

Butler Hosts Music Educators, Students from Hong Kong

The two professors and 15 students had traveled a long way – about 8,000 miles – and at their first stop in Indianapolis, they watched as little kids jumped up and down to the tune of "YMCA," played bingo and learned basics of music education.

When it was over, they considered it time well spent.

They'd come from the Hong Kong Institute of Education to Butler University as a part of an ongoing collaborative effort to observe how music is taught in grades K-12. From May 15-27, Dr. Tim Brimmer, associate professor of vocal jazz, music education and technology, took them to, among other places, the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, Jordan Academy of Dance, the Butler Community Arts School and classrooms where Butler alumni are teaching music.

"Urban schools, suburban schools, rural schools, well-to-do and not so well-to-do schools – a cross-section," Brimmer said. "They want to look at music and arts education from every possible angle. They are on a fact-finding mission."

Their first stop, Friday, May 16, was at the Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. There, music teacher Julie Newman showed off some of the methods she uses to teach her pre-kindergarten and first- and second-graders.

In addition to the daily games and lessons, the visitors were especially interested in sheets Newman created using different-shaped foam stickers to teach her children musical notation. The students could feel the stickers and recognize the pitches and rhythms.

Annie Mok, one of the music methodology professors leading the trip from Hong Kong, said she found this first part of the visit to be "eye-opening." She said the group hoped to learn what is done well in music education in the United States and take those ideas home to Hong Kong.

What she saw at the Blind and Visually Impaired School – small class sizes (generally 8-10 children), a beautiful campus and dedicated teachers – impressed her. So did the Indiana system that allows for students to simultaneously attend the Blind School and a mainstream school if they're able.

"The support for special-needs students is lacking in Hong Kong," Mok said.

And the lesson they'll be taking home from this day? "How we treat people in need," she said, "and the efforts made to help people become musical."

The collaboration between the Hong Kong Institute and Butler began in fall 2006 when Brimmer was invited to be a visiting scholar. He spent 4½ months there and has gone back for summer workshops and clinics on vocal jazz and technology-related matters.

The Hong Kong Institute's senior faculty have visited Butler, but this was the first time for junior faculty and students to see Indianapolis.

"I think this fits Butler's mission in a number of areas," Brimmer said. "Globalization is one. While we're sharing Butler's curriculum and models for music education in the United States, we're discovering how they're addressing changes in student learning, professional development and appropriate technologies into their curriculum."

The visit also provided opportunities for professional development, civic engagement, service learning and professional advancement of the arts – all ideals that Butler stresses.

"It's exciting for this collegiate level cross-fertilization to be happening at Butler," Brimmer said.