

There's No Place Like "Home"

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I've been volunteering at The Salvation Army Children's Home (구세군대전혜생원) in Boksu-dong, Daejeon for almost two years now. I work alongside a group of three other Guest English Teachers every Monday (except the last Monday of the month) teaching English to about 20 elementary-aged students. The Home itself actually houses children of all ages, from a baby (whom the kids affectionately refer to as "King Baby") to high school students. The children live, eat, and sleep there; it is, in every sense of the word, their home. It is a wonderful and loving place to come to every week, and I've learned so many things about the kids, the Korean orphanage system, and even myself over the last two years volunteering there.

The English speaking program at the Home was started 4 years ago by Fulbright Scholars looking to volunteer and help out in the community. A few friends and I took over the volunteer positions when their contracts ended, so luckily we had some sort of framework to work with right away. At first, the work was fairly straightforward: pick a children's book and some vocabulary words from the book, then play a sort of repeating game for practice. This system worked well for a couple of weeks, and we were totally content with it – reading books and playing with kids for an hour? Sounds easy! Eventually, we were pulled aside by the staff and told (translated, of course), that they'd like us to be more structured and academically inclined – most of the kids at the Home come from low-income families and don't have money to pay for academies. We were to think of ourselves as a sort of private English hagwon. As such, it was important that we attend every week, not only to reinforce what we taught the week before, but also to give the kids a sense of consistency and so that they can rely on us to be there every week. This point was something that we, as a group, really took to heart: the kids are counting on us to be a stable presence in their lives and we should do whatever we can to maintain that trust.

It took us quite a while to figure out the direction we wanted to take with our teaching, and there were so many questions that came up that we'd never even thought of before: who would do the planning? What would our individual roles be in the classroom? Where would we keep the materials? How would we translate the difficult concepts? Eventually, though, we started a system that still survives to this day: on that one Monday that we don't go to the Home, I and three other volunteers meet up and decide on a topic for the month. We then focus on about 8 phrases or words associated with that theme to teach the kids. We'll come up with games ("Duck, Duck, Goose" is a particular favorite, as is "Bingo!") and worksheets, but if there is a children's book that

we can use, that's even better. We'll split up the work among the four of us so as not to put the pressure of extra-material making on one person. The first week is usually an introduction to the topic, words and repetition; the second is writing and practice; the third is usually a craft (or sometimes "party") that has to do with the theme. Although it *sounds* very academic – and that is what we strive for – we also really like to just have fun with the kids. My Korean skills are still lacking (ahem, non-existent) and the kids' English level is still relatively low (although improving!), but just talking to them and goofing around with them is what keeps me going there week after week.

We have worked out a system of planning, but that's not to say that there aren't still problems and complications here and there. This year, I work at two schools and sometimes struggle to find the time to prepare the necessary materials for the orphanage classes. There have been times when I've considered calling the other volunteers and saying "I have so much planning to do, I just can't make it tonight" or "I'm too tired, I'll have to cancel." Of course, just like all kids, they have their bad days – they get restless, they don't listen, they don't want to do an activity. There have been a couple of instances where discipline has been needed because of bad behavior (I'm usually the one to deal with that aspect of our work – not one of my favorite things). There are also times when I think that I should find a place closer to my house to save me the hour long commute to and from Boksu-dong. But then I think of how much I miss the kids when I haven't seen them for a few weeks, how they can turn even some of my bad teaching days into good days, and how happy I feel when I leave the Home. That's when I say to myself "Yeah, this is totally worth it."

My volunteering experience at the Daejeon Salvation Children's Home has been extremely rewarding and fulfilling, although not without its drawbacks. It has not only helped me adjust to life in Korea, but also re-awakened my passion for volunteering. I've been volunteering in various ways throughout my life, but for the first time since high school I've seen and felt how important giving your time can be, and how appreciated it really is. This last week, we were teaching the kids "Thank you for _____" in preparation for a Thanksgiving card writing activity we will do next week. The kids were being surprisingly well-behaved and so we treated them to their favorite game "Duck, Duck, Goose!" (changed to the seasonally appropriate "Gravy, Gravy, Turkey!" as a vocabulary reinforcement). As we were packing up to leave, one little girl (who speaks very little English) suddenly ran back into the room, threw open her arms and gave me a giant bear hug. She said "I love you, Teacher!" and then ran out. No explanation, no reason, just gave me a hug and then left. That's how I know that what I'm doing there is appreciated and it's moments like that that make me want to keep giving.



Picture 1: With 3 former volunteers, playing the “ABC Game” to reinforce new vocab words.



Picture 2: Students sitting in their groups, listening to a volunteer read a book. Our “Rules of the Classroom” poster, which we display every week, is on the white board as a reminder.