

How does American Education Cultivate Positive Thinking?

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Never ask Chinese students if they understand the class. Never ask for questions because they seldom have questions--- a quote from a foreign teacher.

When Chinese students are compared with western ones, this would be probably the first thing popping out of our mind. I am personally very interested in finding out the reason of this impression during my visit to the Wedgeworth Elementary, where I was assigned to observe the classroom activities. My understanding is that if students can learn to be disciplined, then they will have free minds and can become thinkers. Second, the core of education focuses more on how to learn than what to learn.

Classroom Discipline vs. Learning

Contrary to the common belief that American schools are full of energy, noises, freedom and autonomy as we see on TV, I found that American schools are very well disciplined and quiet, at least for the elementary schools. Here are my observations:

During Non-teaching Time

1. Students are not allowed to go into classrooms by themselves when the school begins at eight o'clock. Students gather at the front yard and wait for homeroom teachers to lead them into the classroom. When the school is over, teachers lead the line formed by students and send them off at the school gate or a meeting point. Discipline is enforced all through the day.
2. The school begins at 8 in the morning and ends at 2:10 in the afternoon. There is only one recess time for about 20 minutes from 9:45-10:05, Time varies for difference grade. Teachers are not responsible for the students' safety during recess or lunch time. When it is recess time, students are required to queue by the door and wait for admission to leave the classroom. Without permission, students are not encouraged to stay in the classroom during recess.



3. Recess time and lunch time are managed by non-teacher helping aides hired by the school (or parent volunteers), and different grades have different recess times. Students are tendered by school aides during recess and lunch time in the cafeteria. Since the access and lunch times of different grades don't conflict with each other, the order and physical activities can gain the maximum satisfaction and also the risk of bumping or hurting is reduced comparing to the horrified percentage of accidents in Taiwan elementary schools.
4. Those "benched" students, who receive warnings during classes, will sit on the benches scattered around the playground and "watch". What could be more "cruel" and effective than this? Students learn how to be responsible for their actions and take the consequences.

During Teaching Time: Classroom Management

1. I went to kindergarten classes and found out some are actually combo classrooms. Kindergarten students and 1st graders who need more fundamental work than average 1st graders are mixed in the class. My experience told me there should be chaos in the class but the classroom is very well-managed and students behave accordingly. I was amazed by the way teachers control 2 different grades with different tasks.
2. Teachers emphasize discipline and character of the learners in the teaching. Posters and slogans are scattered around the classroom walls explaining what categorizes good characters. Starting from kindergartens, discipline is taught and reiterated and it goes all the way through the 5th graders, the most senior grade at elementary school in California.
3. Teachers speak in clear but firm tone, no rising of the voice, no using of the microphone. When the class is quiet, a soft voice can be heard clearly and it actually saves teachers a lot of energy.
4. Similar classroom management methods were used in different classrooms. The old fashion "smiling face vs. crying face" has been replaced by color cards. American education accentuates positive thinking. Those "crying faces" evoke negative emotion and start to lose popularity. The more positive management methods I observed are:





- a. **Behavior color cards** Different color means different behavior. Green means “Excellent”, and red means “Notify parents”. Cards are stacked in the card envelop and every student starts a day with the green card. If misbehavior happens, a teacher may have the student change the color card himself.
- b. **“Currency” system** Teachers always start thanking students with good manners while the class noise starts to rise. “Thank you, Alice, for waiting so quietly”, “Thank you, Ken, for raising your hand so nicely”. Teachers give out the fake money as reward, and take away their money as punishment. Since American currency system is composed by complicated bills and coins, teachers use the system to help students differentiate their currency. For a period of time, teachers may hold sales for students so they are eager to save the given “money” and buy little gifts prepared by teachers. It is not only a positive reinforcement system, but also an opportunity to practice math skills like addition and subtraction.

