

Project SEED to begin three-year study of Taiwanese civic literacy, engagement

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How do Taiwanese teachers work with and engage students, parents and communities?

In what ways are schools there advancing the tenets of a multicultural society?

Both are questions faculty from the **Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment** will explore this summer and next as they travel to Asia to launch a three-year collaboration with Taiwan's **Research Center for Promoting Civic Literacy**.

Their work will generate knowledge about the development of civic knowledge and skills, and attitude toward, civic literacy and efficacy in Taiwan for research and development of civic engagement in language, social science and science learning.

Funded by a **Fulbright-Hays Grant** from the U.S. Department of Education, **Project SEED (Research on Social Justice, Education Equity and Diversity)**, will involve on-site community-based action research, panel discussions, classroom presentations, workshops and more.

Embarking on the pair of six-week trips are Department Chair and principal investigator **Wei-Chen Hung** and professors **Laura Ruth Johnson** and **Tom Smith**. ETRA colleagues Vicki Collins and Todd Reeves are serving as co-PI and program evaluator, respectively.



Wei-Chen Hung and Vicki Collins

Joining Hung, Johnson and Smith in Taiwan are two representatives of K-12 education: former ETRA instructor Isti Sanga, executive director for Educational Technology in the Kershaw County School District of Camden, S.C.; and Lifang Tsao, language teacher from Glenbard North High School.

NIU's team will collect new data, tap into existing data and develop new instrumentation to better assess what the data reveals. They also will remain open-minded to new and unexpected ideas that might surface during their research.

Afterward, they will disseminate their findings through an international symposium on civic literacy and efficacy, journal publications and a series of instructional activities on civic education.

Funded by the Taiwan Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan's Research Center for Promoting Civic Literacy aims to develop standardization and institutionalization of investigating protocols to promote civic literacy research, Hung says.

"The current center director, Dr. Huann-shyang Lin, also a long term collaborator with the project team, believes it is important not only to the educational system – to educating people about the science, about the social justice, about the culture – but that it must be extended to the communities and to the general population," Hung says. "Most people feel like Taiwan is not very ethnically diverse, but Taiwan is indeed very ethnically diverse."

Smith and the others are "looking forward to immersing ourselves in the Taiwanese culture and learning what these concepts mean in Taiwan and how they are expressed among its citizens."

"Given events in the U.S. during the past several years, we've all observed how civic engagement, social justice and science literacy are critical elements of a healthy, functioning democracy," Smith says.

“As part of Project SEED, we hope to participate in mutual knowledge-sharing with our Taiwanese colleagues and learn from each other how these qualities of engagement, social justice and literacy can best be nurtured and enhanced in both the U.S and Taiwanese citizenry,” he adds. “We’re looking forward to immersing ourselves in the Taiwanese culture and learning what these concepts mean in Taiwan, and how they are expressed among its citizens.”

Johnson is equally excited to make her fourth visit to “a beautiful country with a strong national and cultural identity and rich traditions – and delicious food!”

During her Fall 2019 research sabbatical there, she saw innovative projects and initiatives connecting college students with elders and residents in surrounding communities that highlighted traditional knowledge and practices.

She hopes her work “can help us rethink relationships between universities and communities, as well as challenge notions of research that privilege academic knowledge and research, instead viewing communities as intellectual spaces.”

This will include an exploration of how various Taiwanese ethnic groups – Hoklo, Hakka, mainland Chinese and indigenous Taiwanese, for example – perceive social justice, education equity and diversity as well as how these perceptions influence their feelings of civic literacy and civic efficacy.

“I am particularly interested in how institutions, at the K-12 and university level, engage indigenous communities – there are 13 officially recognized groups in Taiwan – who have historically been marginalized and are struggling to preserve their traditions and language,” Johnson says.

“I was fortunate to interview a faculty member and one of her students about ongoing research in a nearby indigenous community focusing on traditional ecological knowledge related to water use and climate change,” she adds. “I am planning to continue this work over the summer as part of a broader research project on community-based qualitative research in diverse contexts.”

Hung’s collaboration with Smith should yield beneficial knowledge for Taiwanese teachers and educational administrators as they integrate competencies of social justice, civic consciousness and multiculturalism with content of language, social studies and science.

“The highly centralized Taiwan Ministry of Education has recently implemented a 12-year curriculum framework extending the original nine-year curriculum with the intent to address the core competency of social participation, such as multicultural and international understanding, moral practice and civic consciousness,” Hung says.



Tom Smith

The social participation competency focuses on nurturing the development of inner quality through day-to-day interactions by instilling appreciation for the value of learning. This added core competency, Hung says, shares similar requirements to teacher education dispositions in the United States.

However, learning of social participation often is focused on knowledge acquisition and memorization, given the deep-rooted Taiwanese social value on intellectual development and academic achievement.

“People understand that this is something they must learn,” Hung says, “but we cannot say this traditional methodology is the best way.”

For that reason, Hung and the research team will compare the “very different” Taiwanese and U.S. models.

“Unlike the education system in Taiwan, education is primarily a state and local responsibility in the U.S. Yes, there are national standards like Common Core, but local districts can develop their own curriculum,” Hung says. “With that mindset, I think that that we will be able to share some pros and cons – the advantages and disadvantages.”

Project SEED “is a win-win situation for both sides, especially in having the opportunity to tap into a project that has been going on for five years,” Hung adds.

“We are promoting international collaboration,” he says. “Broadening the scope of our research also has the opportunity to bring such experience and knowledge to our classrooms through research-in-practice.”



Laura Ruth Johnson

