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EDUCATION IN CHINA AT A GLANCE

Don Pottorff

Recently, I had the opportunity to travel to the Peoples' Republic of China as a member of a North American Reading Delegation at the invitation of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The trip was sponsored by the Citizens Ambassador People to People Program, funded by the Eisenhower Foundation. The purpose of the trip was to provide a forum for Chinese and American educators to share their research and current teaching practices in reading/language arts. The thirty-six member delegation was led by Dr. Richard Anderson from Western Illinois University.

In seventeen days we visited sixteen schools: seven primary schools, two middle schools, two high schools, two universities, a school for the learning disabled, a school for the hearing impaired, an adult education night school, and the National Institute of Education and Research.

Organization of Chinese Schools

Chinese schools consist of three components not so unlike our own: primary schools (grades one through six), middle schools (grades seven through nine), and high schools (tenth through twelfth grades). Schools are in session five and a half days per week, from early September into July. Some vacation days are incorporated into this schedule, including a winter break of approximately three weeks. School is compulsory through ninth grade.

School usually begins at 8:00 A.M., often with an exercise class. Middle and high school students attend six required classes per day; most students attend two optional classes as well. Class periods for middle and high school students are forty-five minutes, with ten-minute breaks between classes; those of primary children are forty minutes, with fifteen-minute breaks. All students spend much time in preparation for exams, which they must pass to be promoted. Only students who pass comprehensive examinations are able to enroll in high school and college.

The high school curriculum typically includes nine basic courses. Of these, only Chinese, math and English are taught six days per week. English appears in the curriculum somewhere between third and sixth grade. Chemistry, politics, geography, biology, history and physics are taught less than six days per week. At graduation from high school, a student will have completed four years of chemistry, biology and physics, considerably more than most American students. Pacing, however, is considerably slower, because a great deal of emphasis is placed on understanding and mastery. Two years of chemistry, for example, may well equate to no more subject matter than is taught during one year in an American school. Labs for such classes were nowhere apparent.

Students attend four classes in the morning, followed by a two-hour lunch break, and then two more required classes after lunch. These are followed by optional courses, such as music or art. Students attend the lunch break for two hours.

Students remain in their classes until about 3:45. The day begins with a class, and there is a national assembly in the school yard at about 10:00 A.M., when the students are dismissed from their classes. During observation, teachers move from classroom to classroom, beginning elements of creative writing and reading is taught throughout the high school. Students comprehensively examine college entrance examinations.

Several hours later, classes adjourn. In the Chinese schools, classes are taught in large classrooms, buses, and custom-designed school buses.

Teaching

Teachers in China are typically in their jobs for less than five years; most Chinese teachers in the United States teach three or four days per week; primary school teachers are usually assigned to only two classes. Normally, schools have larger classes, but Chinese classes are smaller. In addition to teaching, teachers have to be fulfilling various administrative duties, such as monitoring student attendance.

Class size is rarely more than thirty students in one class, and usually it is less than twenty. Class size: forty-eight students. Lessons are fast moving in most schools. Teachers are also using new teaching modes. In addition to the traditional teaching methods, there is a national curriculum in which there are at least two or three hours of new courses. One could spend the day observing one and the same teacher. Sharing offices with other teachers is not normal.

A teaching day is about 415 minutes. The day begins with a two or three hour lesson, and then the students are dismissed for a two-hour lunch break. The day concludes with an hour of class. Teachers evaluate the students' achievement on exam scores.
China as a Place of the Chinese People's Ambassador to the United States of America. The purpose of the trip was to share their research and exchange ideas with the Chinese delegation.

In the Chinese schools, two middle schools for disabled, a middle school for the National, and the National Primary School are attended by students who are disabled, a middle school for the National Primary School is attended by students who are disabled, and high schools are attended by students who are disabled. Approximately three hundred forty-five students attend these schools.

Middle and high school students attend two to three classes per day. Most classes are between forty and forty-five students. This does not seem to be a problem for teachers, because lessons are fast moving, completely teacher directed and relatively short in duration. Teachers are also trained to change activities often and to vary student response modes. In addition, the arts are used generously as a means of response, particularly in the primary grades.

Chinese teachers take great pride in being thoroughly prepared to teach their classes. During our teacher-to-teacher exchanges at the end of the school visits, they were astonished to learn of the large number of classroom contact hours and the many preparations required of their American counterparts. Recurring questions were, "How can you possibly be prepared? How can you keep from burning out?"

