

# MY OBSERVATION OF IOWA EDUCATION — FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

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This trip to Iowa was an invaluable experience for me. I've been teaching English for the past six years, but have seldom encountered teaching materials that teach much about American culture. This awesome two-week Iowa short-term training program not only broadened my horizons of English education, but also enriched my background knowledge about American culture. Now, I have more practical, first-hand experience to put to use in instructive teaching strategies which will benefit my students.

My partner Yu-Fen and I stayed in Clay Elementary School for one week. The school is located in Altoona, to the northeast of Des Moines, where we met a graceful and friendly principal, Ms. Morris. It was very impressive that she introduced Clay Elementary School's faculty with a sweet smile and a warm voice, as if we ourselves were new family members in Clay. The teachers in Clay were friendly and quick to share everything with us. The following sections are my observations of Iowa education.

## DEVELOP WELL-BEHAVED STUDENTS

Students in class were well-behaved. They listened to the other classmates patiently. In addition, when the homeroom teacher was teaching one group in a small learning center, the other students did their own tasks quietly and independently without disturbing others. If there were a low-achiever in class, most students treated him or her in a friendly way. During recess, they walked in a line quietly to go outdoors. The students in Clay were more disciplined than the students at my school.



I tried to figure out how to "develop students' good behaviors." The following points are my conclusions:

### 1. RAMS WAY

RAMS is the education rules of the Southeast Polk Community School District. It stands for Respect, Always responsible, Manners, and Safety. All of the students from kindergarten to senior high school need to follow RAMS. It's not only a slogan, but also their way of life.

They teach RAMS in many programs and activities, such as during the Pledge of Allegiance, Respect Code, lesson plans and modeling, etc. The students in Clay recite the Pledge of Allegiance and the Respect Code every morning.



## 2. TEACHING AND REVIEW RULES PERIODICALLY

Clay Elementary School has a series of lesson plans to teach students how to behave properly. For example, in the Indoor Recess lesson plan, students should play with designated indoor recess games and activities, use an inside voice and play cooperatively with others. When a student is well-behaved, she/he can get a "Star Ticket" from a teacher.

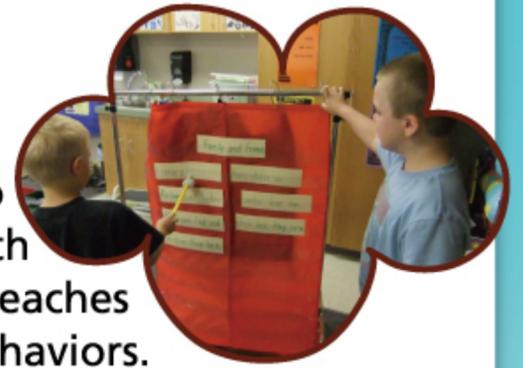
A teacher will need to teach and review the rules at the beginning of the year and periodically throughout the year. At the beginning of the semester, it usually takes a teacher about one month to review and practice these rules.

## 3. LEARNING RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH TASKS

A teacher arranges many activities for developing students' responsibilities and gives her/him appropriate tasks based on the student's ability. First, they teach students how to finish their job. Second, they give them the tasks and then encourage them. Following are three examples:

### ① DAILY FIVE:

The Daily Five includes several literacy tasks (reading to self, reading with someone, writing, word work, and listening to reading) which students complete while a teacher is working with small groups of students or instructing an individual. A teacher teaches and practices skills until behaviors become habits and default behaviors. With a teacher's clear explanation, students practice one or more skills every day.



### ② RESTAURANT—SCHOOL DAY:

High graders have a chance to be a server in the restaurant. They prepare some food for customers, take away dirty dishes, and clean tables. The tips they earn will be for their field trip or a charity.

### ③ DOING A SUITABLE TASK:

Every student has a different learning style, so a student can choose a suitable task and finish it. I observed a good example in Ms. Jenkins's class. During Math class, some high achievers write math exercises very fast, so she shows another math task list to those students and they can choose a task from the list and try to solve it.



Above all, students need to be reminded about good behaviors by teachers again and again. Teaching responsibility, a teacher arranges a task which should involve four main points:

- Explain the steps clearly.
- Fit to the student's learning level.
- Let students have an opportunity to choose.
- Social awards.

## MODELING

I'm impressed by how American teachers respect others. Every time when I talked to my host, Robin Norris, principal Lea Morris, or other teachers in Clay Elementary, they always put away their work, focused their eyes on me and listened to me attentively. I felt their full attention and respect as we talked.



Even when they were talking to a student, they used the same respectful way. On the other hand, they also taught students to keep their eyes on teachers when they talk. It's respectful to be silent and listen while the other person is talking.

Here is an example I learned from Deb Price, a reading specialist. She told me that once a student hated her because she always pushed him to learn more. When she taught him, she used a soft and affirmative voice without getting angry. She always spoke in a respectful way and never gave up on helping a low achiever. I think that modeling is another good way to teach responsibility and respect.

