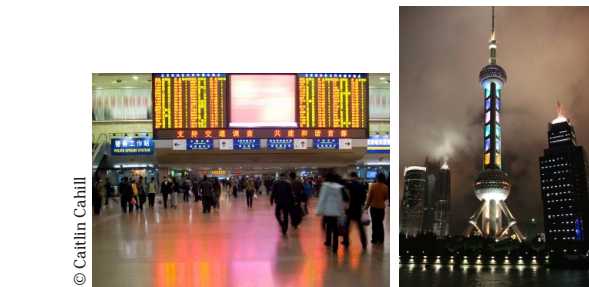


Take Each Child by the Hand



An Early Childhood Educators' Delegation to China

Dan Bellm



In urban China today, there appears to be literally no time for rest. Construction cranes operate all day and night, as open spaces and older neighborhoods give way to highways, subways, commercial centers, housing tracts, and Olympic sports arenas. What's much less visible at first glance is China's huge expansion of investment in education as the key to its growth and success, beginning in children's earliest years.

As this formerly closed nation opens its doors to the world, many issues of concern to educators are playing out all at once. In a one-party system that has long stressed collectivism and the public good but now promotes entrepreneurship and the chance for private wealth, how much freedom of thought and expression in schools is acceptable? How can education help address growing inequities between city and countryside, rich and poor? How much growth is good? This is an extraordinary time for educators in China and the United States to learn from each other.

In April 2006, our delegation of 20 early childhood educators from across the United States visited China. The study trip was part of a program led by Jane Wiechel, associate superintendent of the Ohio Department of Education and former NAEYC president. The 12-day journey took us to Beijing and Tianjin in the northeast, Guilin in the south, and Shanghai on the central coast. Stops included public and private kindergartens (serving children ages three to six), elementary schools, a public school program for children with developmental disabilities, an experimental public school providing the entire nine years of compulsory education (roughly, ages 6 to 15), and the Beijing and Tianjin Normal Universities, specializing in teacher education. The delegation, which included state education officials, teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Head Start and community agency directors, and university researchers, was sponsored by People to People International. This is a brief recounting of our journey.

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A model kindergarten in Beijing

Our first school visit takes us to Beijing Normal University's (BNU) model kindergarten, a colorful, inviting school in high demand by local parents and a placement site for university students.

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Serving 420 children, ages two to six, and employing a staff of 105, this kindergarten receives three applicants for every student opening. As we pass the school nurse's office near the entrance, director Zhu Min notes that the kindergarten's number-one focus is on health, safety, and nutrition—a theme we will hear repeatedly in the coming weeks. China's kindergartens are a key part of the nation's health care system, providing regular physical examinations, two to three meals a day, and often a nurse or doctor on site.

Springtime is in the air throughout the building, with wall displays of classic Chinese poetry about the season and a group of three-year-olds painting a mural of flowers in a light-filled hallway. Nearly every classroom has an "English corner"—as Ms. Zhu notes, parents place a high value on English-language learning—and many children eagerly shout hello or sing a song in English.

In a classroom of 27 four-year-olds and four teachers, we see more boys than girls. The imbalance shows the widespread effect of China's 1979 One Family One Child law combined with a traditional preference for sons. (Nationwide, among young children, there are about 116 boys to every 100 girls.) Another common reflection of the one-child law is the oft-repeated view of parents, teachers, directors, and our guides that children grow up spoiled, receiving an undesirably high level of individual attention from parents and grandparents.

Next door, a separate wing houses the boarding school program, with its own classrooms and sleeping quarters. Boarding schools for preschoolers? In fact, many kindergartens in China operate such programs at least five days a week to help families with adults who work more than full-time, at more than one job, or, in today's high-stakes job market, even in another city. Boarding schools also serve parents who want their single child to experience more of the rough-and-tumble of group life.



