

Teaching is a Work of ‘Heart’

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I am a primary school teacher by profession. I am passionate about children, the way they learn and their absolute trust, faith and love for their teachers. Being in Korea is no different.

Upon first arrival at my school, I thought that I would never form any kind of special relationship with my kids. I was wrong. Being a Guest English Teacher (GET) has been far more than teaching English to Korean elementary students. Because of my position, I have been given many opportunities – in terms of building relationships with the students around me. I’ll be honest, initially I was overwhelmed by something as small as their names. How would I learn them all? How could I teach them without knowing their names? That is where ‘actions speak louder than words’ came into play, in a big way.

Kids, no matter where they are from, want praise and encouragement – and that was the strategy I adopted. I am a very enthusiastic person, and I think that shocked a few students, initially, however, now we have gotten into a groove and both myself and the students know what to expect. I attempted to learn a few names. Seeing these kids’ faces when I greeted them by name, was priceless. Often their heads would almost touch the floor, due to the depth of their bows. What a humbling experience for me. Aside from knowing their names, they also wanted me to share in their achievements.

Everyday, when I walk into the school grounds, I am bombarded with kids. They either hold my hand, comment on my hair, clothing choice or simply say hello. It is enough to ensure each day will be a great one. One day, in particular, stood out. I was casually strolling in, when a young Grade 6 girl ran up to me.

“Emma teacher, Emma teacher, I spoke to a foreigner.”

In Grade 6, we are busy teaching them about directions, and I encouraged each of them to help a confused foreigner out and also practice their new words.

I smiled at her and asked where she had spoken to the foreigner. A foreigner had approached her in the subway and asked for directions to a nearby place. My student had directed her, in English. I gasped and said I didn’t believe it. She smiled and said, ‘It’s true Emma teacher. You teach me the words and I used them.’ I didn’t realize what an impact that moment would have on me, let alone her. I gave her the praise she was due and encouraged her to speak more,



and frequently. My words meant the world to her. And that has been a realization, what I say has so much importance to them. Who are they to listen to me, or even trust me, yet they do!

I was teaching my grade 3 book club the other day, and we were doing a story about cleaning the house. One of the new words they learnt was ‘vacuum cleaner’. I felt like none of the students understood or even cared about what they were reading...until the next day. One of the members of the book club approached me as I arrived at school the following day. Instead of saying hello, he made the hand gestures of a vacuum cleaner, as well as the sound. I smiled and then silently wished he had remembered the word. I looked down at him and he looked up and said, ‘vacuum cleaner’! Small victories are just as great, or even better than huge victories. My students work so hard, and give their best in every class. They are brave when they answer my questions and they understand when they are wrong, and try to make it better. That’s an attitude I have not yet recognized in my teaching career, until now.

I think, in a way, this experience is made to remind me about the truth about teaching. Sometimes we try to make it so rigid and we worry that the students are not learning. Learning is one aspect of school and teaching. Teaching is about relationship: celebrating victories and mourning loss, encouraging and humbling. I feel so honoured to have the position that I have, with these kids. In so many ways, I am the student.

‘Teachers open the door – but you must enter by yourself.’ Chinese proverb.



Sang Rok, the Grade 3 student who learnt the word ‘vacuum cleaner’.