

# Character Education in L.A.

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I believe that almost every English teacher is going or has gone through some classroom management crises: students talk loudly without even raising their hands for permission during the class; students are impolite or even rude to the teacher, especially when the teacher is a female; students do not follow the teacher's directions or do not pay attention on learning; students are not willing to cooperate with partners when they do pair works or team works. I have also suffered and was extremely annoyed by these so-called misbehaviors during the first few years of my teaching. It was then that I found the importance of classroom management, for what use is all the lesson plans if they are not able to be properly implemented in the classroom? Nowadays more and more researches have proved that elevation in students' character helps elevation in academic performances as well. In addition, I have always been impressed by well-behaving American students in the movies. Hence, going to L.A. and getting to see the real educational environment was a perfect opportunity for me, and naturally I set my mind on focusing on character education and classroom management.

## *My Observations in Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, L.A.*



During the first week, we had trainings on various parts of English teaching, and we also had the chance to visit a preschool and an adult learning center in the district. The preschool was called Amar Children's Center, a place where they prepare kids (from 2 to 4) for kindergartens. They have different recess and lunch times, but still the kids were behaving very nicely, moving in lines quietly and orderly, no shouting or pushing at all. They were quiet and behaving well even when they were in the playground during recess time. That was what surprised me the most. My experience in Taiwan is



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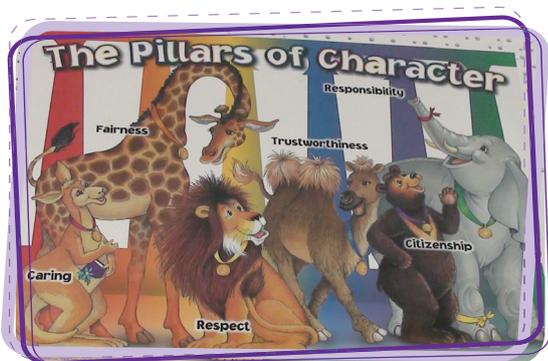
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that children tend to talk loudly or even shout and scream in the hallways and sometimes even in the classrooms during their recess time. But why were these little kids behaving so well? We discussed about it and came to a conclusion: respect. Children were taught to respect others at any time and any places. It started at home, not after they came to school. The same situation happened in Willow Campus, the adult learning center. The posters emphasizing character were everywhere to be seen. They emphasize not only on academic performances, but also on attitude, such as the ability to care, to be patient, to be grateful and to be responsible. I think that this is what makes the difference. We always say that adults and parents are models for children. Here the examples of character education were actually being built, so that parents become good models for their children.

## My Observations in Graziade Elementary School



The school I was assigned to visit was called Graziade Elementary School, famous for its students' high academic performances. However, the school was also concentrating on building students' character. In 1992, the nonprofit Josephson Institute of Ethics developed a common language of core ethical values and later launched as Character Counts. The six core ethical values are the Six Pillars of Character (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship), and they are also adopted by some of the schools here in Hacienda La Puente Unified School District as a discipline plan. In the parent-student handbook 2010-2011 of Graziade, I found an agreement which required students', parent's and teacher/administrators' signatures. In the agreement there were pledges, and among the pledges, there was one about Character Counts Pillars, which said that they will practice, model, promote and teach the Character Counts Pillars. In addition, during the morning session before class started, students were singing one of the patriotic songs, chanting the pledge of allegiance and then chanting the Graziade Elementary School Character Counts Pledge together. It went like this: "As a member of Graziade Elementary School, I promise to practice the six pillars of character: to