## ENGLISH INSTRUCTION

They spend over 460 minutes a week on English language instruction. Teachers use various methods to develop students' English ability, such as letter people, word work, story retelling, read alouds, reading, handwriting, writer's workshop, daily 5, problem solver and language arts. They hope to have students progress from phonemic awareness to reading aloud, and then on to being an independent reader; and progress from being a guided writer to being an independent writer.

My students in Taiwan are beginning English learners, so I focus on how to teach them to read. Like me, American teachers spend a lot of time on phonemic awareness and phonics in early grades. Following are some useful strategies:

### ① PHONEMIC AWARENESS:

A teacher says a word and a student decodes the sound. For instance, a teacher says "map", and then a student says "/m//æ//p/". Don't ask students to decode sounds and put sounds together at the same time because when they put sounds together, they might think these sounds are one sound.



### ② VISUAL PHONICS:

Visual Phonics is a strategy that guides students to see sounds. Learning letter sounds with hand gestures makes students see more clearly which part of the mouth is producing the sound. For instance, to teach the "N" sound (/n/), put your finger on your nose and draw a half circle. It makes it easy for students to say the sound correctly.



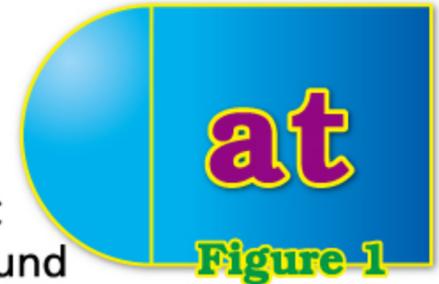
### ③ PUT SOUNDS ON YOUR ARM:

Some students have a blending problem. When they see a CVC word, such as "mat", they don't know how to say the word "mat". A teacher, Deb, might encourage them to put the first sound, /m/, on their shoulder, put the second sound, /æ/, on their elbow, and put the last sound, /t/, on their hand. Then they drag the sounds from their shoulder to their hand, trying to put the sounds together. The dragging sounds speed from slow to fast.



### ④ WORD FAMILIES:

Some English words have their place in a larger group, called a "word family". A teacher teaches one word family a week. For example, Ms. Price draws a mailbox and puts different letters in the front (figure 1) and then encourages students to sound out the word. In the beginning, the teacher doesn't put two similar families together, such as -at and -ad, because it may make students confused and feel discouraged.



### ⑤ METACOGNITION:

Metacognition is a strategy for students to monitor his/her learning process.



When a teacher teaches a student, they ask some questions to help a student use his/her metacognition. When a student reads incorrectly, the teacher uses the questions to remind him/her to find the mistakes and make corrections by himself/herself. These questions are "Read the word again," "What's the letter sound?", "If you don't read fluently, what can you do?" and "Go back to the beginning of the line and read it again." The

teacher's goal is to ask questions patiently instead of giving the answers directly to the student.

## AMERICAN CULTURE

I used to learn about American culture from American movies, but on this trip I found out that the movies are not always the same as real American life. Sometimes, movies over exaggerate.

In Iowa, we stayed with a friendly and ardent host family. Robin, the host, treated us nicely, just like family. She had arranged our whole week's schedule before we arrived. The scheduled activities included attending a meeting, having a barbecue party, and hunting buffaloes.

After living an American lifestyle for a whole week, some cultural differences between America and Taiwan became clear. First, Americans wear shoes instead of slippers inside the house. Because of clean ground and less rain, Americans can wear shoes inside without dirtying the floor. Second, when you visit a friend, you can make some dessert, muffins, or cake as a present. Third, Americans are used to drinking cold ice water. According to my culture, if you drink too much cold water, it might hurt your body.

There is still a lot of American culture left for me to experience, so a two-week's stay is too short for me. I hope that I will have a chance to go to America again in the future.

## RETURNING TO MY SCHOOL

After returning to my school, I tried to assimilate most of the materials which I learned in Iowa. When I face an English teaching problem, I will try to think about how I can solve it.



My students have a "th" sound problem and are not used to putting their tongue between their teeth. There is no "th" sound in Mandarin, so I used Visual Phonics to help students to overcome this difficulty. One of my students said, "With the hand gesture, it's easier for me to produce the sound." In order to help students remember Visual Phonics gestures, it is important to put the symbols on the wall.

There's another phonics problem that I encountered; some students cannot blend a word, so I asked them to put the sounds on their arm. When low achievers became familiar with the rules, it was easier for them to say a word. According to my experience, when students begin to put sounds on their arm, it's better to start with two sounds (letters) and work up to three sounds (letters).

One of the ways to help English low achievers is to ask them to take responsibility for their own learning. When low achievers learn a new lesson, they do not practice at home; therefore, their learning performance is always behind the other classmates. It's really a vicious circle. So after I returned to my classroom, I made a class rule that if students can read out loud what they learned in class that day, they can take a break. If not, they might need more practice during break time. Students like to take breaks, of course, so their learning attitude became more focused and active.

Most important of all, I would like to show my sincere appreciation to the Iowa Education Bureau and the Taipei County Education Bureau officers for arranging everything for us. In addition, I want to thank all of our friends at Clay Elementary School, Robin, and all the members in our group. Through your sharing and experiences, I can have more confidence and a better ability to teach English.

