Hemi Kong

I am a missionary kid from Tanzania, and I currently work as a Speech Language Pathologist in an elementary school in Houston, TX. I was born in Tanzania and grew up attending a boarding school for missionary kids in Kenya from 5th grade -12th grade. Upon graduation, I moved to the U.S. to attend college. I graduated from Calvin University with my bachelor’s degree in 2020 and my master’s degree in 2021.

I currently work in a public-school setting and work between two main elementary schools as their speech therapist. In the school setting, we categorize speech therapy as a function in the special education department. To briefly summarize what a Speech Language Pathologist does is we work fluency, voice, articulation disorders, language disorders, augmentative/alternative communication, autism, cochlear implants, traumatic brain injury, and even swallowing difficulties. So, we work with a lot of medically fragile or students categorized with multiple disabilities.

To share a little bit about myself I was born in Tanzania and lived there until I came for college in the United States. Our family briefly lived in Korea for a year in 2004 for their sabbatical. They were getting re-trained into another missionary organization and lived in Jeonju. Because my brother was about 8 and I was about 5 we were left to attend a Korean school while living with my grandparents in Daegu.

Fast forward a couple of years and I remember transitioning from an international school close to home to a boarding school in another country so my brother and I could receive good education while my parents served in the mission field. I remember attending the boarding school at the age of 11 and remember how hard it was to live away from my parents. I struggled with homesickness and had a hard time transitioning into a new environment on top of the normal everyday schooling a student was supposed to receive. Although it was a difficult time and I still have memories of staying up crying at night, I do remember the constant love and care the staff, teachers, dorm parents, and everyone around me provided. Looking back at my experience, I would say school did not only consist of a solid education but was also a place where I could grow and receive the love and care a child requires when growing up.

Like many of you, growing up in the mission field I often followed my parents and learned to help out with their mission work. Of course, as a little girl there were ministries I couldn’t help out with, but there were always a couple I was welcomed to. One that is solidly left in my memory would be visiting the preschool and primary school my mom was helping out with. My mom often joined the students and staff in the morning and taught a bible story. I vividly remember my mom collecting all my stuffed animals and placing them in a basket to teach the story of Noah’s ark to the students. Once we finished our morning worship and prayer, we all sat around in a circle and listened to the story of Noah’s ark. My mom used the little stuffed animals to demonstrate and provide examples the student’s could easily follow and understand. I remember the students were all engrossed in the story and listened attentively to the message. That was one of my earliest memories in the mission field.

Then fast forward a couple of years, my parents were called to serve in a small island composed of 95% Muslims. It was a beautiful island and it was widely known as a tourist attraction, however, we knew the people there needed the gospel. As many of you know, venturing into a place with another religion, we were cautious to blatantly label ourselves as missionaries. My parents became teachers and worked under an NGO so they could receive visas to enter the country. God called them to bring the gospel to the people by bringing in Christian curriculum through good education. The school focused on daily devotions, teaching them Christian songs, and introducing bible stories into the curriculum. Many families and parents were willing to send their children to get good education despite their religion.

When witnessing the students in each of these schools, one thing all these students had in common was their engagement and their desire/passion to learn. I remember seeing their twinkling and curious eyes eager to learn a new a bible story or their constant humming and singing to a worship song. It was such a beautiful sight only God could create.

When I first went to college, I was very uncertain about my major. There was an overwhelming number of fields I could choose from. I entered the field of speech therapy after realizing my passion for helping/serving people as well as my desire to work with students with special needs. In my past experiences, I always felt like I struggled with fitting the “norm” or even just other barriers along with needing to gain an education. Because of my past experiences and my educational background, God placed in my heart a seed of empathy for the students in special education and the students who are often struggling with more than education.

Growing up, I witnessed my parents spread the gospel through education. Education is powerful wherever you go in the world. It has no boundaries in terms of religion or in terms of race. As long as it was good education, parents/families were willing to send their children to a Christian school despite their contradictory religion.

In all honesty, upon graduating from college, it was my selfish desire that I wanted to pursue my speech language pathologist role in a private Christian school or even a small clinic/hospital. But God had other plans and placed me in a public school setting in the middle of Houston. Working in the American public school system, I was shocked to see the difference in socioeconomic levels, broken up families, and such behavioral concerns. I experienced students and families who were filled with gratitude, but also worked with behaviorally and emotionally unstable students. Some students were born to a mom who had a drug addiction, some lived with relatives as they never met their birth parents, most parents were not present or active in the lives of the students and the student’s priority was not education. When working with students who threatened, hurt, and used inappropriate language, I was often shocked, however, God gave me the patience to understand these children were only reacting from the environment.

Some students need the love and care offered by any adult: teaching is not only passing down our knowledge and wisdom to the next generation, but also openly loving our students (making sure their needs are met, providing protection and helping in times of need). Although I’m not attending a Christian school, God has continued to challenge me to demonstrate Christ-like love, care, and integrity as a Christian. Reflecting back on my experience this past year, one thing that really stuck with me was something a retiring special education teacher shared during one of her speeches. She was one of the teachers that was always running around trying to solve situations when students were climbing over fences, undressing themselves in the middle of the classroom, violently hitting teachers/students, screaming across the school, or even running away from the school completely. We always asked how she did or how she knew how to respond to each difficult situation, but she mentioned she never knew the answer or the solution as to how to solve a problem, but just knew God was always with her and she was never alone. Getting the strength to teach, to care, and to love the children from God should be what we as Christian educators need to achieve.

In the long term, I feel led to enter the mission field through education, however, I am certain God has placed me in this role to grow, to learn, and to experience the hardships of working in an American public-school setting. God has given me the power to love, to care, and to empathize with each student I have interacted with this past school year. It’s not a one-time thing, but God continues to humble me through these difficult situations. I hope God gives you the opportunity to experience the power of education.