"To liberate and educate"

Earlier in the morning, Professor Zhang Yan of Beijing Normal University had given an overview of early childhood education in China. The nationwide development of a large-scale early childhood education system began soon after the Communist Party's ascent to power in 1949. Its two primary goals—"to liberate the parents and to educate the children"—reflect a dual focus on economic development and education from the start. Today, the more formally developed kindergarten system, serving children ages three to six and regulated by the Ministry of Education, coexists with a much more informal, largely home-based "nursery" system for infants and toddlers, overseen by the Ministry of Health.



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About 50 percent of all Chinese children (in the cities, 80 to 90 percent) now attend kindergarten for at least one year before beginning their nine years of compulsory education at age six. The government's stated goal is, by 2015, to universalize three years of kindergarten in urban areas and to reach 80 percent of rural preschoolers for at least one year. Currently, the kindergarten system serves about 130 million children nationwide.

Given the size of the task, the Chinese government has long recognized that government support for the entire education system is impossible and that private investment is necessary. Because early childhood education is not part of the compulsory education system, nongovernmental organizations are the main providers of nurseries and kindergartens, and parents pay a significant part of the costs. In the coastal city of Tianjin, for example, we visit the Greenday International Kindergarten, a sparkling new complex run privately by the Cathay Future Preschool Educational Group and financed by building developers and a neighborhood business association.



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Like the Beijing Normal University-sponsored kindergarten and a program we will later visit in Shanghai's Putuo district, Greenday is a model or experimental site, part of a system developed in the 1990s to highlight innovative models. Here a primary focus is the intensive study of English; five-year-old students greet us with pictures and gifts in the colorful courtyard, inviting us to join in songs and games in English. Mostly the children of professionals and growing up in a

newly built, affluent neighborhood, these students are clearly off to a favorable start in life.

Earlier in our journey, Professor Zhang had frankly expressed doubts about the model kindergarten system, fearing that disproportionate attention and resources go to schools in the "better" or wealthier communities. Although our delegation tends to visit showplace programs, not venturing far into rural China, where over 60 percent of the population lives and poverty is far more pronounced, we still find hints of disparity.

A brief tour of kindergarten classrooms in Guilin's Qingfeng Elementary School in the rural south is an eye-opening contrast to the private kindergartens of the urban north. Very little play equipment or space for individual exploration is visible; even for the youngest, school appears to be a matter of desks and chairs. In one room, 44 five-year-olds do rapid-fire math calculations in their heads, chanting in unison with their teacher—an impressive display but in a

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barren setting that seems unequipped for any sort of activity other than academics. Nearby, a group makes identical cutout pictures. In another room, 15 three-year-olds do after-nap exercises seated at tables.

Since 1996, national kindergarten standards for curriculum content and teacher training—focusing on health habits, language development, science, art, and play—have sought to raise the quality of all programs in China, especially in rural areas, from a relatively low baseline. Shanghai, Beijing, and other cities have set higher standards of their own. But a more fundamental question than quality, the answer to which is still evolving in today's China, is how much freedom of thought and action a Chinese child should be educated to expect.

Professor Liang Tangyu, chair of the Educational Science Institute at Tianjin Normal University, summarizes for us the nation's "twenty-first century philosophy of early childhood education" in three points: "One: Respect every child (equality); two: Hold every child in your arms (closeness and communication); three: Take each child by the hand (guidance in the right direction)." It's around the fine line between the second and third slogans—the twin emphases on nurturance and social control—that the educational and political debate in China now takes place.

At Qingfeng Elementary School, a head teacher expresses the view that "kindergarten teachers should be professionally trained to help children think independently and explore," a view that broadens the traditional correct-answer-oriented, teacher-centered approach. But the rather somber Communist Party official who heads our meeting breaks into a nervous smile at such talk and comments, "This is open to further study." He is interrupted—or rescued—by energetic music broadcast over the loudspeakers: it is 3:15, time for the children's daily eye exercises! So we learn a series of rubbing motions meant to stimulate muscles and ease blood flow at the pressure points around the eyes—a way to relieve strain and prevent the need for glasses, which seems a very useful technique to take home.

