

VIETNAMESE STUDENTS HAU and KIET in MALLACOOTA 7 July to 25 August 2024.

In the first week of their visit, Hau and Kiet were introduced to many people, and it was probably overwhelming. But they made an effort every time to shake hands, smile and talk with everyone. This took courage, but they got a good reception from everyone they talked with. Because the school was on holiday, they had a lot of time with older people, and were at all times very respectful and considerate. Activities included beach walks, a visit to Bruce Pascoe's property to meet the manager Chris, making an insect hotel with Diana, basketball, sketching, dinner with our friend Gillian, band practice with our music group, hearing Buddy Knox (well-known blues musician), and four vocal workshops with Eva, culminating in a public performance. All activities were first time experiences.

Then the weather turned very cold, and they weren't able to ride bikes, walk, or go to the beach. Fortunately school started in their second week, and they had two sessions with teacher Simon Berry to help them burn some energy. Hau and Kiet have been very patient and very helpful, but they needed time with their own age group. They were welcomed into the Murrumbidgee P-12 College by the Principal, Susi Allen, and Deputy Principal, Kathy Scott. In discussion with the teaching staff, they felt that it would be good for Hau and Kiet to spend a 2-hour literacy session with Grades 1-2 (teacher Tilly Hewitt), Grades 3-4 (teacher Ben Donegan) and Grades 5-6 (teacher Ketzia Wood). During these three introductory days, all staff and students that we encountered were very friendly and welcoming. Teachers invited them into their classes "anytime". I felt this care and consideration reflected on the friendly culture of the school, with a fine balance between informal and very structured learning.

My observation is that Hau and Kiet found the 3 literacy sessions difficult, due to the focus on blended vowel sounds (Grade 1-2), punctuation (Grade 3-4) and poetry and literature evaluation (Grade 5-6). The Murrumbidgee students not only have English as their first language, but also a total of 10 hours per week intensive literacy study. At this stage I would like to note that English teachers in Vietnam may be interested to learn the techniques of these teachers, and adapt them to their Vietnamese students, as appropriate.

I found the three teachers to be very dynamic and inclusive of all students. Tilly Hewitt had a constant rotation of well-organised activities that all her students engaged with, eager to help set-up and achieve. Ben Donegan used a range of different ways to repeat the facts and "quiz" the students, so that they were rote-learning, but not aware of it. Ketzia Wood also changed activities and used discussion groups and full participation of all students in enquiry, creative ideas and "quiz" reiteration of language structures. All three teachers were observant and left no student out of the activity. This is the advantage of smaller classrooms, which I think Hau and Kiet cannot experience in a much larger school. I will be interested to hear their observations.

During the Grade 3-4 Library session with Trudy, Hau and Kiet browsed the bookshelves, and chose a physics textbook (Hau) and a book on dinosaurs (Kiet) to take home and study. As I write this, Hau is writing pages of notes at home. I have a copy of "The Hobbit", as well as the movies, which they have not yet shown an interest in. They seem to prefer watching, and are more familiar with their phone screens. All classrooms use a large interactive screen that may be unfamiliar to them.

Peter Barnes warmly invited Hau and Kiet to an afternoon science session, but we got invited into John Baratta's maths class on the way, and they chose Maths, as their strong suite, possibly to counteract their unfamiliarity in the previous language sessions. I noted that Hau and Kiet were more comfortable with a worksheet and notebook than with the open engagement of the younger students. But they made some friends with the younger students, particularly Jack, who happily

exchanged drawings with Kiet. It was a good idea to start them with the younger students, because they all now say hello. Hau and Kiet and I all have a respect for the difficulties of English grammar, and I thank the Primary School teachers for sharing their skilful teaching practice with us. My educational research promotes the value of small rural schools, with multi-age classrooms and peer learning that was so well demonstrated in these classrooms.

At this stage I feel that Hau and Kiet are settling into the rhythm of Mallacoota, with people kindly offering the loan of bicycles, helmets, weather jackets, fishing gear, garden and koala-spotting tours, bird-watching, card games and walking tours. They will have the opportunity to play a range of sports with Reclink, do art works with local artist Yolande Oakley, and learn harmonica with musician Justin Brady. The Wilderness Collective has offered computer games and usage. In exchange, Hau and Kiet will be able to assist older people with computer and phone problems.

I note the generosity of Hau and Kiet, giving gifts of their artworks and assistance whenever required. At home they help with cooking meals, clearing plates, washing, splitting firewood and feeding the chickens and the guinea pigs. When the weather clears we will plant a garden outside their accommodation in the "Happy Mango". They are exceptional young men, and great ambassadors on this pilot project. I hope that this will generate an exchange between Mallacoota and Vietnamese students and teachers as the social enterprise of Mekong Organics continues to foster our interconnection. Well done Mallacoota! Well done Hau and Kiet!

Regards,

Kate Jackson.

B.A. (hons). Grad Dip Ed. M. Education (hons).