Learning from China

Bertram C. Bruce and Susan Bruce

[Published (May, 1997), in the Peking University Office of Foreign Affairs Newsletter, pp. 4-7.]

In the Fall of 1996, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to spend three months in Beijing as part of an exchange between Peking University and the University of Illinois. The focus of our visit was education in China. We hoped to be able to take a broad look at schooling in China, from the primary grades through the university years, and to share with Chinese colleagues some current trends in schooling in the United States.

During our stay we visited a number of primary schools and middle schools in Beijing and in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. On a previous visit in 1993 Chip had visited schools at several levels in Wuxi, Nanjing and Shanghai, as well as in Beijing. From these experiences, as well as through meetings with educators at four universities and a research institute in Beijing, and conversations with university students across China, we have drawn many conclusions.

This brief summary surely reflects what we value, and thus, it is not by any means intended as a definitive description of the current state of schooling in China. Our visit was limited, by time, and by the fact that we had to rely on the generous services of translators in each school we visited. So these are merely personal reflections about a few aspects of Chinese education.

In many ways Chinese classrooms look like classrooms anywhere in the world, with a chalkboard in the front of the room and a teacher standing by it. But we were struck by some obvious differences. In primary schools, teachers specialize in a subject area and move from class to class; in our country primary teachers teach almost all subjects, and where they do specialize, the students move from room to room. While US classes are often no more than 25-30 students, in China many classrooms have 45-60 students. Large class sizes necessarily mean less flexibility in room arrangements, and thus most Chinese classrooms have students sharing small desks and sitting in rows, while many US classrooms have tables and chairs that
can be shifted about. Classrooms and curricula in the US vary a great deal from region to region and city to suburb, while teachers in China appear to follow a more uniform curriculum. Schools in the US also vary greatly in their material resources, but they typically have many more resources than Chinese schools enjoy. In China, when schools have access to computers, these are often in central labs to be shared; in the US, computer labs can be found in some primary schools, but many schools instead provide one or more computers in each classroom.

In China now, as in the United States and many other countries around the world, there is much discussion about the need for reform in education. Yet it seems to us that we in the United States can learn much from Chinese education. True, by US standards, new technologies, materials, and facilities seemed limited, even in the key schools. Moreover, some of the new ideas in US education, such as cooperative learning in small groups and long-term projects, were not evident in most of the classrooms we visited. Nevertheless, we sensed that students and teachers were involved in a kind of learning that was challenging, engaging, and meaningful.

When we speak of the integrated curriculum in the US, we often mean such things as using writing in mathematics, or teaching reading skills within history classes. These connections were evident in some of the schools we saw, but there were connections beyond the academic realm as well. Five areas seemed most prominent.

(1) Expanded language study. As in the US, teachers in China want language to open doors of the world for children. We saw parallels to our classes in sessions focusing on Chinese, English, and American literature. But because Chinese students were learning more than one language, and that language was almost always English, they could engage more deeply in discussions about language and culture. This was particularly true at the secondary level.

Language study was also expanded in the way language was used in the primary classroom. We saw that when students were asked to read a text aloud, the purpose seemed not merely to assess their reading, but to help them extend their thinking about the meaning of the text. This focus on meaning was connected to the practice of encouraging students to express their feelings as they read. We learned that this practice, reading aloud with feeling, has a special
name, Lung Tsong.

(2) Integrated curriculum. Many Chinese educators seemed to have a broad notion of the integrated curriculum. At one middle school, we saw an American literature class in which the teacher used a short story as a way to engage students in critical thinking and problem solving. He asked one student to locate Cincinnati on a map, thus linking geography and literature. He had students discuss their ideas about the story in small groups. These activities were ways to expand the possibilities for learning through literature by integrating it with other aspects of the curriculum. At a rural school near Shanghai we saw similar ideas in the integration of mathematics and reading.