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Teacher preparation and pay

As in the United States, preschool teacher training in China is still quite different from that of primary school teachers. Students who attend a normal university to prepare for teaching kindergarten typically complete a three-year middle-level course that is slightly more advanced than an associate's degree program in the United States. It is short of the senior-level course (roughly equivalent to earning a bachelor's degree), which is more and more in demand for teachers at the urban model kindergartens.



Beijing Normal University's early childhood department, housed in the Education School, provides middle-level training focused on child development and age-appropriate curricula. But in Professor Zhang Yan's opinion, this level of teacher training has become insufficient for developing a high-quality kindergarten system; at the Beijing kindergarten we visit, the director and several teachers hold bachelor's or master's degrees.

At Tianjin Normal University, meeting informally with a group of local kindergarten directors and teachers, we ask about teacher pay and turnover. In public nurseries and kindergartens, teachers receive a guaranteed salary roughly comparable to what primary school teachers earn, and they are paid according to the degree or level of training received. Teachers at model or experimental kindergartens generally earn more than teachers in other schools; however, pay varies also among cities and

regions of China, in line with their sharply differing levels of economic development. Not unexpectedly, we learn that pay is minimal in the informal, largely home-based system serving children from birth through age three.

The teachers and university students we speak to in Tianjin assure us that they consider kindergarten teaching a lifelong profession—a highly competitive, even high-status, career that guarantees a decent, stable income. They are quite surprised to learn that this is not the case in a wealthy country like the United States, and we become more than a little tongue-tied trying to explain why!

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One view of special education

In the town of Lingchuan, half an hour north of Guilin and along the scenic Li River, we visit a special education program for 45 children, ages six to 18, housed within the Peizhi Public Elementary School. We arrive in time for the school's morning assembly. While most of the students, wearing spring-green uniform jackets, are gathered near loudspeakers in the play yard for the national anthem, those in the special program stand far to the rear, distinctly separate.



After students return to their classrooms, Principal Lihong Deng and several faculty members speak with us about the school and about special education in China. Although the building looks rather drab and neglected, construction will start later that month on a new million-dollar facility half funded by the Chinese government, with the rest to be raised from local associations and businesses.

Of the school's 45 special students—divided into four classes among 12 teachers—19 receive some government financial sponsorship and 16 are boarders. The principal describes the program in this way: "The school's goal is to bring out a sense of self-confidence in these students—self-respect, self-reliance, independence, and dignity. We combine the regular subjects with vocational training, so that they will be able to earn a living." We later visit several life skills rooms, including a "store" where students can practice shopping and using money, a roomful of computers with touch screens, and a sewing workshop. The staff proudly lead us to a display case of the children's artwork where there are also photos of several prizewinners in a national arts competition for children with disabilities. Preparations are well under way here for ping-pong, swimming, and track competitions in the National Special Games later that summer.

Unlike the 13 categories of disability defined under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) for U.S. schools, China divides disabilities into three broad groups: deafness and blindness, cognitive disabilities, and emotional or mental disabilities such as autism. Children with physical disabilities other than deafness or blindness go to regular schools, we are told, and are not considered "handicapped." The children at Peizhi fit into the second or third categories; there are no deaf or blind students, "due to insufficient resources."

Most teachers here are graduates of three-year normal school special education programs. Parents generally pay more to send children with disabilities to a separate school such as Peizhi; those with fewer resources may send their children to regular schools if they are unable to obtain government subsidies. To that extent, one could say that some children are mainstreamed, but not in the American sense; they do not necessarily receive other services.

Before we depart, two classrooms stage a performance, with a student representative welcoming us as "dear grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles from the United States." Recitations of T'ang dynasty poems of spring are followed by a chorus conducted by an older student with a baton, and six students dance an enactment of "The Enormous Turnip," a folktale most of us recognize. Amid much raucous laughter, we join in three-legged races and a chasing game called Eagle and Chickens.

As we wave goodbye—is it a coincidence or is it done for our benefit?—the songs piped over the loudspeakers are Chinese-language versions of "Frère Jacques" and "The Wheels on the Bus."

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