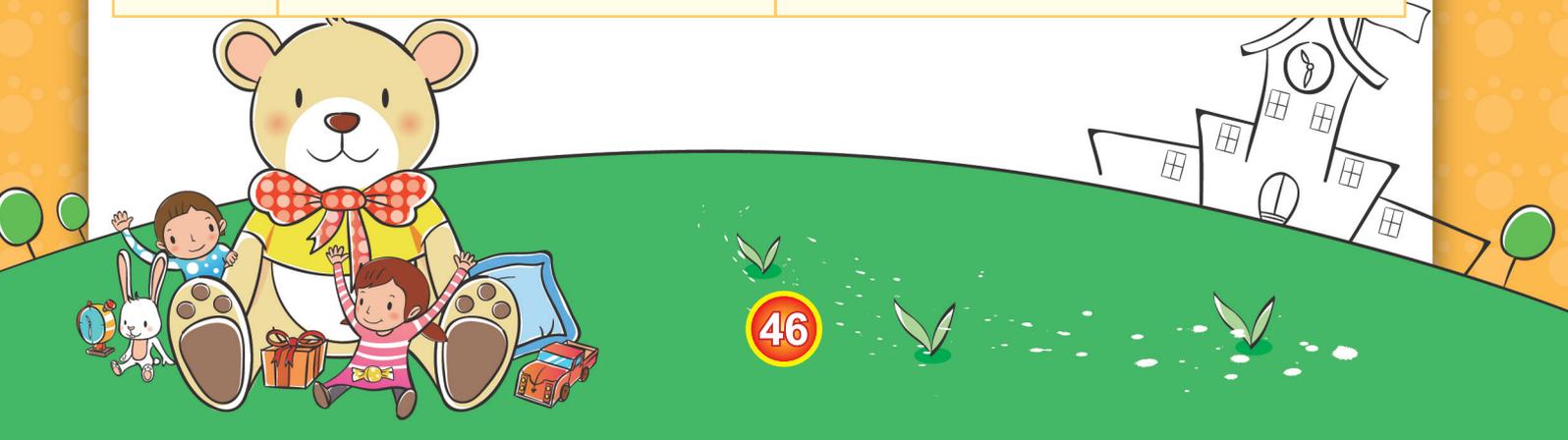
Good classroom management offers learners sense of security and cultivates motivation for learning. Their attention span can sustain in a learning-friendly environment. I actually expected to see a very vigorous, energetic teaching/learning situation. However, to my surprise, the learning atmosphere in classrooms is always calm and not excited. When the voices rise, teachers use chant or other methods to calm down the class. Students are instructed not to shout to express themselves. This habit is formed in early childhood, which explains why, most of the time, foreigners tend to speak in a quiet voice, while Chinese tend to share our conversation with the passers-by.

Core Value of Education

In addition to the learning atmosphere, the key components of education in Taiwan are completely different from America as I observed teachings of different subjects. Basically, the comparison is about: “how to cultivate learners’ positive thinking”. Thus other elements will be excluded.



Theme	Taiwan Education	American Education
Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on memorization, including words, meaning, and content. 2. Questions are related to “fact” presented by the book. 3. Emphasize the importance of memorizing content knowledge. 4. Standard answers are encouraged. Students learn more about “what” than “how” and “why”. 5. In order to have a perfect answer, the teachers ask more closed questions than open ones. 6. Teachers praise on a correct answer. 7. Language skills are used but most students are not aware of the connection. Besides, students don’t have enough chances to master the skills/strategies. 8. Only certain answer is considered “perfect”. Learners fear for not giving the perfect answer. 9. Instead of learner participation, teacher instruction is the main teaching method. 10. Focus more on rule-oriented learning. 11. Have more paper and pencil tests than oral assessments. 12. Learners might know some learning strategies but can’t really apply them. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on language skills and strategies, such as writing skills and comprehension strategies. 2. Questions are related to “thoughts”. 3. Respect individual opinions. Individual thinking is encouraged in class as creativity. 4. Using quoted sentences directly from books are not desirable answers. Teachers focus more on “how” and “why”. 5. Open questions are asked very often. Students are required to rephrase what they read from books. 6. Teachers praise every idea in classroom. 7. Knowledge and skills are learned at the same time. While introducing the content, teachers point out the strategies being used, and learners practice the strategy right away on their workbooks. 8. Learners are encouraged to share individual ideas. 9. Students with multiple intelligences and different learning styles are respected. 10. Learning activities are learner-centered. Learners actively involve in different activities. 11. Various teaching methods are used to enhance comprehension. 12. Graphic organizers are popular to prompt thinking and make connections. 13. Have regular in-class individual language development assessments. 14. Skills/Strategies are reiterated for reading and writing.



As for “writing”, for example, it surprises me that the teachers introduce writing strategies as early as in kindergartens. I observed how those teachers simplified the strategies and guided children to complete a topic sentence to describe a picture. They give clear guidance for kids to follow, and have many practicing activities. Instead of copying ideas from others, the learners learnt the right way to think. If young children in the States can write complete sentences under teachers’ guidance, why we still prohibit kindergarten kids learning writing in Taiwan? Once kids prove their abilities, they are ready to explore the learning world and challenge themselves for advanced learning.

