

Opportunity for Leadership: Field Trip to Taiwan

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**Abstract:** As education budgets shrink, an important aspect of American schools has been declining: student field trips. Many educators believe that real world experiences outside of school are vital for meaningful learning connections. This article focuses on the conception and planning of a field trip to Taiwan. It illustrates how an elementary teacher leveraged a project relationship and leadership principles to open the door to an international journey for a group of grade 4 students from a low socio-economic school in Hannibal, Missouri.

**Key words:** leadership, experiential learning, international projects

### **Field Trip Anyone?**

An often overheard comment among technology-using teachers goes something like this: although it would be great to take our students to South America or Alaska, it's just not realistic, so instead, let's go on a virtual field trip. But wait...what about real field trips? The educational benefits of a real field trip can provide as much or more learning than in a classroom (Bitgood, 1989).

B. F. Skinner (1964) wrote: "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten." Skinner refers to the value of experiences, and what remains beyond school learning. Ives and Obenchain (2006) found that experiential, out of the classroom learning fosters higher order thinking skills, increases student motivation, and can result in increased student achievement. Out of the classroom learning might mean a trip to a museum, a tour of a state capitol, a nature hike, or any of a number of student destinations. On offering students experiences, Jakubowski (2003) wrote: "a pedagogy of experience can be facilitated through the use of a critically responsive approach to teaching and learning that is grounded in experience, critical thinking, reflection, and action." (p. 31), all of which can be demonstrated in the simplest of field trips. For affluent school districts, field trips are commonplace, but for poorer districts, most field trips have fallen away in budget cutbacks, focus on standardized testing, or other perceived priorities. In my very non-affluent school, where we have a 97% free and reduced lunch population, I've observed that our students have few, if any, real world experiences: most kids do not travel beyond the city limits, do not attend plays or music performances, do not participate in local clubs and organizations, and have never been to a museum or zoo.

### **International Project Surprise**

In the winter of 2003, my classroom was engaged in a number of Internet partnerships around the world, one of which was with a school in Taipei, Taiwan. We had collaborated on a project I created called *Solving World Problems* from which a meaningful, ongoing classroom-to-classroom relationship developed. Students were e-mail friends, shared family and school information, photos, podcasts, writing, and other student work. Additionally, a close working relationship evolved among myself, the classroom teacher, and the liaison from the Department of Foreign Languages (DFL). One day, the DFL liaison made an unexpected proposition: she suggested we could create a *magical experience* if American students could come to Taiwan and visit their e-mail pals. I agreed, and considered this an interesting thought, but not something I expected to happen. However, to my surprise, she was serious and proceeded with details of how an international trip might be arranged. To me, it seemed impossible and unreasonable, not only for financial reasons, but also because it would mean addressing traveling with very young children, parental permissions, school policy questions, insurance concerns, general fears, and other unknowns. Nothing like this had ever been done before in our district, and I began to wonder if it were possible.

George Bernard Shaw said: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man." As I thought about the existing educational structure and the processes and restrictions already in place, it was clear there was no precedent for traveling with elementary students beyond the state line, much less across the Pacific Ocean to Taiwan. Kouzes and Posner (2002) listed *challenging the process* among their exemplary practices of leadership. In sum, the status quo must be disturbed if any change is to happen. Kouzes and

Posner (2002) wrote that a leader needs to ask for *what should be* and not be satisfied with *what is*.

If I decided to pursue this field trip, I knew from previous experiences with school districts, that the status quo could be a formidable obstacle. But to push this trip forward could possibly be the most significant contribution I could ever give to my students. As the conversation continued with the Taiwanese liaison, we tackled the issue of money. Neither my district nor my students had the money for a field trip of this magnitude. The Taiwanese liaison startled me with her next offer. Two-thirds of the expenses would be paid by Taiwanese parents. The remaining one-third would be raised by our students. My sense of excitement and possibility is hard to describe. It was almost unthinkable – and so far I had not discussed this with anyone in my school administration, and really didn't know how or where to start, or how I would proceed. Reading the advice of Kouzes and Pozner had a focusing effect: I would need to *inspire a vision enabling others to act*, I would need to *model the way*, and I would need to make it very real, or as Kouzes and Pozner stated it, *encourage the heart*, that is, to help parents understand and internalize the importance of this journey to the lives of their children.

### **Art of Persuasion**

I needed a stance or a presence to begin this process with my administration, that is, I wanted to do it right, not to appear to be suggesting something too outlandish so as to be summarily dismissed. One early response to my proposal was “You want to do what! Taiwan? You've got to be kidding.”

Conger (1998) offers several leadership steps using what he calls the art of persuasion. I used his basic approach of establishing credibility, framing for common ground, providing

evidence, and connecting emotionally. It began with my principal, explaining to her the basics of traveling to Taiwan for a ten-day, international summer school in early July. In the international summer school, I would be a planner and a teacher. Sharing these details and the fact that most of cost would be funded by Taiwan, and the fact that I had traveled previously on educational journeys to England and Wales, established my initial credibility. I had experience in connecting with international schools and been a guest teacher in European classrooms. My role was credible in that I was a veteran classroom teacher, the school web manager, and I had instituted several multi-school Internet projects over the years.

