

Voyages of Discovery through a Backpack Exchange

Tracy Hong Syz, Fair Lawn Schools



Backpacks are commonplace in American schools. Each day students transport them to and from the classroom as they manage to carve out a little oasis of space to gather their treasures, homework and books. In Fair Lawn's recently launched Chinese classes, backpacks take on new responsibility, becoming culture bearers that connect middle school children from East and West and provide insight into the lives of new friends on the other side of the globe.

The plan was to broaden the common pattern of a student-to-student pen pal exchange by creating two collective products to exchange in place of letters. My students were just beginning to learn Chinese and their written communication was limited, so I focused on a whole-class project that would emphasize cultural exchange. The backpack would become a culture bearer, providing insight into items of interest to middle school learners. With the objective of getting to know the likes and interests of 12 or 13 year olds in the target culture, we established a bimonthly routine to send two backpacks across the world, one from each grade level, containing products collected and created by participating students. These products included student artwork, class albums, favorite books, magazines, CDs, movies and much more.

Four times per year we would fill and mail backpacks carrying students' collaborative works corresponding to



the designated theme. The theme of the first voyage was the introduction of individual students through a scrapbook, photo album, DVD or other medium. The second voyage communicated school culture with photos, schedules, school materials and sample assignments in each subject area. The third voyage centered on books students read at each grade level with sample editions, student editorials, book reports or summaries and opinion statements. The theme of the fourth and final voyage was pastimes including favorite music, school-related activities, and sports through photos, CDs, school supplies, advertisements and newspaper articles.

Here in New Jersey each backpack's arrival at Thomas Jefferson or Memorial Middle School generated much excitement. Students huddled around to examine the shipping labels, converting their mere arrival into a mini lesson about international shipping protocol. Once opened, the package contents spilled out for my students to examine. Their excited chatter was a testimony to their high level of interest. The backpack's arrival provided many teachable moments as I interpreted the contents for my students and answered their questions. To reach the wider community, the backpack and its contents became a traveling museum show to be signed out overnight so that every family had an opportunity to examine its contents and to learn from them along with their children.

To study a language is also to study the culture embedded within it. As Fair Lawn embarks upon a new Chinese language initiative, we seek to develop a bridge of understanding between students' native culture and the target culture and we have seen that the



backpack exchange is an effective vehicle to meet this goal. The sixth, seventh and eighth grade American students studying Chinese are also gaining firsthand experience with the target culture through a backpack project. In return, Chinese children and teachers are enjoying the opportunity to try out their English and to share their culture with their new friends in the United States.

Being involved at the ground level of a new program was both exciting and challenging for me. My mission was to develop a program that would attract new students and maintain high standards and expectations. Interaction with the community afforded me professional growth and community interaction. First, I established strong ties with the parent community through a welcome tea that was given in my honor. Second, I created a CD highlighting my interactions with fifth grade learners and distributed it to each elementary principal to show to the parents of their school. Administrators helped me attend national and local conferences where I benefitted from special sessions dedicated to the teaching of Chinese and the many new instructional materials that have been created. In addition, time was built into my schedule each week to work with my supervisor on methodology and curricula. She encouraged me to apply for the Foreign Language Educators of New Jersey (FLENJ) grant for... and facilitated the backpack exchange.

I am excited and encouraged that our beginning level enrollment is up more than 30% for next year. I look forward to the continued articulation of our program to new grade levels. As the Beijing Olympics have opened China to the world, the backpack project has begun to unlock Chinese culture for the children of Fair Lawn.



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Tracy Hong Syz was the first Chinese teacher hired in Fair Lawn when a new program was launched in 2007 as a result of Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant funding. Born and raised in Taiwan, Tracy also taught and lived in Beijing (China), Singapore, and Sydney (Australia). She was a teacher at Beijing Normal University before moving to the United States to become a PhD. candidate at Columbia University. Her hobbies are reading and traveling. She can be reached at tracyhong-syz@yahoo.com.