

My Hubbell Experience

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At the end of April, 2008, I was lucky to have the opportunity to visit Des Moines, Iowa, for a two-week trip sponsored by the Education Bureau of the Taipei County Government. I stayed with Mr. Schott, the principal of Hubbell Elementary School, and his lovely family for the first week. Not only was I able to become part of his family and experience their daily life, but I also got to take a closer look at the school's operation and observe a lot of classes. What interested me the most were the similarities and differences of the school system between Hubbell Elementary School and the elementary schools here in Taipei County.

School buildings

Hubbell Elementary is a three-story building with 15 classes, ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade. It seems that most of the public elementary schools in Des Moines contain kindergarten through fifth grade, and the sixth grade is included with junior high schools. At Hubbell, all of the classes are in one building, and the hallways are enclosed indoors. There aren't as many windows as there are in the classrooms of Taiwan, but all of the rooms are air-conditioned. Kindergarten, first grade and second grade classrooms are relatively bigger than the other grades, thus younger kids have more space to move around. The class size varies from 20 to 27 students per class.

Looking back at Taiwan, like most elementary schools here, Jhuwei Elementary contains students from kindergarten all the way to sixth grade. There are two main classroom buildings, with a total of 35 classes; there are 30 to 35 students in one class. None of the rooms are air-conditioned and the windows either face the hallway or the street. Classrooms are right next to each other and the doors are usually open, so it's easy to hear what the neighboring class is doing, especially if the teacher uses a microphone while teaching, as many teachers in Taiwan do. All of the rooms are about the same size.

Unlike the teachers at Hubbell, who stay in the same room and teach the same grade every year, homeroom teachers in Jhuwei have to move from one classroom to another every year. Usually a teacher teaches the same group of students for two years, from grade 1 to 2, grade 3 to 4, or grade 5 to 6.

Daily routines

School hours at Hubbell begin at 8:15 daily and finish at 3:00 p.m. An opening announcement starts the day in the principal's office, where there is a PA system that broadcasts into every single room. Students sit in their own room and listen to the principal's announcements, which are followed by the singing of the national anthem. After the opening, teachers will start their school day by counting how many students want to eat hot lunch or taking attendance.

Jhuwei students have to be at school by 7:50 a.m. The first period is for homeroom teachers to collect homework, write in communication books, collect money for lunches or the school bus, or simply for the students to study or read a book on their own. There are no daily opening announcements, but there is a weekly gathering on Monday mornings. All of the students will gather in the courtyard to listen to announcements or receive awards. School finishes at 3:40 p.m.

At lunch time, Hubbell students are brought to the dining hall to have lunch. Students of the same grade have lunch at the same time. They have about twenty to twenty-five minutes for lunch and then they go back to their own room. Teachers usually go to the lounge and eat the lunch they brought with the other teachers. Lunch time is very different in Jhuwei. Students eat their lunch in their own classrooms, and homeroom teachers have to eat lunch with their students. The hot lunch is brought to each classroom. After lunch, students have about forty minutes to take a nap.

Another very interesting difference between Hubbell and Jhuwei, which I think is also true for most of the public schools in Des Moines and Taiwan, is the number of times of recess. At Hubbell, students of the same grade have recess at the same time. For example, kindergarteners have two recesses in one day, from 10:00 to 10:20, and from 11:55 to 12:15. First graders only have one recess, which lasts for 30 minutes, from 11:00 to 11:30. In Taiwan, elementary school students get a break every forty minutes, that is after every period. There are a total of eight periods each day, so students get seven breaks—two twenty-minute breaks, four ten-minute breaks, and a one hour lunch break. During the twenty-minute breaks, students clean their classroom and the campus.

Teaching and Learning

A lot of learning focus at Hubbell is put on literacy, including guided reading, shared reading, reading aloud, phonics skills, literature, and writer's workshop...etc. Almost every teacher has guided reading groups in the morning. A guided reading group means the teacher takes five or six students at a time and teaches them to read, while the rest of the class does work stations or learning centers. Classroom management is very important since the teacher only works with a few students and the other students are doing different things at the same time.

Ms. Aerisolphal's kindergarten class was the very first class I observed, and her class was very well disciplined. The students sat on the carpet, which is their listening position, and the teacher gave instructions. Ms. Aerisolphal assigned students to different tables with different tasks and explained what each table was expected to do. When students were dismissed, they went to their assigned table and started working in groups. Some were cutting and coloring, some were writing worksheets, some were doing puzzles and some were sorting out letters. Meanwhile, Ms. Aerisolphal worked with five kids. They read a book together, worked on pronunciation, and then talked about the story. After some time, kids switched to a different table and did another task, while the teacher worked on reading with another group. The second group might not read the same book as the first group. Reading material is chosen according to that group's reading ability.