A teaching day for Chinese teachers typically begins at 7:45 A.M. and concludes about 3:45. The day is spent in teaching two to three classes, in lesson planning, in collaborating with other teachers, and in grading papers and preparing exams. Since there is a national curriculum and teachers usually have only one preparation per day, a large amount of time is spent on grading.

The collaboration model was of particular interest to the American educators, and one which could prove to be beneficial in our own system. Chinese teachers spend two or three hours per week planning lessons together and then periodically observing one another teach. They offer each other feedback and suggestions. Sharing offices with teachers from the same content area aids the collaboration.

Teacher evaluations are based on three criteria: attitude toward teaching, student achievement on exams, and standards set by individual schools.
Teacher Training

Teachers in elementary, middle and high schools in China are predominantly high school graduates. With a baccalaureate degree it is possible to teach in a university. Students are free to choose to become teachers and usually do so by ninth grade. After graduating from ninth grade, prospective teachers attend a special high school for teacher preparation. The training takes at least three years and includes a heavy emphasis on psychology, child development, and meditation (thinking and reasoning). The program includes a generous amount of observation, teacher assisting, and working with children.

Teacher Salaries

Teacher salaries are much lower in China. Primary school teachers earn a salary of 400 yuan per month, or an equivalent of about $70. They can expect an increase to 600 yuan, or $105 per month after five years of teaching experience. Middle school and high school teachers also begin at about 600 yuan per month and can expect a raise after five years. By comparison, waitresses earn between 500-800 yuan per month. Older apartments rent for 10 yuan per month and newer ones for 20 yuan. In addition to salary, teachers often receive gifts from parents, usually food, often fish or other sea food. This has been a common practice for centuries.

During an orientation at the National Institute of Education and Research, we learned that schools are encouraged to set up their own enterprises to improve teacher welfare. We encountered several schools that were doing just that. In Suzhou, one school we visited operates a plastics factory located immediately behind the school. Employees' children attend the school, along with other neighborhood children, and the principal of the school serves as the president of the factory as well. In Shanghai, one school operates a factory, a second a French pastry shop, and another accepts tuition paying high school students who (according to a displeased faculty member) could not otherwise pass the competency test to be admitted. This extra money supplements the low state salaries and is also used to purchase teaching materials and classroom equipment.

Homework

By fourth grade, homework can involve several hours of work per night. Students take home the lesson studied in class during school hours and practice reading and rereading it until they have mastered it. Then they write a summary of what they have read, and finally they prepare themselves to recite the lesson in class the following day. A parent signs their work for return to the teacher the following day. If the homework is not done properly, the teacher may work with a student before class or during the second hour of lunch.

Rosenbaum (1983) described the arguments and strife in the home due to this large amount of homework. Apparently, the same is true a decade later. Teachers reported that if you give too much homework, "parents will make problems." According to Pan Zi You (1993), Director of the Division of Teaching Methodology for Reading, Teaching, and Music at the National Institute of Education and Research, there has been a demand from parents to allow their children to engage in leisure activities and to want less pressure. "Parents want less pressure for their children, and this is currently being considered.

Libraries

It was explained that each city had a library but only the central areas were able to visit one. Many of the libraries contained children's materials for teachers and for adults.

Personally, some teachers buy books and books that are used to purchase teaching materials for children's centers.

Discipline

Similar to infrequent discipline problems, discipline problems were somewhat crowding by fourth grade. Typically, one time, with the teacher absent, students observed from a window. Two seven-year-olds were in them, knocking at the door, and emerged from a classroom, lock and key, way back to the principal.

I observed two ninth graders in one class and 41 students in another class, directed. Students talked, or for that matter, obviously.
there has been a national outcry about excessive homework and "children not being allowed to be children." Parents want to reduce the length of the school day, they want less pressure on their children, they want less homework, and they want more leisure time for their children. Mr. Pan indicated that reforms along these lines are currently being considered.

Libraries

It was explained at the National Institute of Education and Research that every school has a library, but only at the Suzhou Experimental Primary School were we able to visit one. This library was divided into three sections. The first, for students, contained children's literature; the second contained reference and professional materials for teachers; and the third contained magazines and newspapers mostly for adults.

