

TDF (Teacher Development Forum) Speaker Event

"Teaching through a Global Recession"

On **Wednesday, March 25th, 2009** at **7 pm**, TDF hosted a discussion panel on "Teaching through a Global Recession". 3 guest speakers talked about different aspects of how the financial crisis is affecting teaching and teachers in China as well as the Chinese government's new directions in education. The speeches were delivered in a discussion group manner with questions and comments being given as the talk went on.

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Mr. Wang Xiaoyang, the first speaker, talked about the Chinese government's investment in education and their expectations. Mr. Wang is a director of the National Association of Foreign Language Education (NAFLE), China Education Society and Executive Editor of English Teachers Magazine. He has more than 20 years working experience as a high school English teacher, a textbook editor, and an NGO manager.

Mr. Wang's talk - Executive Summary

Mr. Wang began by introducing himself and his association - NAFLE, to everyone and their role in the Education system of China. He then began his talk by displaying a number of slides having bar graphs showing various figures as the number of schools in China, the number of students, number of teachers and then the amount of money allocated to education in China as a percentage of the GDP. This amount was compared to the same spending in both developed and in developing countries. It showed the lag in education investment in China.

Mr. Wang, while answering a few question talked about how the investment in education in China is shared by the central and provincial governments as well as the local governments and it is not always clear who is to spend how much in that regard. The discussion went on for a while about the spending versus the needs.

He also talked about students having equal access to education throughout the country. Using the example of the university entrance exam he talked about that the fact that acceptable scores are different depending on the area.

Mr. Wang than went on to talk about the supply and demand with regards to education in China – that fact that the supply does not meet the demand. He focused on the comparison between the east of China compared to the west of China and the imbalance that exists between them. He also mentioned how that imbalance also exists within a city.

The next significant part of Mr. Wang's presentation was about the heavy workload or pressure put on today's students due to the race to enter 'key schools' and the best universities. This continued with some comments from the audience on that topic before coming to an end.

Talk Notes

This is a set of notes following the progress of the presentation. It includes questions from the audience. Note that any text that is placed within quotation marks are not necessarily the exact quote. This set of notes complements the recording where everyone was looking at the slides. The recording, if you did not receive it is available on the TDF site – www.tdf-esl.com.

NAFLE was established in 1981 has 5000 members (ELT professionals – teachers and supervisors) in different provinces.

NAFLE offers teacher training, ELT seminars and workshops and consulting for the ministry of education. We publish ELT journals and editorials. I (Mr. Wang Xiaoyang) am executive editor of 'English Teacher' magazine. The president of the organization, Mr. Gong is a professor at the China National Institute for Educational Research.

Mr. Wang then began his presentation: he began his talk on the government spending in China. He went through his talk using PowerPoint slides showing statistical information on different aspects of education.

The first slide show the number of schools in China including pre-school, primary and secondary schools as well as universities. For example, the numbers showed that there are more than one million pre-schools (kindergardens), more than 100,000 primary schools, 30,000 senior high schools and over 2000 universities.

The second slide showed the number of students in China. For example: 22 million pre-school students, 100 million primary school students and 60 million junior high school (middle school) students.

Someone asked a question at this point since the slides were showing that the greatest number of schools and students were at the primary school level. The question was – do you think that the number will rise accordingly as the children further on to junior high and senior high. Mr. Wang replied that a significant portion of these figures (primary school) are students from villages and in a good majority of cases today, will go on to help their family with work rather than go on to middle or high school.

The charts showed a significant drop in numbers from primary school to middle school.

Another person mentioned that he thought the number should change now that secondary school education is free. This is a recent change from the past two years apparently. Mr. Wang confirmed that these figures were from 2007 and that compulsory education or free education began only two years ago. He agreed that the number in the secondary school level should increase. At the same time, the overall number of students at the primary school will decrease as the population decreases.

The next slide showed the number of teachers (30 million teachers) in China. It showed that there are many more primary school teachers in the same ratio as the number of students.

After seeing the slides of the number of schools, students and teachers, Mr. Wang made the point that 'Chinese education needs more money and investments but is presently not quite enough'. He mentioned that the government should play a very significant role in education.

MR. Wang then showed a slide of education investments versus GDP in various countries including China. The bar graph showed that the number for China's investment in education was significantly lower than in other countries and lower even than the world average. The world average was at 4% whereas the investment in China was closer to 3%. This number was even lower than other 'developing countries' such as the Philippines and India.

The Chinese central government does want to change this and although they did previously promise to reach the 4% mark, has not yet succeeded. However, things may change now since the government is drawing much more taxes and thereby have more money that could be allotted to education investment.

He concluded that slide by stating that it was a less than ideal situation. One person asked 'why is that?' (that the government is not spending more on education)

Mr. Wang said in a light tone "That's a good question ..." not offering an absolute answer. The education investment is afforded by the federal, provincial and local governments together. Before the 1990s, the central government drew less taxes form the people and the local governments drew more. But after 1990, the central government drew more taxes than the local government. So the central government should play a main role (as well as the provincial governments) to invest in education.