My principal was stunned, energized, and enthusiastic at the prospect of offering this incredible opportunity to our students. She was ready to bring the proposition to the superintendent and school board, once we had a plan in place. Finding common educational ground with my principal was easier than I had imagined. It was clear to her how the lives of our students would be enriched tremendously by traveling halfway around the world to visit a foreign culture.

### **Choosing the Travelers**

Choosing the travelers for the trip was difficult. We were dealing with young children, and picking some meant that others would be excluded, a hard thing for a child to deal with. I notified parents that we had an amazing opportunity: based on the funding supplied by the Taiwanese school, ten students could have the opportunity to go. Parents understood that students would be staying in Taiwanese homes, that I would be in contact with students at all times, we would be gone for ten days, and that we needed to raise a very small portion of the money for air travel to Taipei. Many parents spoke up immediately: they could not let their children travel out of the country; and this helped trim the list of possible travelers. Among the

remaining students, I proposed the following criteria for students. Those who: (1) are respectful to teachers and work hard; (2) are responsible and caring; (3) show good manners and good behavior; (4) are conversational and enjoy making new friends; (5) are willing to try new foods; (6) are brave enough to stay with a Taiwanese family; (7) will learn basic Chinese phrases before going; and (8) will represent our school and the USA with pride. With the principal's help, I selected ten students from my class who best fit these criteria. Grades and academic performance were not part of the criteria.

But before anything could happen, I needed to address the parents directly: their questions, their concerns, their fears about allowing their nine-year-old children to travel halfway around the world with a fourth grade teacher.

### **Enlisting the Parents**

First I spoke with a few parents active in PTO, shared the idea informally, and got their feedback and comments. After that, a series of official *Taiwan Trip Parent Meetings* began. At this point, Conger's persuasive art was needed again – I had to assure the parents of my credibility, convince them that the trip was safe, share with them my deep belief that this would be a transformational experience for their children's lives. They all knew me, but they didn't necessarily trust me to take their children on an airplane to Taiwan. I began slowly by retelling the story that resulted in our invitation: the projects, the e-mail exchanges, the Christmas presents, all of the moments that had created this international relationship. I showed photos and videos of the Taiwanese school, a prestigious private institution located in the mountains southwest of Taipei, Taiwan. Our two schools could not have been any further apart, not only in distance, but in size, resources, and population. Tuition at the Taiwanese school was as much as at an American college; students came from families where parents were professionals in

medicine, business, law, government, education and so forth. This knowledge helped many parents begin to relax, believing and feeling that their children would be cared for by responsible parents. The case I was making fit with Kouzes and Posner as an effort to *encourage the heart*, to bring parents to believe that the impact of this trip would be enormous, an event never to be forgotten by their children. I wanted the parents to know and believe that with all of us working together, we could do what we might have all thought impossible.

Between January and June, we plotted the dates and time for parent meetings and fundraisers. Issues to be resolved were gifts for the Taiwanese families, kids' spending money, insurance, clothing, luggage, passports, inoculations, kids' fear of being away from parents, parental misunderstandings, medical authority, communication with parents while out of the country, the Chinese language barrier, and parental religious concerns. As we moved into this part of the plan, it was clear that there was much work to be done, including attending to the emotional states of the students, their parents, and changing feelings about separation as we approached the day of departure. Resisting the urge to micromanage, I stood back as parents took charge of the fund raising activities and selecting gifts to take to Taiwanese families.

In time, we raised more money than we needed through fundraising and donations, acquired passports for all students, while managing the emotions of both children and parents as the date for departure grew closer. Students had been exchanging frequent emails with their homestay families, and all had photos of where they would stay in Taipei, some in houses, some in high-rise apartment buildings.

### **The Field Trip Begins**

At 4:30 AM, the school bus arrived in the early morning darkness at our gathering place in

the school parking lot. Parents were teary-eyed and nervous, but ready to send their children on this journey. One mother when asked how she could possibly allow her nine-year-old son to go alones on this trip to Taiwan, replied with conviction: “How could I not let him go? I could never make this possible for him on my own.”

After waiting and watching parents hugging kids, I made the announcement that it was time to move out. Ten students and two teachers boarded the bus, waved goodbye, and rolled off toward the St. Louis airport. They would fly first to Detroit, cross the Pacific Ocean, change airplanes in Osaka, Japan, then roar into Taipei International Airport. They would be met on the other side of the world, twenty-two hours after starting, by exuberant Taiwanese families waving welcome signs, as though these American 4<sup>th</sup> graders were movie stars. Indeed, what had seemed impossible, was possible -- the field trip of a lifetime. Amazingly, we did it again in 2007.

**Note:** Details of the Taiwan trips: <http://www.smithclass.org/proj/projects.htm>

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