Books appeared for the most part to be in nearly new condition, indicating little use. Many of the volumes were dusty. Students in this school were not allowed to check out books or even to visit the library on their own; they were supervised by a teacher at all times. One teacher explained, "How can you be sure they are comprehending what they are reading if they don't have supervision and direction?"

Personally selected literature is routinely recited to the teacher. Even high school students typically write summaries and give reports about their readings, and much of what is read outside of the text is assigned and monitored. One high school teacher stated, "There is little knowledge in popular novels and materials. The treasure of world literature is unlimited, and students ought to be reading classics."

According to the National Institute of Education and Research, parents and other members of the community do not have access to school libraries. In many large cities, a central public facility provides libraries and other activities for children. In Beijing, the library is located in the Children's Palace. In rural areas, there are children's centers with libraries.

Discipline

Similar to information reported by Kennedy (1994), we observed essentially no discipline problems in any of the schools we visited, despite large classes and somewhat crowded conditions. Playgrounds often had 200 to 300 children playing at one time, with very little or no playground equipment. Occasionally one teacher observed from a window or doorway, but only once did I see a need for intervention. Two seven-year-olds, a boy and a girl, were jumping rope, when a second boy ran into them, knocking the girl down and causing her to cry. A teacher immediately emerged from a doorway, dusted off the girl, counseled the boy, and sent him on his way back to the classroom. He left cheerfully, skipping and smiling.

I observed two forty-minute reading lessons in first grade classrooms with 52 in one class and 48 in the other. The instruction was very intense and entirely teacher-directed. Students focused intently on the teacher and responded at the appropriate times, obviously out of respect for the teacher and not out of fear of corporal
punishment. In fact, we found teachers as a whole to be very kind individuals who were genuinely concerned for their students.

Following classroom observations, we were treated to light refreshments of fruit, candies, and hot tea. During this time, we could exchange questions and ideas relating to research and practice in reading/language arts and discipline problems. For instance, teachers acknowledged that they sometimes had discipline problems, but not of a serious nature. The procedure for handling a problem is very clear and straightforward. First, the teacher simply talks to the student, who is expected to "confess his sins" and apologize to the other students in the class. The teacher pays special attention to this student, both in class and after class. The teacher might say, "This is your character fault; you must work to get rid of it" (Ge, 1993). The teacher's special caring attention nearly always gets the student back on track. If these methods fail, parents are contacted to help resolve the problem. However, teachers with recurrent discipline problems are asked first to examine themselves and their teaching methods, because the problem may lie with the teacher rather than the student.

At the National Institute of Education and Research, we were first jokingly told concerning discipline: "We don't have to worry about weapons." But there is concern in China about the status of discipline. With the government "one family-one child" policy, there is a general feeling that children are becoming spoiled. Some parents refer to their child as "little emperor." Single children often dominate two generations in the home—parents and grandparents. Because these children are required to do little work at home, it is believed that the school must teach them to work. Also, special programs are being filmed for government television to try to educate the families about the serious nature of this situation.

Educational Lessons We Can Learn From Each Other

As the trip progressed, I became convinced that American and Chinese teachers can benefit from incorporating the strengths of the other into their programs. Lessons which we can learn from Chinese educators include:

1. More integration of the arts. The arts are valued in the Chinese schools. Art and music instruction are integrated into the curriculum beginning in kindergarten. Many of the children's classroom drawings are advanced for their chronological ages. We observed a group of one hundred third graders in a music class who could read music. In our own schools, music and art are the first to be cut when funds are short. In many American schools, children get a mere thirty to forty minutes of art instruction per week, often from a push-in cart.

2. More teacher preparation time. Because Chinese teachers typically teach two to three identical class sessions per day, even in the elementary schools, much emphasis is placed on preparedness, a sharp contrast to our own elementary teachers, who can be expected to teach language arts, math, science, social studies, health, and often art, music, and physical education. Our junior high and high school teachers normally teach at least five classes per day and commonly have as many as three preparations. American teachers frequently complain about feeling papers.

3. Child development stages of cooperations of effort is made and the mood of discipline progressively reaches the school. The school instruction is class breaks.

4. Kind and caring teachers with their students. Teachers do not blame their poor students, but believe that their teaching methods, teaching.