But the fact is that, in China now, it's the provincial government that provides the most money for education. They get less taxes but should provide more. Now, the central government has realized that and has promised to invest more.

Another slide shows a graph for the average investment per student per year for primary school students (year 2007). It is 2,600 rmb per student and several years ago, it was only 873 rmb per year per student.

Someone asked what he thought the extra money was being spent on. He replied that mainly, it's the teacher's salaries and the building and equipment.

One person in the audience who was previously a school governor in the UK talked about a spending figure in the year 2001 close to 3,000 pounds per student per year. He was talking about figures regarding primary and early secondary education spending in the UK in 2001. Being asked if he thought it was a significant spending, replied that it's never reasonable because education is the most important investment any country makes.

Mr. Wang continued – I think that the problem is that the government promises to spend more on education but that actually the fact is very different. However, from last year more money has been spent on education but I don't have the exact figures.

This is mainly what Mr. Wang wanted to show in his talk – that 1. the Chinese education needs a lot of investment, 2. the government should play the main role, 3. the governments not doing enough at this time. The central and provincial governments should follow up on their promises since they are richer than the local government, and 4. the government is improving despite all that and is now making a big plan called 'Outcome Plan for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development from 2009 to 2020'. So, from this year, another new round of educational reform will begin. 'So', Mr. Wang said, 'I believe more and more investments will be allocated to education.'

Someone asked at this point that, given that potentially, China is heading into a recession, do you think that there is a good reason to be optimistic? He replied that he feels that more and more people will actually get more training in the recession because mainly they can't find a better job. As far as he knows, more money will be allocated to 'basic education' especially, as one way to stimulate the economy. But maybe the stimulus package is not so high as compared to construction projects for example.

The audience asked if he thought that the central government really believed in spending more in education or if these were only words – is the priority more on construction or work projects or on education? Mr. Wang said that the leaders are always saying that education is the number 1 priority in China but that history has shown otherwise. "As a professional in the education field, I do want the government to invest more and I do believe that more will be spent but how much, I don't really know as now the 4 trillion investment is not enough.

Question from the audience: "in your opinion, what is a significant number that should be allocated per student?" Mr. Wang didn't state an exact figure per student but simply stated that the GDP percentage should go up to or beyond the 4% mark.

Since the Chinese economy is so big now, just 1% of that would be significant. With that, more countryside students could go to schools and not have to help their parents to work.

Another topic is that people should have equal access to education. For example, the university entrance exam in China is an extremely important exam for all of Chinese students but the enrolment standards for that exam are not equal. For example, the big cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjing have a much lower standard for university than other provinces. The test is the same but the pass mark is not the same.

Another problem is the imbalance between the educational supply and demand. Supply is not enough. More significantly, the east part of China is richer than in the west so, children in the east part have more chances and more money for their education. The parents as well have more money and this is more so in the urban areas as compared to rural areas. Even within the cities, there are imbalances because of what we call 'key schools'. Key schools have the best teachers compared to ordinary schools also due to more money.

Another imbalance is that we need to alleviate the heavy school work burden placed on primary and middle school students. That's another very severe problem in Chinese education. For example, my daughter is 14 years old now and is in grade 9. This June, she will attend the entrance exam to the senior high school. This is a big struggle. She gets up at about 6:40 each school day and goes to sleep after 11 pm and each weekend, she will have to attend more than 6 hours of after school training.

It's not so much the parents fault because the parents as well as herself want to try and go to 'key schools' and that will assure that she can enter in a very good university.

This race gives the students a very heavy burden and this burden is even greater in the small cities than in the big cities. In small cities, senior high school children have maybe only one day's rest per month. So, it's quite a miserable situation.

Audience member's comment: This is something which in my opinion desperately needs to change in China. Because a child needs to be a child. A child needs to grow up, must enjoy his childhood – it turns people into machines. Children need their leisure, for their health and development and this is one thing which is very important. There's not enough pressure on authorities to change things. Children are also taught to keep quiet, never to question the teacher, never to say anything. So when they come out at the end of the system, universities, companies say – you're not profitable to us, it's going to take 2 to 3 years to turn you from an undergraduate, a new graduate into an effective, profitable employee. The system of education not only needs less hours, the hours need to be used more effectively and Chinese teachers need to stop putting themselves as being 'perfect'. They need to be prepared to be questioned, by students, just like we do in other countries. That's something that is so desperate to change because then, young people, when they get to work, they'll be able to participate in committees, speak confidently in public, they'll be able to handle telephone conferencing calls. At this moment, they're all frightened to do that. And my work is helping people these people develop because companies all say – that's why we pay such small salaries to new graduates, because they're not worth much money when they start. So a lot of thinking and a lot of change needs to take place.

Mr. Wang continued: Yes, so that's why I mentioned the imbalance between the supply and the demand. You have less money allocated in education so then you have less qualified teachers and less qualified schools and students all have to struggle for better schools.

So that's why the government, teachers and the people all want reform in the curriculum, the teaching material as well as the examination reform.

My presentation may not have been so positive ...

Audience: No, you cleared up a lot of things for us : you've done very well actually.