Different reading strategies are applied by different teachers. Ms. Marcovis' first grade reading class was very impressive and she was willing to share her S-W-B-S idea with us. She started the lesson by flipping the pages of the storybook, *When I Am Old with You*. Students were asked to look at the pictures and try to remember the story they had read. Ms. Marcovis then reviewed the plot by using the S-W-B-S chart to get the students to tell her the main idea of the story. "S" stands for "somebody"—*a little girl*, "W" stands for "want to do"—*do things with Granddaddy when she's old*, "B" stands for "but"—*she will never be old with Granddaddy at the same time*, and "S" stands for "so"—*she did the stuff when she was young*. Sometimes another "S" will go before somebody, which stands for setting.

After filling in the chart as a class, the students were asked to re-read the story and try to answer some reading comprehension questions in pairs. Then students wrote a character web worksheet, where they picked a character of their choice and wrote about that person. Meanwhile, Ms. Marcovis worked with some kids who were

still behind. When the students finished with their worksheet, they could do centers.

Teachers at Hubbell don't rely so much on textbooks, and a unit is usually taught thematically. Ms. Schoessler's second grade math class not only taught math concepts, but also art and language. "Fractions" are a new concept for second graders. After the concept was taught, the teacher gave out fraction pieces. The students were asked to color the pieces before they cut them out. Then they had to glue the pieces to make an animal. At last, they labeled their animal and described it using fractions. Lots of creative ideas were solicited.

Ms. Apolonia's ELL (English Language Learning) class is another good example of cross-curricular integration. The ELL Program is a pull-out program to help kids who are new to America and whose mother tongue is not English. The teacher started the language class by showing the flow chart of how a tiny seed grows. She then read a story, *The Tiny Seed*, written by Eric Carle. She asked the kids some questions about the story before the students wrote their worksheet. The students were expected to cut out all of the processes of how a tomato grows, and then paste them in the right order. When the students finished with their worksheet, they got to plant their own seeds in a plastic cup in pairs. They carefully moistened the cotton pads before they put the seeds on the top. They put the plastic cup on the windowsill to make sure the seeds would get enough sun. Next, they colored the cover of their plant journal. Later they would have to write down their observation of how their seeds grew every day. I think this was a very successful activity which involved kids' multiple intelligences.

Sometimes students would go in and out of the classroom with a baggie of books. They either went to an ELL class or a reading recovery class. Reading Recovery is an early literacy intervention program designed for children who have literacy difficulties at the end of their first year at elementary school. It involves reading and writing in a daily one-to-one lesson with a highly trained teacher for a period of

between 15 and 20 weeks. At the end of that time, most children have caught up with their classmates and can read and write at a level appropriate for their age. Daily 30 minute lessons are individually designed and delivered by specially trained teachers. Reading Recovery teachers make moment-to-moment decisions to support the child's learning. During each lesson, children read many little books. These include 2 to 3 familiar books, a re-reading of the previous day's new book and the introduction and reading of a new story. Teachers keep a running record of the previous day's new book to analyze the child's independence and reading behavior. Children also compose, write and read their own messages or stories. In addition, children read slightly more challenging texts that they have not read before. Teachers provide detailed support for the children as they read these more difficult texts. Magnetic alphabet letters are used for sorting, to assist visual discrimination, and to analyze words.

By contrast, whole-class instruction is very common in Taiwan, and students usually sit at their desks and listen to the teachers most of the time. Textbooks are the main teaching material and teachers are expected to finish them by the end of the semester. There are a total of seven learning areas: Language, Math, Social Studies, Science and Technology, Arts and Humanities, P.E. and Health, and Integrated Curriculum. The number of hours spent on each area is specifically regulated by the Ministry of Education through the *Nine-Year Integrated Curriculum Guidelines*. Students in Taipei County learn English, Mandarin and their "home language" (their mother tongue—Taiwanese, Hakka or one of the aboriginal languages) starting from the first grade. There are two written exams each semester: mid-term and final. Chinese, English, Math, Social Studies and Science are the subjects tested. There should be a total of two hundred school days every year. There are two semesters in a school year: from September to January, and from mid-February to the end of June.

The weight of a student's school bag has been quite an issue in Taiwan. Parents are concerned about how many books students have to carry to school each day and if the school bag is too heavy for young kids to carry. It doesn't seem that this would be a concern for Hubbell parents. Students at Hubbell put all of their textbooks in their book box, which is kept in the classroom all the time.

The amount of homework is another concern for Taiwanese parents. Students usually spend thirty minutes to one hour (sometimes even longer) on writing their homework after school. Hubbell students don't seem to have as much homework, and most of their homework is reading.

Conclusion

I saw a lot, learned a lot and benefited a lot from this trip. It wouldn't have been possible without the help and support of the Department of Education of Iowa, which organized the itinerary, arranged accommodation and transportation, and put in a lot of effort to make everything go smoothly. I would also like to thank all of the Hubbell staff for being so open and generous, and welcoming me into their classrooms. Finally, my appreciation goes to the Schotts for their loving kindness, who treated me as part of the family.