

A TEACHING CAREER SPARKED BY MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE IN TAIWAN

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ABSTRACT

A Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) Fellowship to Taiwan in 2008-2009 sparked my interest in teaching and sustained it through a decade-long career in education. A global perspective means having a viewpoint that decenters yourself and recognizes the interconnected and different ways of life around the globe. My interest in bringing a global perspective to my students began in Taiwan and continued in the United States through letter writing and video exchanges. As a STEM cluster teacher now, my global perspective from my year teaching in Taiwan has contributed to my development of a curriculum that is accessible to all.

Keywords: teaching • Taiwan • education



BACKGROUND

As a philosophy major at Grinnell College, I knew that I wanted to live a life of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. I knew that I wanted my actions in my professional life to positively impact the public sector. While it was unclear at the time which career path, I should pursue that would align with my mission, my Fulbright English Teaching Assistant (ETA) fellowship in 2008 helped spark and nurture my desire to become a public-school teacher. The teaching experience, cross-cultural exchange, and lifelong friendships forged on the island of Taiwan motivated and sustained me to continue teaching for another ten years in the New York City public schools' system.

Choosing Taiwan to pursue a cultural exchange was personal for me. My parents, not knowing a word of English, immigrated from Guangzhou, China in the 1980s to the Rocky Mountain state of Colorado. We spoke Cantonese at home and I learned Mandarin in college. As someone who never quite fit in as a child of immigrants straddling two cultures, Chinese and American, in the suburbs of Colorado, I wanted to learn more about the more progressive island of Taiwan and the Taiwanese identity that my friends would proudly distinguish from that of the Chinese identity. I intended to learn about the Taiwanese identity and share in cultural exchange with teachers and elementary-aged students, but what I gained from the experience was far richer than what I had expected.

I accomplished many of my proposed goals in Taiwan, including engaging in pedagogical discussions with teachers, learning some martial arts, and taking classes to improve my Mandarin Chinese. I taught at Hua Shan Elementary School in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and at the English Villages in three different

elementary schools. Taiwan's emphasis on bilingual education is evident in its investment in English Villages. English Villages employ simulated environments like an airport or grocery store where native Taiwanese speakers can practice their English skills with native English speakers. English Villages are typically built as an additional structure next to elementary schools or within elementary school campuses. They can range in size from one classroom to an entire wing of a school. At the time, these spaces were open to all fifth graders in the city and students would take field trips to visit these simulated environments to practice their English. The Taiwanese government recognized that these spaces served as an alternative to the traditional English classroom because the English Villages provided a context, however, staged, to let kids play and practice their English. In a typical, traditional Taiwanese English classroom, students would rehearse sentence structures and practice scripted dialogue. In the English Village, students not only get scaffolded support with what to say in the simulated environment, like a grocery store, but the English speakers like the Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETAs) can spontaneously insert more dialogue to create a more authentic conversation that would occur in the environment. These English Villages supported bilingual education and continue to this day.

CULTURAL EXCHANGE IN TAIWAN

When I first arrived in Taiwan, the bustling streets, sweet aroma from night markets, and humidity hit me with startling clarity; this city, far from my suburban life in Colorado, was abuzz with life. When I arrived for my first day of co-teaching in a public elementary school in Kaohsiung, the second largest city in Taiwan, I was greeted with a loud cheer and greetings in unison in the school gymnasium. I was the first Fulbrighter to this elementary school and my cohort of Fulbrighters was the first to come to Kaohsiung.

The students didn't know that I could understand and speak Chinese until the final weeks of my fellowship so I overheard many of the young students say, "She's not American! She looks just like us!" While I was initially taken aback by the comments, I worked to educate my students over the next few months that I am, indeed, American, and that to be American you do not have to have blonde hair and blue eyes, their stereotype of an American. There were many assumptions by my students that I realized I needed to help break down. I created a series of lessons intended to teach and show my students that Americans celebrate many different holidays, look different from each other, speak many languages, and that America is a land of immigrants. I taught 13 regular English classes for grades 4-6, two special English classes for grades 5-6, and story time for grades 1-3. Altogether, I taught over 400 students while also teaching at the English Villages in three different locations.

As part of my cultural exchange, I also visited my host mother's high school where she taught English. The students interviewed me and prepared 41 questions to ask me on two separate occasions. Their questions ranged from politics and food to questions about whether I experienced racial discrimination in Taiwan. In answering their many questions, I delved into issues of China-Taiwan relations, portion sizes in America and Taiwan, and the varied faces of America. We also discussed voting. In Taiwan, you can only vote in person, not by absentee ballot. Additionally, we discussed the teaching styles of American teachers who encourage and ask students for input in their learning whereas Taiwanese teachers taught by memorization of sentence patterns in language acquisition.

