
An excerpt from the Spring 2011 issue of **THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL'S TIS NEWS**



5th grade students experience life and conduct research in Spain, China, Japan

24 students attend school abroad for 10th annual Capstone trip

For Spanish fifth grader Finn, “it’s important to get to know people in other countries, to know what their life is like, what they eat, when they eat, what they like to play - so you’re not thinking some sort of stereotype. Also, if you want to get a job in another country, it will be easier if you have traveled and know what it’s like.”

Finn was one of 15 students who went to Spain in March for the two week TIS Capstone Study Abroad program. As the school celebrates its 20th anniversary, Capstone marks its tenth year of enriching the student experience at TIS.

The travel concept was first tested at TIS in 1995, when Head of School Lucy Portela took a small group of 3rd grade students and parent chaperones to Monterey, California. The students spent a week visiting a Spanish speaking school and participated in many activities including viewing the butterfly migration.

In 2001 the Capstone Study Abroad

program started officially when three Japanese track students and one fifth grade teacher went to Japan for 10 days. Students visited Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, and Nara City with home-stays in each location.

This year, in addition to Finn and his classmates, seven fifth grade students went to China, and two went to Japan. The students attended school and lived with host families or in school dormitories for one week, then spent another week visiting cultural and historical sites with their teacher and parent chaperones.

“I think [this kind of experience] is important because when we go to China we learn about China’s culture, and we can see what actually goes on in China,” said Theo after his Capstone trip in March. “Instead of just reading about it in books, we got to feel it and see it - and I think that really makes a big difference.”

China traveler Kieran also appreciated the first hand experience. “The food there is different than the Chinese food we make here. I’ve been

trying to eat the Chinese food here for a long time, and I still don’t like it. I hadn’t even heard of red bean paste dumplings, and I like red bean paste!”

The mission of the TIS Capstone program is to provide study abroad experience to accentuate and enrich the language and cultural proficiency students acquire at The International School. During the Capstone trip, students validate and apply their language proficiency, world knowledge, and cultural understanding through first hand experiences and real world application.

Capstone also provides an important opportunity for social-emotional growth. Ten- and eleven-year-olds learn a lot about their own maturity and personal skills by living away from their family for a week absorbed in another language and culture.

Fifth grader Brian was surprised at how easy it was to feel at home in Spain. “It was very different than I imagined it. I thought it would be a lot harder going to the host families, but it was really easy.”



Reflecting on his Spanish Capstone, Alexander said, “Actually I didn’t have any problems communicating. Their accent is a little different so that was a little tough to get used to, but after awhile I got it.”

Katie had a similar experience in China, “It was actually pretty easy to understand their Chinese. Some of them talked with kind of a twist, but they were really nice and it wasn’t that hard to understand.”

Several of the children felt that the complete immersion of being abroad helped bring their language to the next level. Kyle liked that on his Japan trip, “there wasn’t anyone telling me that I had to speak Japanese and not to use English like we’re told at school. It was just that if I spoke English, I would be surrounded by a lot of blank stares. I really had to use my Japanese to be understood.”

Alexander learned the same thing in Spain. “You can’t just ask for everything in English. You’re relying on the language, therefore you learn and understand it a lot better because your life depends on it right now.”

Students use primary research to compare cultures

This year Capstone took on a whole new meaning as it was combined with the school’s first annual International Baccalaureate (IB) exhibition.

For most IB units of study, the teachers provide a central idea and lines of inquiry to define the scope of the lesson. The teacher arranges learning activities and develops an end-of-unit assessment. In contrast, the exhibition is an individual or group inquiry that starts from personal interest and extends into real world local and global issues.

The exhibition inquiry requires students to show an understanding of the main IB concepts: form, function, causation, change, connection, perspective, responsibility, and reflection. Students must use skills from all five areas: social, research, self management, communication, and thinking. In keeping with the IB belief that students should have ownership for their learning, the fifth graders are involved in all stages of planning their work. They choose an issue to study, and, with the help of their teacher, the students define the learning outcomes, the learning

activities, and the assessment.

At TIS, Capstone provided a natural platform for the fifth grade exhibition work. The theme of study was “Who we are,” and the central idea was: “Shared beliefs and values influence people’s everyday lives.”

To delve into that central idea, each student or small group of students chose a topic of personal interest such as transportation, fashion, food, free time or housing. The students designed surveys and conducted their own primary research with people they met on their Capstone trip. They then administered the same survey at home in Portland.

Students used the data and their personal observations to compare and contrast Portland culture with the culture of their host country. The students wrote essays, created informational boards, and developed interactive presentations to share their research and conclusions with the school community.

The students’ ability to discuss their findings and the findings of their classmates showed an understanding of and reflection about the factors that make up cultural norms. One group found that, “the kids in Hokkaido and kids in TIS have lots of similarities. What is unique about the kids in Hokkaido is that they have time for calligraphy class, unicycle team, and drawing Manga during their free time.” Another group learned that the Spaniards they surveyed use more public transportation and drive cars with better gas mileage than their Portland friends. A third group learned that older people in China eat first, yet “like American children, children in China don’t like carrots, onions, vegetables or lettuce either.”

The findings were exciting, but the most enduring lessons were in personal development. The students really saw that they can take ownership for their own learning. With guidance from teachers and parents, the students framed their own questions, figured out how to find answers, and put those answers into context for teaching others.

“It seemed like such a huge project at first,” said Henry, a Spanish Track fifth grade student. “But I learned that even if a project seems really big, once you get started and you get into it, you can do it.”