

000307 Teaching

I am very thankful that I did not grow up in China. This is not because of the government or material goods, but because of the education system. The students are under tremendous pressure due to tests that they must take. First there is a test to determine which high school you can attend. Students are under pressure to get into the best high schools which offer a larger number of students who have successfully gotten into university. Once in a good high school, the students must then study for the big test their senior year which will determine if they can go to university. The results of the test will also determine which university the students can go to and what their major will be. Students get only one chance to take each test. The tests cover the core classes of English, science and Chinese, with English seemingly the most important. If you do not get the minimum score on the exam, then you will not go to university unless your parents are wealthy and can pay to get you in that way. If you get a very good score, you can study English, medicine, law or computers. Lower score result in majors like political science.

A lot of my information comes from a man named Darcy who is on the education committee. He is a friend of Lisa's and was kind enough to speak with our group during orientation. Darcy took the university exam and did very well on the English section because English was his favorite subject. However, he did poorly on the other parts, but well enough to have a high enough combined score to get into university. His score was too low to study English, so he was made a political science major. He was lucky and was able to convince a faculty member that he was excellent in English and was able to change his major. Changing majors is very rare. In the university you only concentrate on your major unless you have some extra time in which to take other classes. Without his English degree, Darcy would not have achieved the success that he has today.

For students who take the test for high school, 4 out of 10 will be pass the exam and be admitted to high school. Once in high school, 5 out of 10 will go to university (these numbers are from Darcy). The examination is the only determination if you can go to university unless you have money.

So that they may do well on the exams, the students spend a lot of time in school. For example at my middle school, the day begins at 6AM and ends at 10PM. Jason and I will come home from dinner to find the students still in class. The following is the schedule for the older students at my school. The younger students go to bed a half hour earlier and eat a little earlier.

6:00 get up
6:00 - 6:20 wash and clean
6:20 - 6:40 jogging
6:40 - 7:00 breakfast
7:30 - 8:10 1st period
8:20 - 9:00 2nd period
9:10 - 9:50 3rd period
9:50 - 10:10 to do exercise
10:10 - 10:50 4th period
11:00 - 11:40 5th period
12:00 - 12:20 lunch
12:30 - 1:30 nap
1:45 ?
1:50 - 2:30 6th period
2:40 - 3:20 7th period
3:20 - 3:30 eye exercises
3:30 - 4:10 8th period
4:20 - 5:00 9th period
5:10 - 5:50 exercise
5:50 - 6:20 dinner
6:30 - 7:30 self-study 1
7:40 - 8:30 self-study 2
8:30 - 8:40 ?
8:40 - 9:10 self-study 3
9:30 - 9:50 wash and clean
9:50 bed

The exercise at 9:50 involves loud music and instructions blared from loudspeakers. The students are assembled in rows on in the school yard and do exercise in unison. The eye exercises involve loud music and instructions blared through the PA system in every room (I cut the speaker wires in my room yesterday. The music was so loud that Jason and I could not stand to be in our rooms while it was playing.) The kids all rub their eyes in sync to instructions that accompany the music. The self study sessions are conducted in the classrooms and look like classes because a teacher is present to help the students.

The schedule leaves time to exercise and to nap, but little time to be on your own or to be a kid. I remember being in middle school and being out by 2:30. I could watch TV, or better yet, I could spend the afternoon building cities in my sand box or playing with the kids down the street. I developed my imagination in the sand%20box or by playing GI Joe by myself or with others. Some say that childhood is overrated, but I really feel for these children who are under so much pressure and in school for so long. I do not have a high school schedule, but I imagine that it is probably similar.

The classes for me are Monday through Friday, but the students also go Saturday and sometimes Sunday. They are not necessarily supposed to, but there is competition between the schools to see who can get the most students into university. The more students that pass

the exam, the better the reputation of the high school. Darcy told us that some high school will even hold classes at teachers homes during the Spring Festival.

To determine the level of the student's English, the education committee will administer a written English exam four times a year. This was deemed too stressful for elementary school children, so the testing starts in middle school. English is very important in China. I have asked in English Corner why this is and when it started. Apparently it was around 8 years ago that the emphasis began. Prior to this, Lisa says that Russian was taught in school. English is seen as important because people see it as a way of improving their lives. It is the economic wave of the future and people want to get on. But that a person's ability to speak English is a litmus test for so many things strikes a discordant note with me. For example, a man at English corner is an electrical engineer. He told me that he just recently - passed a test to become a senior engineer. However, the American company whose joint venture he works for will not recognize the test, so he is still at a lower level. Well, the test was not technical in nature, but a written English test. No US company would see the test as a qualification for a higher technical position.

