

STAR VOLUNTEERS HELPING TO BRIDGE DIVIDES

Abigail Tan a first year Pharmacy student from Singapore, and Xiaofang Yang a postgraduate Education student from China are two Mandarin speaking students with an amazing achievement in common.

Keen to get the most out of their time in Reading they both wanted some volunteering experience and were interested in working with children. They found the **Students in Schools** scheme ideal as it enabled them to pick a volunteering session to fit their timetable and which matched their interests and skills.

At first, they both volunteered to make 10 visits to help children in one local primary school. However such was their enthusiasm and commitment by the end of the year they were helping in no less than 3 schools each. Together they clocked up over **100 hours** of hands on support in local primary schools.

First Impressions

Their first experience of a UK primary school was challenging and very different from their own but they soon found they could help the children and see the difference their contributions made.



Abigail Tan (pictured left) and Xiaofang Yang (right)

Making a difference

Abigail and Xiaofang helped children aged 4 – 7 in the classroom and also gave one on one language support to Mandarin speaking children with little or no English. Activities involved helping children with their vocabulary, pronunciation, reading, writing and spelling. Helping Mandarin speaking children also involved liaison with the teacher to make sure the child understood the teacher and the teacher was aware of any specific difficulties the child was having.

Abigail said of one child she helped *"the boy spoke so little English he had been unable to make any friends. I realised what a difference I could make when within a month he was happily communicating and playing with other children who quickly helped him learn more English"*.

Abigail is a pharmacy student so teaching does not feature in her current career plans; however she still feels she now has a lot of relevant highly transferable experience,

"the patience and empathy needed when talking to the children and on occasions talking to their parents, giving them time to voice concerns and offering re-assurance, are skills that are as relevant to a pharmacist as to a teacher".

Xiaofang who is studying for a Master's in Education had only worked with older students before but she so enjoyed the enthusiasm and affection from the younger children that she is now considering a career in primary school teaching when she returns home.

Experience a different culture

Having grown up in very different educational systems both students were interested to see the UK educational system in action. Xiaofang found it less strict and rigid than in China and she loved some of the more imaginative ways of teaching in the UK

"In China units of measure would probably be taught by drawing lines and measuring them with a ruler, whereas I saw this being taught in the playground by measuring an enormous dinosaur the children had drawn on the playground. I was also very touched when the children in my class proudly presented me with an Easter basket they had made for me, they were so enthusiastic and polite it made me very proud to have been able to help them"

Abigail added

"I was very impressed with the commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers who put in so much effort to help young children discuss, explore and think critically about the work they were doing, it is very different to the system in Singapore"



Advice to Other Students

Abigail's advice to anyone thinking about taking part in the scheme is that is a highly rewarding experience and you can make a real difference; although you must be prepared for a challenge and be willing to put yourself outside your comfort zone.

"If you do you will certainly improve your communication skills, time-management and self-discipline as well as your patience".



Xiaofang felt that the more you put in the more you would benefit and recommended:-

"Spending some time preparing for the lessons ahead and always having a dictionary close at hand! If you are concerned about your level of spoken English start by volunteering to give one on one language support and you will soon find you are able to offer a lot more"

Teachers said

At Radstock Primary School both students were supporting a young child recently arrived from China who spoke no English and was finding school very stressful.

The class teacher said of the students

"Both Abigail and Xiaofang have been extremely helpful to us as a school and to the child who came to us. With their help we were able to communicate effectively with the child and also help him feel safe and happy at school. It was a vital part of his transition into the English schooling system.

We have been overwhelmed by their support; they both have a wonderful manner with the children and have been willing to help with translations, lessons and assessments. It has had a huge impact on the support we can provide, we were able to make links with the child's parents and also complete accurate assessments of the child in both English and his home language.

This one to one support has made a huge impact and has helped this child develop in all aspects of the foundation stage curriculum. He has shown huge improvements in his personal and social skills and has now really started to settle in to school'.

Register

Students interested in taking part in Students in Schools next term can register now at <http://reading.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/register>