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American Education Through a Chinese Lens

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Abstract

This June, a group of faculty members from Gettysburg College and K-12 teachers from York and Adams Counties travelled to China for four weeks of intensive cultural and educational exchange. This Gettysburg Fulbright Group Project Abroad in China studied the cultural and historical foundations of the Chinese educational system, as well as how this system is changing. Participants studied the larger policy context of the Chinese system and how those policies play out in the classroom. (*excerpt*)

Keywords

China, Fulbright Program, Education in China, Gaokao

Disciplines

International and Comparative Education | Teacher Education and Professional Development

Opinion

American education through a Chinese lens

This June, a group of faculty members from Gettysburg College and K-12 teachers from York and Adams Counties travelled to China for four weeks of intensive cultural and educational exchange. This Gettysburg Fulbright Group Project Abroad in China studied the cultural and historical foundations of the Chinese education system, as well as how this system is changing. Participants studied the larger policy context of the Chinese system and how those policies play out in the classroom.

The institutions we visited ranged from middle school through university, from urban to provincial, from public to private; often these were amongst the very best schools in their areas. We had considerable contact with students, teachers, and administrators, both inside and outside of the classroom, many times being given the opportunity to interact with students in a classroom environment. We also spoke with a number of Chinese education experts, some of whom were iconoclastic in their view of their own country's educational system.

The most persuasive draw of the Chinese educational model is that it seems to offer strong results.

Chinese approaches to math are often singled out for praise; indeed, a number of local schools, including Upper Adams and Vida Charter have adopted, for example, Singapore Math, in a clear movement away from the Everyday Math approach. The allure of such systems is clearly the high standardized test scores in math by countries such as Singapore (most recently ranked #1) and China (which would claim four of the top ten spots).

Such approaches to math are developed in a context of high-stakes testing culminating in the Gaokao, or "High Test," an intensive annual exam for which students spend the last two years of high school preparing 10-12 hours a day at least five days per week, with many students opting for extra tutoring beyond those in-school hours. This single exam almost totally determines whether or not and where a student may attend university. The Gaokao is the logical extreme of a system of standardized testing such as PSSAs



Chris Fee & Chloe Ruff

and Keystones in PA.

In the US over the past two decades there has been a strong movement towards high-stakes testing and outcomes assessment, and this has been at the expense of curricular flexibility and teacher autonomy in the classroom. China offers one of the most well-known models of highly-structured, exam-driven education. Unfortunately, Americans tend to try to pull out this model without any understanding of the cultural context which supports it. Chinese parents are willing to do virtually anything to help their students get a higher test score, and therefore would be willing to subject their children to extreme conditions perhaps unthinkable in American classrooms.

The Chinese faculty we met were very engaged and very motivated to help their students; the determination and enthusiasm of these dedicated teachers was inspiring. They were more than willing to put in twelve hour workdays, and often extra social time outside of class. We met teachers who lived in dormitories so that they could be more accessible to their students. That said, they would like less emphasis on the big test and teaching to that test, but due to curricular and time restraints and giant class sizes, they didn't know what a more creative/interactive approach would look like.

We heard many current educational buzz words: STEM/STEAM, an interest in building critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, but these terms often seemed to have different implications in China.

It is unwise to try to "fix" American schools by using the Chinese model, just as it is unwise to try to "fix" the Chinese schools by imposing Ameri-

can standards; finding a balance might be helpful to both countries, and thus our Fulbright trip offered participants from both nations an opportunity to exchange outlooks and ideas.

Over the past twenty years, voices have been raised again and again, suggesting that China offers a model of education for the future, a results-based structure often viewed as a panacea for all manner of educational woes. Ironically, the teachers we met were vocal and fairly unified in their questioning of the absolute efficacy of this type of teaching and learning. They yearned for a more open-ended approach, one that might offer the very sorts of creativity and spontaneity in the classroom that many Americans seem bound and determined to leave behind in the name of concrete test results and quantifiable outcomes. Our Chinese colleagues seemed to suggest that their model, so often lauded, has severe limitations of its own, and they suggested that this approach is not actually preparing students for the jobs of the future and for the challenges of the twenty-first century, which ironically many have suggested will be China's century.

Christopher Fee, a Professor of English and Chloe Ruff, an Assistant Professor of Education at Gettysburg College have contributed this article for the Education Task Force of the Gettysburg Democracy for America. The contents of this op-ed were developed under a grant from the Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad (GPA), U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.