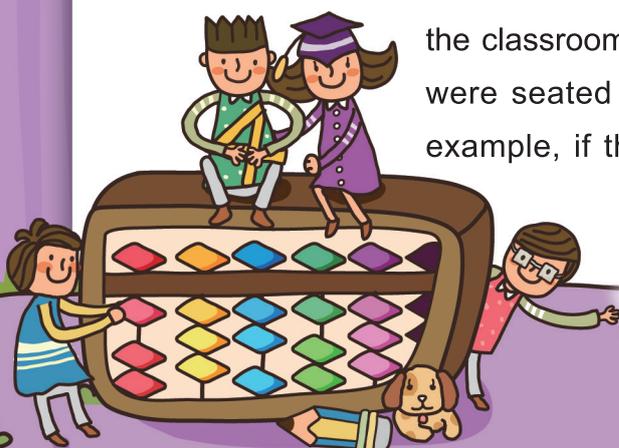




be trustworthy, to show respect, to be responsible, to be fair, to be caring and to be a good citizen. And to always have the courage to do the right thing. Character counts at Graziade Elementary School!" In the handbook, I also found something which amazed me very much. There were concrete behavior expectations written in black and white. For example: "Students are expected to come to school prepared; behave in a manner conducive to a positive learning environment; respect the rights of others; follow all health, safety, and conduct rules as provided to them." Furthermore, the expectations, rules, and possible consequences for inappropriate behavior were written there clearly as well. There were even playground equipment rules and expectations! Maybe they have reasons why they are making these rules clear and requiring the students and parents to sign up on the agreement, like to prevent possible legal proceedings. But still, it felt right to have everything clear, so that the students know what to follow and even aware exactly of the consequences they might confront when they choose to break the rules. Also the parents were involved, so that they would keep cautious on their child's behavior. This was an education on citizenship, and also on respect to other people. Nowadays we talk about internationalization and how the countries of the world have become interrelated with each other, and how important building the skills on how to find a better job in a competitive future is. In my opinion, the education on building children's ability to respect, to care, to be responsible and to be a good citizen should be the top priority, for no one can live on his or her own, and children have to understand that every individual is only a part of the whole. In this way, the students will learn to cooperate with others, and learn to find the solutions when problems appear, instead of reprimanding others or finding excuses for themselves.

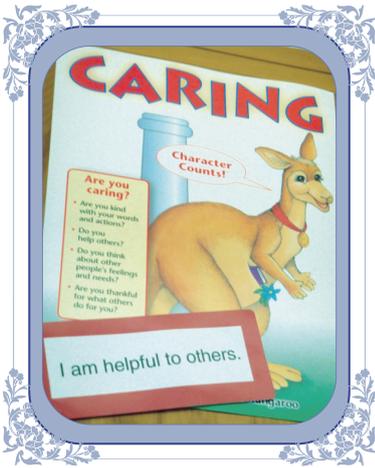
The posters of the Six Pillars of Character were seen on the walls in each and every classroom we visited, even in the cafetorium. Like I had mentioned before, children from different grades have different lunch times. This was partly due to the fact that the cafeteria was not spacious enough to accommodate every student at one time, so the time to have lunch was divided into

different time segments, ranging from 11:15 to 12: 25. The names of the classrooms were marked beside the tables, so that the students were seated at the right tables, during their own lunch time. For example, if the sign says P12, it means that the 5<sup>th</sup> graders from





Room P12 are going to have lunch at this table during 12:25 to 1:05. Again in the cafetorium, the students were behaving well, too, not causing any noise problems to other people who were already in class, even when their home-room teachers were not there. They stood in lines to pick up their lunch quietly, talked but not loudly during the meal, and raised their hands for permission to leave when they were finished. The only thing which made me feel uncomfortable was that they didn't do recycling for the leftover and the disposable tableware. They dumped everything into the garbage bin. The principal of Grazide told me that the reason they didn't recycle was because the paramount importance was to make sure food was not contaminated, but still it was hard to imagine for us from Taiwan, since recycling has become a habit. In addition, we also noticed that children were quite used to wasting the food by simply dumping the food they didn't want to eat into the garbage bin. I think that this part of education on cherishing food and natural resources is what the Americans should pay more attention on, since it's the responsibility of all the members of the planet.



In the classrooms, the teachers did a lot of decorations on various parts of their teachings, like language arts, math, science, arts, and of course character education. The posters and banners on Six Pillars of Character were posted on the walls to be seen easily by the students, and some of the teachers even printed more detailed items at the bottom of the posters for students to follow. There were also other things that teachers were doing for improving character and classroom management. Children were assigned different jobs, like helping hands, to learn how to be responsible and helpful. In a classroom, I also found some children's works on caring and sharing. It seemed that the teacher and the children were having discussions on what were the things they were not supposed to do and what might be the consequences if they chose not to follow the rules. I think that this was a nice activity that I can actually use in my classroom, both for character education and English learning. Some teachers were making rules and punishments very clearly. For example, students would get a warning for the first infraction; lunch detention and complete reflection form for the second; lunch detention and parents call for the third; recess



detention, parents call, referral written, and student sent to the office for the fourth infraction, and student sent immediately to the office for the severe disruptions. One of the teachers from 5<sup>th</sup> grade got a Bully Box in the classroom, and if some students were being bullied, they would talk about it, discuss about it and think about what they could do to improve the situation. The choices were there to be made: tell someone, ignore it, walk away, talk it out, make a deal, or tell them to stop. I think that this is a good activity to train students to talk out and discuss the problems in their minds, as the teacher revealed, for students are usually unaware of the fact that they had these problems. For example, a student is being bullied but s/he is not aware of it, until someone points out that the things happened on him or her were actually bullying. This activity can help students understand themselves more, and feel empathy toward others, which I think are also the fundamental parts of education. In addition, the process, through conversations among the teacher and the students, helps students build the sense of responsibility and self-esteem.