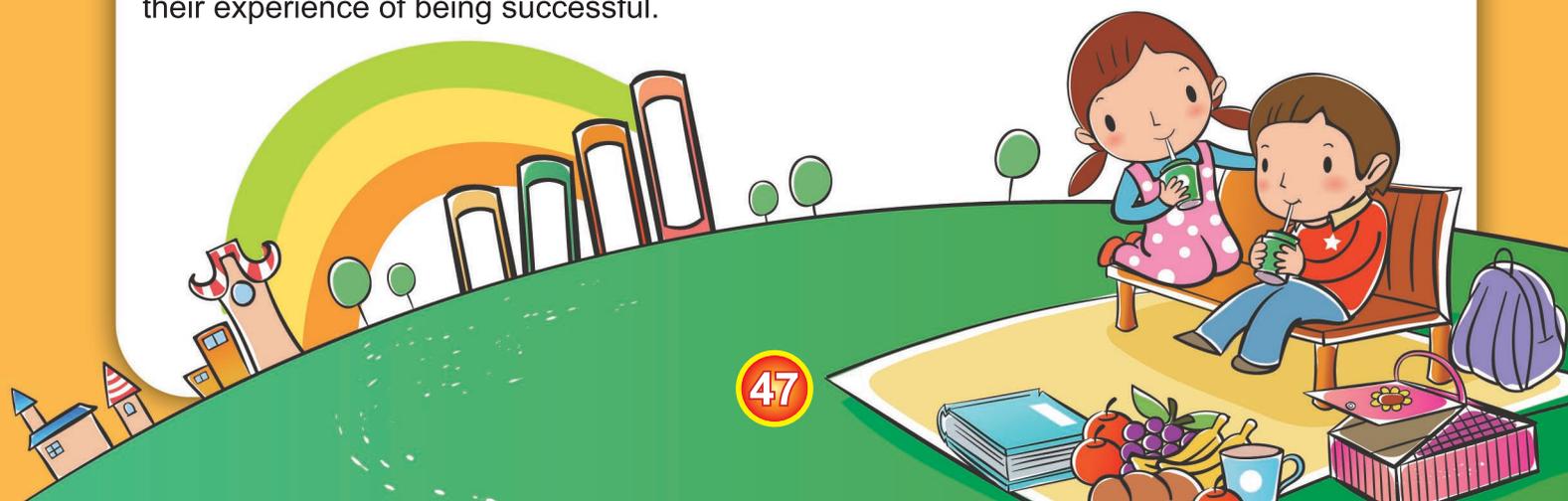
Non-language Subjects Teaching

Math and science classes were also observed. It is interesting to see how the teachers compose chants and songs to help students manipulate math formulae. Again, in Taiwan, we prefer to instruct the learners just follow the rules and memorize all the procedures. But in the States, students become acquainted with the math rules through chants, role-plays, and songs. This is no doubt a more learner-friendly environment. Again, memorization is never the only way for learning and probably not the best one.

Reflection

I applied some easy and quick tips learned from the teachers at Wedgeworth Elementary and amazingly, they worked very well. For example, I instructed the class how to pose “learning position” when sitting. In class I praised some kids on their patient and quiet behaviors while others made noises. When asking questions, I no longer expect perfect answers but offer opportunities for students to exert what they have learned. Even when they give wrong answers, I compliment them on trying hard. The wrong answers also help me assess their learning. I focus more on cultivating students’ learning interests and try to ignore some of the minor mistakes they make.

I also change the way I treat misbehaved students. I used to scold them but now I try to avoid putting them on the spot and find them errands or ask them to be helpers. Magically, the students have higher motivations than ever before. All in all, I find the secrets of helping students think positively and critically are cultivating students’ confidence, and building up their experience of being successful.