From participating in these interviews with the high schoolers during the beginning and end of my fellowship and from teaching in my local elementary school and the English Villages throughout the year, I absorbed Taiwanese culture. Taiwanese students have "sweeping time" and clean their own schools from elementary to high school whereas American schools' task their school custodians with cleaning classrooms and halls. Additionally, all Taiwanese students in all school levels take a nap from 1 pm to 1:30 pm on their classroom desks. My students were surprised when I told them that American students do not have nap time past Pre-Kindergarten. Along with that difference, the Taiwanese calendar starts on a Monday whereas the American calendar starts on a Sunday. My students learned about these subtle cultural differences through my lessons where I taught with a microphone and speaker strapped around my waist. Additionally, I sought to infuse unique projects into my curriculum as well.

While in Taiwan, I read about Flat Stanley projects which were based on the literary series for primary readers *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown. Started by a British school teacher, the project encourages students to develop their literacy while also creating a paper cutout of the main character. Students send these paper cutouts and letters to a friend in another country to encourage learning about different people and places. My co-teachers and I invited our students in our English Club to do a variation on the Flat Stanley project in Taiwan. Instead of having our students draw a two-dimensional version of Flat Stanley, our Taiwanese students drew pictures of themselves together as a class on a poster. I enlisted help from my family and friends to take pictures of the Flat Stanley poster with famous monuments across the United States. As we received these photos of our poster traveling to see these monuments, my students learned about the people and history of those places. My Taiwanese students' Flat Stanley project traveled from the east coast to the west coast of the United States, visiting New York City (New York), Washington, D.C., Boston (Massachusetts), Madison (Wisconsin), Grinnell (Iowa), Denver (Colorado), Boise (Idaho), and San Francisco (California). My students learned more about the United States and loved receiving the Flat Stanley

back in Taiwan. My English club students also participated in video and art exchanges with a primary classroom in Georgia. We made videos introducing the Taiwanese language and culture. When I returned to the United States, the cross-cultural exchange endured for another five years.

The lifelong friendships I made with teachers in Taiwan allowed for continued exchanges between my elementary-aged students in the United States and Taiwanese students. My American second-graders wrote letters to students at another Taiwanese elementary school, Ling Jhou, in Kaohsiung for five years. Each year, a new set of my students would learn about life as a student in Taiwan and about the Chinese traditions and culture. We made brochures, videos introducing our schools to each other, drawings, and letters. Eventually, one of our school's second graders also visited our pen pal school in Taiwan with their family, which showed the enduring relationship our exchange created beyond the classroom walls. My students at the time of the exchanges benefitted from seeing the world differently and as global citizens. From seeing the different architecture of Taiwanese schools that are open instead of mostly enclosed hallways to seeing the English Villages, we explored my American students' questions and curiosity about the people, place, and language of Taiwan.

IMPACT OF MY FELLOWSHIP

Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher known to us through the works of Plato, proclaimed that we must “know thyself” to gain greater self-actualization and understanding of the world. To me, that means knowing what your interests are and knowing how to prioritize how you want to impact the world. Know your values and know what makes you feel so motivated you could work for hours on end without thinking it is a struggle with other parts of your life. As a result of my Fulbright exchange where I experienced the hard, exhausting, immensely joyful, and energy-draining life of teaching, I felt that working in the field of education was where I belonged, and I felt motivated to meet the challenges of this profession. In the capacity of an educator, my interest in developing interpersonal connections and seeing my students thrive as critical thinkers have been an important value to me. While my intrinsic motivation exists to help nurture global citizens who respect and value difference, the lack of respect in the teaching profession in the United States acts as a barrier. Teacher respect in the United States is a paradox; on the one hand, during the pandemic in 2020, teachers were lauded as heroes, but teacher salaries were not an economic priority for many communities. Teachers are entrusted to guide children's educational trajectory, but in many states, teachers are being barred from teaching books, that in their expert opinion, should be taught. Teachers want to be treated as professionals but have historically not been a priority or treated as such by their government and communities.

For teachers to thrive, the government and the school community must believe in the potential of its teachers. Teachers are highly respected in Taiwanese culture. As seen in the 2018 Global Teacher Status Index that surveyed thirty-five countries, Taiwan ranked third in the world as a nation that respects its teachers. The United States came in sixteenth. How the Taiwanese treat their teachers is evident in how they instill recognition and respect. When Hua Shan Elementary School celebrated Confucius Teachers Day in honor of the philosopher Confucius, the school had an entire assembly to honor and recognize all their teachers. All the teachers in each grade, one through six, were introduced and given gifts by the school in front of everyone. It was a beautiful moment for teachers because not only does the school take time out of the day to honor every single one of them in front of the entire school community, but also the consistent public recognition from year-to-year builds reverence for the teaching profession. While the United States has Teacher Appreciation Day and week, the recognition of teachers' work is often not uniform within a school and can vary from year to year.