Almost in every classroom, I didn't hear any teacher yelling or shouting at students, or speaking to students in a negative attitude. Instead, teachers used positive reinforcement. Teachers used languages like "Thanks for sharing with us, Tom." "Look how Maria is doing it!" "I like the way Brian is sitting, straight and tall." They reinforced the good behaviors, and had the students to follow, rather than emphasizing on bad behaviors, which teachers in Taiwan tend to do sometimes. Maybe those students learned to yell or shout at others from their teachers. Teachers here believe that if students were doing something in a wrong way, what they needed was not punishment but more practice. Students need positive models to follow, and in the long run, it becomes a habit.

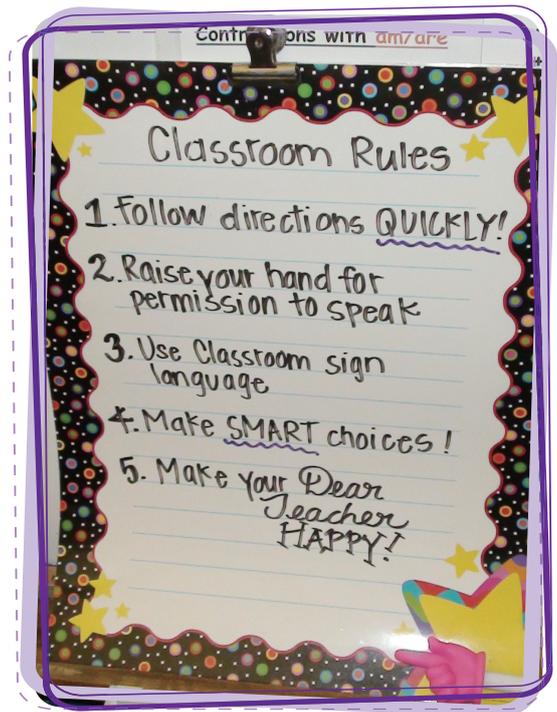
In another 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher used some tips on classroom management which I found especially useful, even for myself. There were some key words for attention or specific movements between the teacher and the students. For example, if the teacher said "class", the students replied "yes" and looked at the teacher at once, stopping whatever they were doing. If the teacher said "class, class", the students replied "yes, yes", using the



same voice tone and volume of the teacher's. Another one went like this: if the teacher said "eyeballs", the students said "click" and immediately set their eyes on the teacher. The two tips went well in my classrooms as well. I was able to get students' attention quickly and easily when they were doing group work or discussions, without having to raise my voice. And they were also learning some useful English words like eyeballs and click. Maybe someday I will try to replace the words with the ones I'd like them to learn.

