



Reflections on Education

Chen Kuan, a participant in the inaugural SLE to the United States in February 2007, wrote the following essay shortly after his return to China.

Asking around, you probably will find out that most Chinese students believe American high school students lead an easier life. “There’s no homework burden.” “They have more free time than we do.” “Their extracurricular life seems wonderful.” These are typical responses and typical as they are, they form somewhat of a consensus among Chinese teens, parents and even the media that American students are “laid-back.”

After all, they are stereotypes, ones that often obscure the fact that American students are hard-working. Some educational officials fail to see past this stereotype, especially ones promoting the new Chinese Educational Reform, whose goals are to release our burden, develop our skills rather than scores, broaden our views and prepare us for society—although I don’t see these things coming.

On the SLE trip in February 2007, I caught a glimpse of American education. At the gate of the U.S. Department of Education, a slogan caught my sight: “No child left behind.” So similar did it sound to ones used in rural areas in China, generalizing compulsory education. I begin to think about the other impressions that the trip left me with.

[Scene 1]

On February 3 at Kearsarge Regional High School, New Hampshire, SLE met our first hosts. We experienced “a half day at school as an American student” the following day. I noticed a teacher, or coach, playing basketball with several students when it was time for class and apparently this was no sports class. The students seemed like they were having fun, carefree. Later I learned that this special treatment is for those who don’t like school.

[End of Scene 1]

In China, most likely the school would contact the student’s parents on noticing this student’s dislike towards school, and later would somewhat urge him to school. This would probably result in either the student continuing at school with his thoughts wandering during class or, despite the persuasion, with him playing hooky and school and parents giving up on keeping him at school.

But in Kearsarge, I assume, the student can choose to remain at school under the condition he is informed of and knows the consequences of his action. In this way, he doesn’t waste time (assuming that staying out of class and staying in class absent-mindedly have the same effect) nor does he disturb the others in class. He learns whenever he wants to and the future is his to bear, whatever may follow.

We stepped into a conference room and met the principal. After a basic introduction and comparison, the director asked what recommendations we have. We all joked: more homework and everybody laughed. My thoughts drifted away...

[Scene 2]

I got out of my room at 11 p.m. and saw the lights go out in my host’s room. I was in New York, and my host from St. Ann’s High was still working on an essay he had told me about. The next morning my host mom was calling him up. “Not a morning person...,” said my host mom. “The same for me. I can fall asleep on my way to school, standing on a bus. Some of my classmates even fall asleep during class.” My host didn’t sleep until 2 a.m. Unbelievable.

[End of Scene 2]



[Scene 3]

I was with my Washington host in a biology class when the teacher came in and handed sheets to everybody: yes, a quiz. Nobody appeared surprised except 2 SLE members, me and Shyyul. I recall that in Kearsarge we witnessed a quiz in an English class. Even upon our leaving the school, my host was reviewing a wordlist with definitions—another little regular quiz. I was amazed at how many quizzes they have to take, or had I been so lucky bumping into classes that started with quizzes?

Come to think about it, the quantity of tests taken by both sides might well be roughly equal.

[End of Scene 3]

As the principal kept asking if we had any advice, I do find myself in a difficult situation. There are pros and cons that I am really unable to filter out. As far as I was concerned, I prefer more school activities and social life.

[Scene 4]

A typical day in Nanjing Foreign Language School, where I study: most people arrive exactly when the bell rings, some still yawning. Everyone stays in the class to which he or she belongs. For me, I “live” in Class 4, Senior 2 (11th Grade). Teachers of different subjects come in and out every 40 minutes. From 7:40 to 12:00, there are altogether 5 periods, and a similar number in the afternoon. Seniors (10th to 12th grades) usually stay at school until 4 or 5 o’clock for classes. The same routine repeats itself unless exams or school events take place.

In our school, big events include Art Festival in December and Foreign Language Festival in April. During these times, school runs as usual except teachers are relatively tolerant on homework. Our lives are livelier and more passionate as every class is organizing performances such as a theater, a song collection, a play and so on. The Big Show is always on Saturday, an uneasy time for the entire school to get together and enjoy performances from selected classes. Most people, including teachers, feel nostalgic when the festival ends. One may feel off-track on the Monday after the Big Show—that’s when teachers tell us life returns to “normal” and to “concentrate.”

At the beginning of every September, the Students’ Union Election is held. Candidates take their free time trying to “sell” themselves in competing for 14 ministers of 7 departments. It is a common scene at noon that candidates run from class to class in every grade delivering their promises and ideas they would carry out if elected: movies, concerts, book markets - school free time is filled with campaigns and our eyes fill with photos of candidates and their symbols/slogans. On Friday, all candidates go into the studio and deliver their one-minute speech through the school TV system, each student gets to vote, and members of the Election Committee collect the votes and send them to the former student union where the final results are announced. In addition, there are small events including Sports Day, Reading Week, Science Week, a karaoke competition and so on. However, not every school has such arrangements.

[End of Scene 4]

From what I saw, such activities are held on a regular basis in America. SLE received a warm welcome by the school jazz band in Kearsarge Regional High School; I watched my NY host take his basketball training; my Sidwell Friends School host had football practice and both the brothers were on the school lacrosse team; I caught a glimpse of rehearsal at 7 o’clock in Sidwell...

[Scene 5]



After snowboarding in New Hampshire, a host mom drove us home. She happened to be a math teacher in Kearsarge and we talked a little. It seemed to me that one of her concerns was that the students were not interested in the subject in question. I paraphrase her remarks: “They simply don’t think they can do well enough. Some of the parents just say ‘it’s too hard’ and the idea just somehow dominates the next generation.” I said, after all, teachers want to help so the parents should rather encourage their kids to take advantage of that help instead of blaming math for being difficult.”

[End of Scene 5]

We thanked the principal for meeting us and for hosting a pleasant discussion.

Education is a great concern for every country as it determines whether the next generation is able to help the nation prosper. From USNews.com I knew that an educational program, No Child Left Behind, is facing obstacles and critics. So is the educational reform in China, one claims to release students’ burdens and pressure, to develop students’ skills rather than scores, to broaden our views and to prepare us for the society. Despite the level of difficulty has been reduced, textbooks re-written and exam systems changed, no one seems content with the change: schools complain that the decrease in difficulty doesn’t meet the exam’s need, students complain that far from leading easier life, they are facing more pressure from Senior 1 (10th Grade) as they have to study 9 subjects simultaneously and the pre-College Entrance Exams, which is rescheduled to the second semester of Senior 2 (11th Grade), only adds more pressure; yet the society debates whether the reform solves the high-score-low-skill problem on a fundamental level.

Both U.S. and China have their particular circumstances and commonly-accepted old-fashioned educational methods—to change them takes great effort. The SLE trip revealed some of the truths about US education, truths that I had previously not known. The message is clear: if you want to succeed, you need to go through hardships while remaining socially aware with an international perspective. In other words, there’s no fast track to success.