But the idea of an integrated curriculum went further. Everywhere we went we saw sayings of Confucius calling for joining moral aims to intellectual goals, to work for social reform through education. In the same way, physical development seemed to be tied deeply to academics. In primary reading classes we saw students standing, turning, and moving their bodies to express or reinforce what they were reading.

(3) Arts in education. The aesthetic dimensions of life were connected in a similarly fundamental way to the rest of schooling. Students worked on their calligraphy, not just to write clearly or correctly, but to write beautifully. In many schools we were greeted by beautiful displays of artwork and writing. As we saw in the regular classes, this was not restricted to special occasions or special art classes, but was the essence of learning. The high quality of student work reflected both individual commitment and an environment in the school and the community that values aesthetics, and sees it as inseparable from all learning. While arts educators in the US might prefer a greater emphasis on individual expression than we saw in children's artistic activity in China, the integration of the arts into school and community life was very remarkable.

(4) Linking school and society. Many of the Chinese we met had read and valued the works of John Dewey, who had expressed ideas about school and society very similar to those put forth by Confucius. Of course, Confucius lived 2500 years before Dewey. Regardless of their source, we saw these ideas manifested in tangible ways.

Several of the schools had display rooms showing the history of the school and the community, the accomplishments of teachers and students, and articles and books by teachers, students, and former students. These rooms told us, and they told teachers, parents, and students, that scholarship was valued, even celebrated. They also said that there was a school and community history, one in which the individual mattered because of his or her relations with others.

(5) Involving everyone in learning. One of the most striking things about the
classrooms we saw was the almost universal appearance of students engaged in and serious about learning. On the playgrounds and in the hallways between classes the students behaved much like those in any US school, but in the classroom, there was a dedication that is sometimes missing in our classrooms. Granted, we often saw students in special schools who may have been on their best behavior for the foreign visitors. But the overall impression of students who care about learning is one that cannot be produced on demand.

Just as the students were involved in learning, so were the teachers. Several schools showed us articles and books by teachers. In many schools there were opportunities for teachers to learn from each other. Teachers met regularly to discuss the curriculum and plans for the week, a luxury not often afforded US primary teachers. Throughout, there was a sense that learning, students, and teachers were valued, and correspondingly, expected to work hard.

Although they clearly did challenge themselves to work hard, the children and teachers also seemed happy with what they were doing. Everywhere we saw smiling faces, and people eager to share what they had done and what they were learning. At the same time, they never adopted the expert role of knowing all the answers, but asked questions and listened, as well as talked.

This integrated view of learning that we saw contrasts with some other perceptions of Chinese education that may be equally true, for example, a vision of uniformity, with 60 students doing the same thing all the time, or a vision of rural schools with severely under-funded classrooms, which we did not see. But it is interesting to note that many of the things teachers told us accorded with the emphasis on teaching the whole child to be a contributing member of society.

These areas of the Chinese curriculum—expanding language learning, integrating moral, aesthetic, physical and academic learning, linking school and society, and involving everyone in learning—are not unique to Chinese schools. Nor should it be assumed that the Chinese schools provide the perfect model for this kind of integrated curriculum. As in the US, or for that matter, as in any country today, there are many unmet challenges regarding education in China.

Preparing students to take an active role in the new global economy, and encouraging young people to develop critical and independent thinking skills will be imperative for China in the coming century. How will China open up to new technologies, such as the Internet and World Wide Web, which are increasingly
becoming significant resources for learning and teaching around the world? What will be the relative roles of central education authorities versus regional bodies in a growing educational system across the huge land mass that is China? How can China expand vocational and technical education for those students who do not complete middle school? How will China increase access to higher education for more secondary graduates, and use the talents of those graduates well?

All of these challenges and necessary reforms lie ahead for China, as well as other countries around the world. Nevertheless, we hope that China will be able to retain many of the good things we saw in schools during this brief visit. For our part, seeing Chinese schools, even in a way reminiscent of viewing flowers while galloping by on horseback, helped us better understand our own schools and ourselves.

Bertram Bruce is a Professor in the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Susan Bruce is the Director of the Research Opportunities Office, in the College of Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.