

Culture Shock: The Sticky Situation

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As I entered my school for the first time I felt like I was walking into a blind date. I had spent an hour picking out my outfit, I tried to arrive early but not too early, and I had barely slept the night before. All the advice people (and the internet) had given me was running through my head. I was so nervous I wished I had used more of my precious antiperspirant. (It is true that deodorant and antiperspirant are hard to find in Korea).



A hike with my fellow teachers

As for all that internet advice take everything you hear (including my opinion) with a grain of salt. I'd heard everything from “you will make the kids cry everyday” to “you will hate Korean food, pack your own lunch” and finally my favorite “don't cut your hair or it will mean you're unhappy” I understand there are seeds of truth to these but for me they all proved untrue.

The one difference I feared the most did prove true. I had heard about the commonality of physical punishments in Korea. When the bell rang for my first class I saw the wooden stick swinging in my co-teachers' hand. Afraid I would be witness to something bordering on child abuse I braced myself for an emotional disaster. In my first class the only use of the stick was to tap on a desk to get attention. I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking it was perhaps used only as a threat. However, in my next class I watched as it was used on students. This kind of punishment would not be allowed in public schools in the US (I remember getting a teacher in trouble for forcing a child into his chair) but here it is acceptable. Quite contrary to my previous beliefs I understand the controlled use of the stick. It's true that even this small form of power can be abused and turned into a weapon rather



than a tool. Physical punishment is now banned by the Office of Education in Seoul after an internet video of a violent teacher went viral. But the times I've seen it used here were conducive to both the classroom environment and to the students. Honestly it's more about embarrassing a

student than it is about inflicting real pain. There is never enough strength behind a strike to be noticed by the student after a minute. The students inflict far more pain on each other than teachers do. Even the students say physical punishment is a positive force for teaching. As a Guest English Teacher I myself never use physical punishment on the students. The difference between the classes where a stick is present (mind you even if not used) and a class where it's absent is immense.

Here's the profound advice I have to deal with these problems. First, think about what people tell you a first date: to be yourself and smile. I know, it should be so much more complicated than this but that's the best advice I can give. People are the same wherever you go, so do the same things you would at any other job: be nice, try your best, talk with your co-teachers, laugh at jokes, and just smile. Second, while you're here give things a chance, whether this means the mystery fish dish on the table or trying to accept (if not like) a different way of discipline. You will get so much more out of this experience. And maybe, this blind date will turn into happily ever after.



The strange looking fish dish proved to be our favorite.



My husband and I exploring the ancient capital Gyeongju...

Happily Ever After!