In the competition to acquire students, there are also private schools in China. However, Darcy thinks that a more costly school is misconstrued as being better. But the good news is that as education is more widely valued, the position of a teacher is now seen as a good job. For the teachers here who must work all day in classes with an average size of 60 students, I am in awe.

In my school there are actually two different schools. One is the boarding school and the other the non-boarding school. The two schools have separate classrooms and dining rooms. The only time that I see the students mix is during the exercise period. The boarding school costs more, but the students get better teachers and better facilities. I teach at both schools, but I only see my non-boarding students once every-other week. I have my boarding students once a week. In my boarding classes I have 60 - 70 students per class. My non-boarding classes have 80-100 students per class and are just not at the same level as their counterparts though there are some bright exceptions.

The examination for university are written only. A standard aural test would be too difficult to create and administer. Therefore, a lot of people are good at written English, but not at speaking. This is the type of memorization that the test encourages is what Darcy explained. He told us that he could rattle off all of the books that a given famous author wrote, but he had no time to read any of them. This has actually given the populous the impression that they are not good at English speakers despite some being quite good. But, this does hold true for many, including a lot of the teachers at my school. There are English teachers here who can not speak English or are embarrassed to try. The bright students will understand me, but the teachers will not. Thankfully, there are also some very gifted teachers here.

However, this conception that the students can not speak English is why WorldTeach is here. WT asks the host country what they need the most. Some countries need nature guides, China needed English speakers. Jason and I are here to get the kids speaking by

encouraging them to talk and to exposing them to new words. However, we are also to teach the teachers as we found out on Wed morning at 8AM when we were summoned to a meeting with the teachers which turned out to actually be a class (no one told us). Communist Party Secretary Hou wants us to test the teachers and give them grades, but we are not eager to do that except as a last resort to get them to talk. However, we tried to engage the 30 teachers in a discussion on the differences between the Chinese and US education systems, but only 3 would talk. But, they all did chatter during my introduction when I explained that my mom and sister are both teachers. The teachers thought that was the best thing as do my students who I also tell this to during my introduction.

Some of my classes last week went well, others bombed or at least, I thought that they did. In what I think is my favorite class, I was explaining that Massachusetts is a state. For my less, I also have written the Chinese words and some characters in case I can not communicate effective in english what a word means. Since this was my sixth class in two days, I had the character for state memorized. I wrote it on the board next to "state". The kids thought that this was awesome and all began to clap. How could they not be my favorites? Although in this same class I named one girl Dana because I could not tell if she was a boy or a girl. I got halfway through the class when the students around her began to laugh. I turned to look and they began to cry out that she was a girl but that I had given her a boy's name. One student was holding a book of English names and there was Dana under the character for male. I went over to the girl who was now on the brink of tears and knelt down next to her so I was at her level. I told her that in the US, Dana is a girl's name. I explained that I had several girl friends who were named Dana, meaning several female friends. At this one girl shot back "You have girlfriend named Dana!", all giggly. "Um, yes" I responded after which Dana refused all offers that I made to give her a different name.

Other classes were not as much fun. In one class I was asked why people in the US don't like people in China. However overall Jason and I have achieved celebrity status here at wuzhong. Often the classes will clap when I am done with my lesson. After my second day of teaching, Jason and I decided to walk to the market. As we left, maybe 100 student who were on break between classes began to call my name from the balconies of the school. Jason and I are swamped as we walk to our apartment by kids who want us to autograph their books. It's all fun and we wont let it go to our heads since our novelty will wear off soon. However, on teacher who I practice my Chinese with lamented that Jason and I are so popular with the students, but they don't like her because she is so strict. This is in some was true, but unfair. She must deal with her classes all day, every day whereas I only see them for 40 minutes a week. I can go into her class and have fun with the kids and get them all wound up and not have to deal with them the next period. There is also a difference in teaching styles with the Chinese style being more conservative than the US style. The teachers in China are under a lot of pressure as well. The success of a teacher depends on how well their students do on the standard exams. This atmosphere encourages cheating between the students and a lack of response from the teachers. It is as if cheating is expected and encouraged for the benefit of the students and of the teacher. This philosophy is difficult for me to understand.

Last Thursday the infection in my nose and throat finally broke. By the end of the day,

however, I had lost my voice from being ill and from talking so much. But, with the infection on the decline, I was able to teach on Friday. I thought that this would be my healthy week, but on Sunday I ate something that I should not have. I was so very sick on Monday that I cancelled all of my engagements. It was my first illness here that I seriously was worried. This morning (Tuesday) I felt well enough to teach, but I have not eaten in days, nor does my stomach want me to. However, I have a dinner tonight with the principal and the party secretary, so I may end my fast with a sea cucumber. Yum. Please keep me in your prayers this week as I struggle to get healthy.

Take care,

Jeff

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