Conclusion

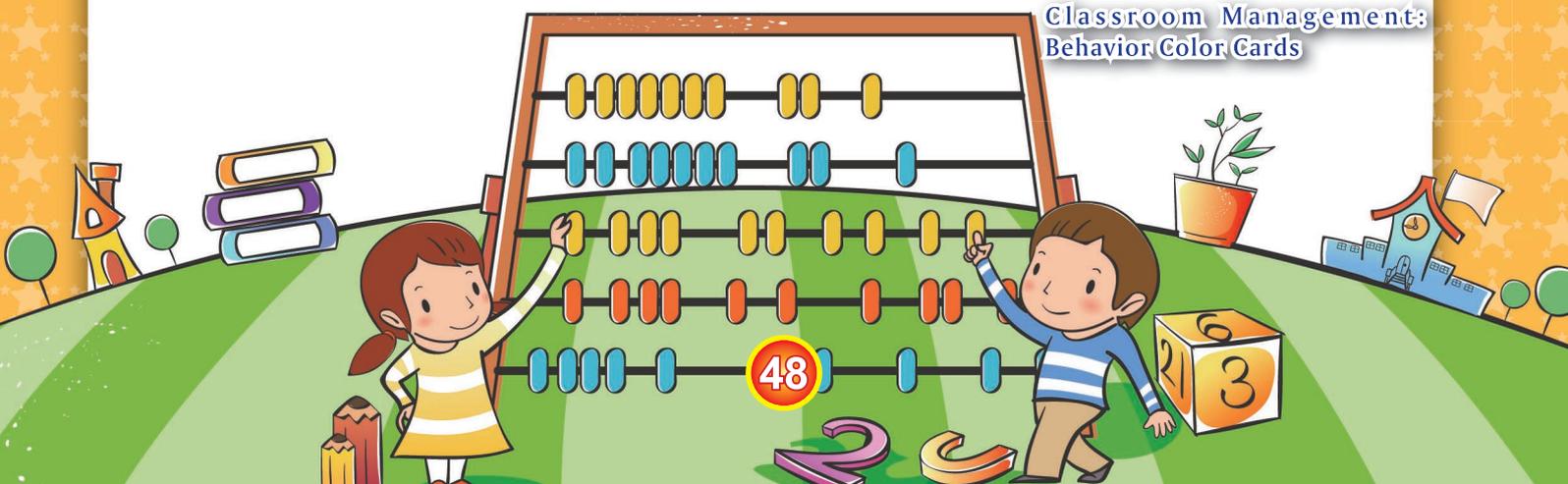
To sum up my report, I'd like to outline some key factors which in my viewpoints build up a unique American education trait: think positively and critically.

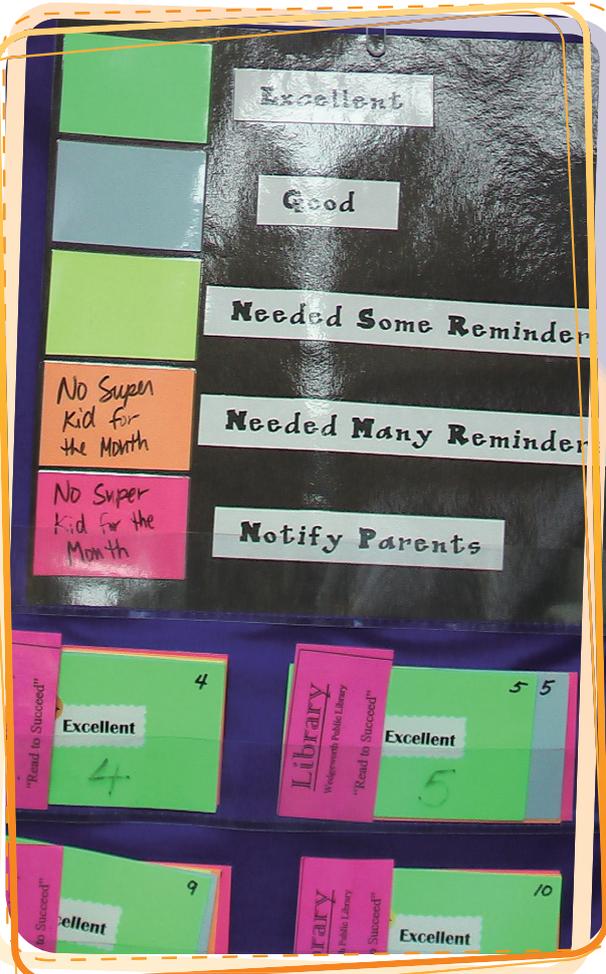
1. Learn to be independent and disciplined from early childhood, with mutual cooperation from family and school educations.
2. School and family education co-build the goal of being unique. That's also the reason why sports stars and academic achievers both exist on American campus.
3. Creativity can still take place in disciplined classrooms.
4. Schools offer teacher training and standardized teaching methods and skills, which create the maximum benefit for students.
5. Instead of requesting students to memorize the content, teachers equip learners with the learning strategies and skills in every subject. Students will automatically apply them to future tasks.
6. Design learner-centered learning activities. Create a learner-friendly learning environment.
7. Emphasize individual academic development with systematic guidance: you can only compare with yourself.
8. Teachers always think positively.
9. Encourage all kinds of questions.
10. Being unique is the key. Never become a copy cat.
11. To learn "how to learn", instead of "what to learn".

