of effective practice." They are shaping, length of practice, monitoring, level of accuracy, distributed practice and time between practice sessions. Teachers should be there to provide help for the students throughout all the process.

I was also amazed by the BTSA program as well as the "Induction Program." BTSA stands for Beginning Teacher Support & Assessment. Support provider known as SP will give support to the participating teacher known as PT for two years when they start their teaching career. They meet once a week to solve problems the new teachers encounter. This concept is totally new to me, for in Taiwan we are pretty much on our own. We didn't get any support from the administration. Luckily we

survived. "Learning to teach is a life-long process." It seems that teachers in Hacienda La Puente get a lot of support from the administration. It is not OK to not ask for help. Everybody works as a group.

Data-based teaching strategy is also something new to me. Honestly speaking, before I went to the States, I thought they didn't take test scores so seriously. Then I found out they did and they had a database about all the students' academic performance on language arts and math. Also principals have formal observations three times a year. So if a teacher cannot make students scores higher, he/she has to figure out how. Everybody knows "what" they need to do, but it's "how" that matters.

II. Class Observation in Los Altos Elementary School

Day1

The classroom setting is nice, comfortable, neat and cozy. The classroom is equipped with carpet on the floor, Elmo and an easel. Also every classroom is air-conditioned. In this school, there are two after-school Chinese classes. The schedule is twice in a week, Tuesday and Thursday. Each lesson lasts for two hours without any recess. They hired teachers from Taiwan to teach the American Born Chinese mandarin. Teachers use laptops to show learners what the Chinese

characters look like. They had a special phonetic system to help the learners sound out all the Chinese characters. According to the teacher, Chinese now has become more and more popular in the States.

In the day school, the period lasts for ninety minutes. Between the periods, there is a fifteen-minute morning recess. The lunch break is forty-five minutes. Afterwards, the kids line up in the field waiting to be picked by homeroom teachers.

The students took a test called "the California English Development Test" for the first two periods. It's a special program designed for non-native speakers of English. The teacher separated them using blockers. The students sat in groups of five or four students. Instead of using the CD player to help test the students, the teacher read the questions by herself.

The teacher also pulled in some of other teachers' students and assessed them together. Some of her students went to another teacher's classroom. The teachers usually monitored when students were doing their reading comprehension. The teacher's attitude toward kids was friendly. She would remind a student who dropped a pencil on the ground with the expression "What's on the floor, sweetie?" If a student asks an irrelevant question, she will say "Yes,

my friend." And then "Does your question have anything to do with the math question? If not, I don't want to hear it."

If students were done with any sections, they could go fetch books to read. Unlike students in Taiwan, who usually act passively, students in this class knew exactly what they should be doing. It occurred to me that we should provide enough books for students to refer to whenever kids in Taiwan have free time during class hours.

Then, in the afternoon came the "Sharing Day." Sharing Day is a day for the student of the week. He/she could bring one of their belongings to school to share with others. They had to state the reason why they brought this specific item and whom they got it from. The other students could ask two questions each to clarify their thoughts.

Day 2

--Field trip

Students went to the Rowland home, a house built in 1832. Students were doing a lot of "station activities." In some stations, students were asked to grind the corns into powder. It is pretty much the same in Taiwan. We ask our kids to grind the sesame, peanuts and crackers in a silver bowl to make the "ground tea." Kids helped out

each other. Parents were also invited to participate the event. You could tell how happy everybody was from their faces. I heard that there were field trips every three or four months. It was refreshing for me, for I could sit on an American School Bus, and be more part of the class members.

--AR, accelerated reader

The students were given an account number. Then they could use it to get to the system called "accelerated reader", where they were being accessed when they finished one book weekly. If they passed a certain level, they could head to the next. It is all computer-programmed. All the teacher needs to do is provide the account number. How neat it is!

Day 3

--Kindergarten & first grader combo class

Today I observed Jane's class. She is the teacher of the year. And I could see why she got selected. She arranged the class quite well. In her class, there are kindergarteners and first graders. She started out her class with a song mixed in English and Chinese, the song is called "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." And then she told them a story about sounds. Students were asked to sit quietly on each grid of the

carpet. She wouldn't go any further if any of the students misbehaved.

Then the kindergarteners were kept busy with hands-on activities. They had to make a paper animal puppet. The teacher pulled the first graders out to another side of the classroom, teaching them math—Six plus four equals ten. Ten is four and six, and vice versa. She used a lot of different colors of cubes to help students better understand this concept. During the process, if the kindergarteners made any noise, she would give them a signal or tell them to work quietly.

The words in this class were so much powerful than in my class in Taiwan. The students respected the other learners. They really engaged themselves in the self-silence project. I was wondering how it could be possible. Students in Taiwan seldom respect others. All they care about is themselves. Maybe that's something I need to work on. I should put more focus on the attitude of the students than the academic performance.

Day 4

--Cross Country

"Cross Country" is somewhat like the "Sports Day" in Taiwan. Kids from Grade one to Grade five all participated. They ran around a

big field. Each grade ran in different circles. I just wanted to point out that I really appreciate the way they praise the kids. They gave almost every kid a certificate if he/she could finish the race.

The competition is not about winning the game, but about participation. Another thing that impressed me a lot is that all the teachers stood in the finish line, welcoming the runners. They cheered them up by saying "Good job, well-done etc." If I were a runner, I would be so proud of myself if I could make it to the end.

Day 5

--Laptop System(fifth graders)

The school district spends a lot of money on students to meet their needs. They offered every fifth grader a brand new laptop with wireless access, so called the "laptop system". The laptop system allows the teacher and students to communicate through the Internet. Also students have access to the "Blackboard" system. In that system, they can hand in their assignment in "My Access." It is a computer program designed for teachers to mark students' compositions.

When the teacher labeled a student as a slower learner, he/she could assign a package of exercises for that student to do more practice through the laptop system, too. Or if the majority of the

class failed on a certain topic, say Algebra, the teacher could assign more exercises regarding Algebra to each student. The teacher could also require the learners to hand in the assignment by certain date. All that fascinating interaction happens through the little tiny laptop. I hope someday in the future we can have the same too.

School authorities also invited a deputy to school. This deputy taught the fifth graders how to set goals. Steps to reach goals are listed as follows.

1. The goal must to be important to you.
2. The goal must to be positive.
3. The goal must to be specific.
4. The goal must to be possible.

He also demonstrated some examples to let the students decide whether or not it was a good goal. For example, he said "Can I set the goal that I want to go to the moon tomorrow? Why or why not?" The answer would be no, of course, because it is not possible.

To sum up, I really like the effort they put in education. They set goals for learners to reach. They scaffold the learners, providing every resource they can find. And everybody benefits. Students are willing to give their best. Parents appreciate the teachers'

effort on teaching. So there will be fewer complaints. Teachers are the biggest winners. They enjoy teaching! And again, I am grateful I had the chance to see the American school system and that "God opened another door" for me!