## Whole Brain Teaching

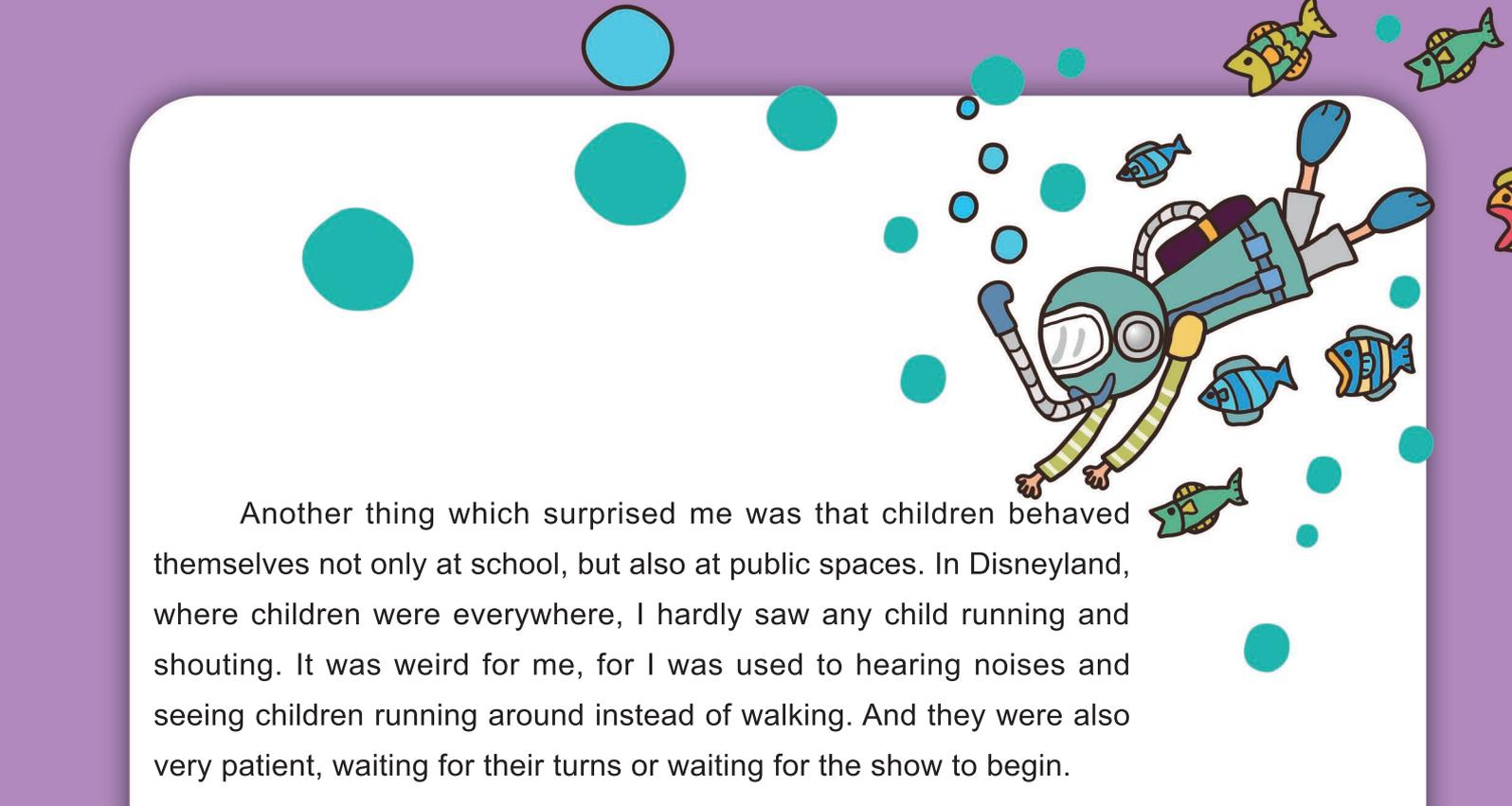
I was curious about all those useful tips on classroom management, and the teachers told me that most of them were from Whole Brain Teaching. One of the teachers even e-mailed me some of the things he thought might be useful for me, and recommended to Google on the subject. And so I did. Whole Brain Teaching, formerly, Power Teaching, is an educational reform movement that began in 1999 in Southern California, and it emphasizes on making teaching and learning fun, free and brain friendly. Human brain learns in five ways, by seeing, hearing, doing, speaking and feeling, but in Whole Brain Teaching, they believe that the brain learns best when all five of these regions are involved simultaneously. To list one of its teaching skills, they created Biffytoons to make sight words learning easier and more entertaining. Each of the 48 Biffytoons presents a gesture that illustrates the meaning. It is a great classroom management tool as well. The following are the five classroom rules with hand gestures: 1, Follow directions quickly! 2, Raise your hand for permission to speak. 3, Raise your hand for permission to leave your seat. 4, Make smart choices! 5, Keep your dear teacher happy! Some of the classrooms adopted these as the classroom rules in Grazide.



## What I have seen in L.A.

In addition to schools, the whole community and public places were children-friendly. A friend who has been living in L.A. for 10 years told me that America is a paradise for children and the elderly people. I really got the idea of what it meant during my stay in L.A. I left my 1-year-old daughter in Taiwan with her dad when I was in L.A., and so every child on the street I saw reminded me of my daughter. That also made me notice what the community and the government have done to protect the rights of children. One of them was that almost every place was easily accessible to people with wheelchairs or baby strollers. In Disneyland, I was surprised to see that there were stroller parking lots! The lots were packed with strollers, which meant that lots of parents were taking their toddlers or even infants out for fun. In Taiwan, it is inconvenient if you take a baby out, and you are restricted merely to some specific areas. Thus, having children usually means no fun anymore. No wonder moms with infants tend to have melancholia easily. I recalled upon the time when I just had my baby born. We couldn't afford to take the baby out with us to some fun places when she was small, because the places were usually not infants-friendly. It was incredible. I kept wondering how it happened. How did they do it? The solutions to the questions I think lie upon the government. The government should be responsible for building an environment where all the people, of all ages, can feel safety and fairness. Once we set the models of being consideration and respect, it imprints in children's minds. The children grow with the consideration and respect will eventually become considerate individuals who know how to respect. This is education outside the classrooms, and every adult individual is the teacher.





Another thing which surprised me was that children behaved themselves not only at school, but also at public spaces. In Disneyland, where children were everywhere, I hardly saw any child running and shouting. It was weird for me, for I was used to hearing noises and seeing children running around instead of walking. And they were also very patient, waiting for their turns or waiting for the show to begin.

## My Reflections

The trip has made me think a lot about the importance of partnership among the government, the community, the parents, the school and the children. Only through cooperation of all can we achieve the goal of building a whole person with healthy character, who will ultimately do well for the whole society. I think I will continue to do my best on helping students not only developing on academic performances, but also on mental maturity and responsibility as global citizens. After all, what the society needs are not brilliant villains, but honest, virtuous and decent people to make this world a better place.