Finally, I'd like to show my deepest appreciation to all the people who had helped us during our observations. I would like to thank the substitute Principal Mr. Guon, who gave us the greatest support and customized arrangement and the very cooperative education team at Wedgeworth: Ms. Hayashi, Ms. Lin, Ms. Kuo, Mr. Chu, Ms. Au Yeung, Ms. Yuen, Ms. Tang, and Ms. Lee. Without their help it would be impossible to observe the real American school teaching methods and strategies, and I benefit tremendously from their classes. Three days are just not sufficient to learn everything from these wonderful teachers!

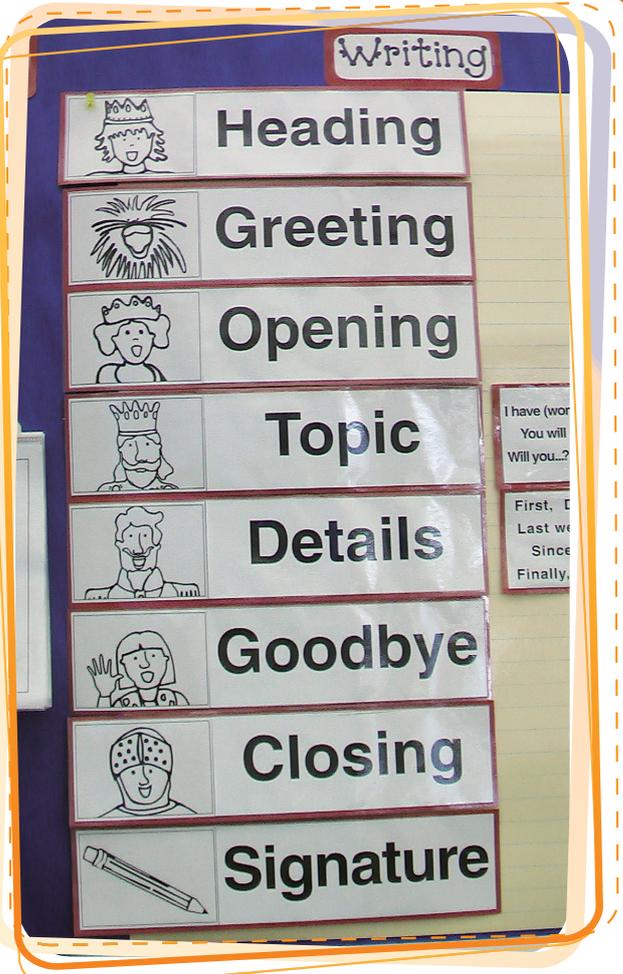


Classroom Management:
Behavior Color Cards

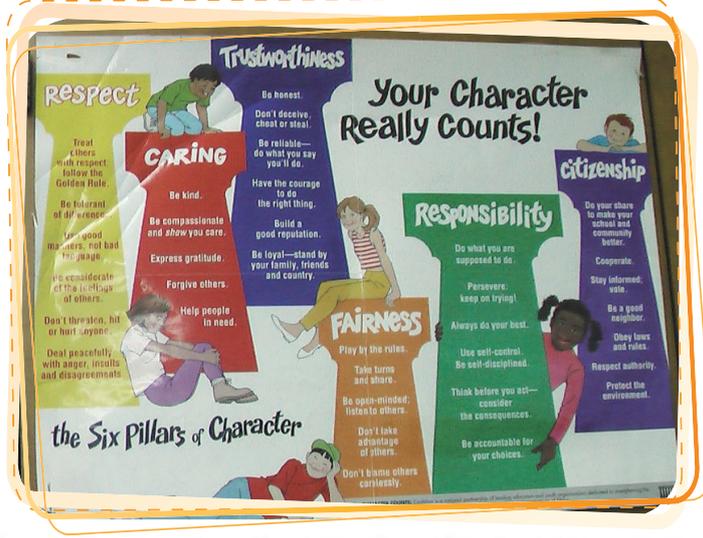




The Definition of Behavior Color Cards



Eight Essential Writing Skills (Teachers make chants and act out to reinforce learners' writing skills.)



Great Emphasis on Character Education: the Six Pillars of Character





Graphic Organizer: Utilize Reading Comprehension Strategies

Daily Schedule	
8:00-8:30	English Language Development Daily Oral Language/Math.
8:30-8:45	Language Art Opening Routine.
8:45-9:15	Reading Group/Centers.
9:15-9:45	Reading Group/Centers.
* 9:45-10:05	Recess
10:05-10:35	Reading Group/Centers.
10:35-11:20	Read Aloud/Grammar Writing.
11:20-11:40	P.E.
* 11:40-12:30	Lunch
12:30-1:25	Mathematics/Math Manipulative. Social Studies/Art

A Daily Schedule for Grade 1



Cultural Experience: Meet the real L.A. Police Officers