While respect for the profession of K-12 teachers in America has ebbed and flowed with the pandemic, there is a teacher shortage across the United States. Teachers are leaving the profession for a variety of reasons ranging from low teacher salaries to overwhelming responsibilities to a lack of respect shown by parents, administrators, and students. To curb this “edxit” as it has come to be known on social media, it is imperative that the United States offer competitive pay to keep and retain its teachers. Implementing public recognition and appreciation of teachers consistently helps over time, but a community that pays its teachers well into the six figures will elevate the profession's status naturally and incentivize teachers to stay in teaching. Additionally, offering paths for teachers to work in public policy can help create teacher career pathways that go beyond education administration and curriculum development. There are very few career advancement opportunities for veteran teachers who have expert knowledge of curriculum, teaching, and education. Reserving a spot on each school board for two to three veteran teachers would be an excellent way to ensure representation by teachers and a potential path toward education advocacy.

Of the twelve Fulbrighters in our original Kaohsiung cohort in Taiwan, a third of our group became educators and are still educators to this day in America. The Fulbright experience shows that it does not just create cultural exchanges but can create enduring experiences for the education profession. While some may not consider it a professional pathway toward teaching, it does help elevate the profession by emphasizing the benefits of cross-cultural exchange.

IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE

Since the pandemic, I have transitioned from being a primary grade, classroom teacher to being the STEM (Science, technology, engineering, math) and computer science cluster teacher for my entire school. My experience as a Fulbrighter who taught a language as a cluster teacher in my first year of teaching in Taiwan has come full circle. Just as I shared my identity with my students in Taiwan, I do that now with my students in America. My Fulbright experience has also impacted the curriculum I develop for my students.

I am lucky to be in a school that values the expertise of its teachers and gives them the freedom to develop curricula that match the needs of our students. When I teach about computer science or any of the STEM concepts, I think back to my days as a teacher in Taiwan and how I shared parts of my identity that are important to me. As I begin to develop curricula that reflect the identities of my students, I know that they do better when they see themselves in the curriculum. When I shared parts of myself with my students, they had so many questions and were much more interested in the learning process. Remembering the interviews, I had with the high school students in Taiwan and also being peppered with questions from my elementary-aged students, I wanted to recreate those experiences and impressions by inviting speakers to come to talk to my students. As I developed curricula to support members of the Black, indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) communities and other underrepresented groups like women and the LGBTQ+ community, I have invited scientists from those communities to speak to my students. The impact has been great and many of my students wrote in their thank you letters to the speakers that they appreciated them sharing their experiences as scientists and as people. The beauty of teaching is helping expand a students' worldview, whether it be beyond country borders or beyond just the classroom walls. Taking steps to reach a global perspective begins with also addressing difference in America. By bringing in the stories of BIPOC, female, and LGBTQ+ scientists, I was already broadening the perspectives of my students.

In addition to designing curricula that affirm my students' identities, I also like to use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with my students. The Taiwanese government's emphasis on bilingual education helped me move away from anglocentric, monolingual pedagogies. While I do not teach at a bilingual school, I see value in still teaching other languages like ASL to decenter students from their monolingual experience. Helping students see other ways of communicating is so important in valuing difference. As a technology teacher, I also think it's important to expose students to whom we design technology. Having a global view helps pave the way for inclusive design for people who are different from you. Whether that means designing for people

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with disabilities or for our marginalized communities, or designing a robot that can automatically translate languages, it is important to include voices who may normally not be included. As I continue to teach my students, I hope they continue to value differences in our cultures and continue a cultural exchange that once began with me but is now being passed on to them.

NOTES

1. For more information on English Villages in Taiwan: <https://taiwan-etaprogram.org/eta-stories-blog/2017/10/24/lets-talk-about-english-village>
2. Fulbright in Taiwan English Teaching Assistantship Program: <https://taiwan-etaprogram.org/>
3. To learn more about the Global Teacher Status Index 2018: <https://www.varkeyfoundation.org/what-we-do/research/global-teacher-status-index-2018>



Shiela Lee teaching a primary class on the differences between Chinese culture and American culture at Hua Shan Elementary School in Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 2008.

BIOGRAPHY

Shiela Lee is a public-school teacher in New York City. She received a 2008-2009 Fulbright English Teaching Assistantship (ETA) award and was recently named a finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching. You can read more about her at www.shielalee.com. She can be contacted at leeshiela@gmail.com