5. Time on teaching instruction in American class instruction is American class.

6. High school in the United States. American schools are very different from the Chinese schools.

7. Smaller classes in China. It is very different from the American schools.

8. Teacher collaboration. Teachers are observing one another and working together.

American educators feel our system is

1. More students should be very teacher of the student-generated level in terms of the text. If the text is challenged in our schools.
individuals who

about feeling harried and not having sufficient time to prepare or to grade

3. Child development principles. Chinese teachers are very much concerned with

stages of cognitive development and their implications for learning. A conscious

effort is made to teach from the concrete to the abstract and to vary activities

and the modes of learning. Even the relatively short classes followed by 10-15

minute breaks reflect attention to sound learning theory. The school day

progresses at a relatively more relaxed pace than it does in American schools.

The school day is longer, but the actual number of classroom minutes spent in

instruction is only slightly more than ours, when the two-hour lunch and between-
class breaks are taken into account.

4. Kind and caring concern of teachers for their students. Teachers care
deeply for their students and have high expectations for them. We did not note the sense of
blaming that sometimes prevails in American schools: i.e., no parental
support, poor student motivation, or bad community environment. Chinese teachers
believe that their students can learn and that if they aren't

learning, then teaching

methods, teacher

behaviors, and student attitudes need to be changed.

5. Time on task. Students spend a great deal of time on task, receiving direct
instruction in the classroom. Very little time is wasted, in contrast to the
American classroom, where interruptions are often the norm. In
China, instruction is intense and focussed, with teaching objectives

clearly in mind. Teachers use structured, guided practice, with much teacher questioning.

6. High school curriculum. Students graduating from high school
have completed four years of math, biology,
chemistry, and physics. It is

little wonder that Chinese students outperform American students in math and science.

7. Smaller learning packages. Instruction proceeds at a much slower
pace in China. It is packaged in smaller units and contains much review and over-
learning. Their thin textbooks contain smaller daily lessons,
in contrast to the "quantity over quality" practice that sometimes occurs in our own
system.

8. Teacher collaboration. The idea of teachers planning lessons together,
observing one another, and providing feedback and suggestions is particularly
appealing to me. American educators at the secondary level tend to operate
apart from other content-area teachers and often from teachers within their own
department.

Chinese educators seem sincere in their desire to want to better understand the
American education system and to improve instruction for their students. Strengths I
feel our system can offer them follow:

1. More student interaction in classes. Instruction in Chinese classrooms tends to
be very teacher-directed. Little time is allocated for student interaction or for
student-generated questions. Teacher questions are nearly always of a lower
level in terms of Bloom's Taxonomy, and tend to require answers verbatim from
the text. If thinking and reasoning skills are to be developed, students need to be
challenged at higher levels and with open-ended questions.
2. Less teacher control of the learning process. Chinese teachers are considered the informational authorities in their classrooms and become predominantly dispensers of knowledge (Paine, 1990). Students need to take charge of their own learning at some point and need to be encouraged and given the opportunity to do so.

3. More integrative writing. Writing in China is required regularly and is essentially connected with homework. Writing assignments, however, nearly always involve summarizing, analyzing and reporting on materials read from the text. A broader spectrum of writing is valued in the American classroom and includes creative writing, essays, poetry, research, journals, etc.

4. Student collaboration. Chinese students work alone on assignments, and the teacher is the sole audience for student writings. American educators have found that students learn from one another in verbal interaction and in working together on tasks. Greater understanding is gained through thinking, planning, debating, and exploring other points of view.

5. Libraries. Access to school libraries is very controlled in China. Teachers want to monitor what students read and then check for comprehension either orally or in written form. Little emphasis is placed on free and recreational reading. American educators value and support reading for pleasure as a means of encouraging life-long learning and literacy growth.

6. More open college enrollment. In China, the middle school and high school concept is one of screening and elimination, so that only the top students are able to attend college. I frequently asked high school seniors if and where they would attend college. The answers were always the same: "We hope so, Sir, but we don't know if we can, or where." Students take comprehensive examinations and apply to colleges and universities, but enrollment is very limited.

7. Less instructional regimentation. Instruction in China is dominated by a pattern of teach, regurgitate, and test. It is a form of mastery learning to the extreme. Little value is placed on student schema or prior knowledge. Instruction is very stimulus-response oriented with, as Paine (1990) observes, "the textbook as the source of knowledge, and the teacher as the presenter of that knowledge" (p.51).

References


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