



What we learned about education policy.

The long-standing partnership between the Office of K-12 Outreach in Michigan State University's College of Education and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) has enriched efforts to make dynamic connections between leading scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. A key initiative of this partnership—the Education Policy Fellowship Program (EPFP™)—has offered education and human service professionals recurring opportunities to deepen their understanding of education policy at the local, state, and national levels.

Recently expanding the scope of EPFP, IEL—in partnership with MSU—has established a new opportunity for EPFP alumni who want an international experience: the Global Education Policy Fellowship Program (GEPFP).

GEPFP is designed to give Senior Policy Fellows a chance to connect and interact with experienced global policy experts and professional leaders from around the United States. A key goal of the program is to develop a deeper understanding of global educational policy issues, particularly the discrepancy that often exists between policy intent and policy implementation.



Global EPFP (GEPFP) is a unique experience combining online learning and international travel open to EPFP alumni and other

senior level leaders with an interest in global education policy. The purpose of the GEPFP is to provide senior fellows with the opportunity to study education policy in the age of globalization by investigating education reform challenges in economically developed and developing countries.

The GEPFP 2012–13 Cohort gained a global perspective on education policy and its impact on the U.S. by exploring China's education system and its approaches to the challenges of education reform. Fellows took part in a 9-month program that included monthly online seminars and discussions as well as a 10-day study tour of China. The study tour provided an opportunity for fellows to attend briefings with education policy and university leaders, visit schools, and engage in conversation with Chinese educators.



Look at any nation's educational system and you will find the ideals of the society that built it. There are few more compelling cultural markers than how a society chooses to teach its children, and what it believes they must learn.

At this point in world history, there is perhaps no more fascinating culture to explore than China. After five millennia of isolation, feudalism, and mystery, China has emerged as a global economic superpower. The

relatively new openness of Chinese commerce and society offers intriguing insights into the evolving ideals of an ancient nation.

In October 2012, fellows of the Global Education Policy Fellowship Program (GEPFP) traveled to three cities in China—Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai—to explore how the recent transitions in politics and culture are influencing the work of teaching and learning.

Understanding the Historical and Cultural Context

For 5,000 years, the people of China were subject to dynastic rule. The authority of each successive dynasty was supported, in part, by widespread cultural adherence to the ideas of the ancient teacher Confucius, who believed that social harmony was the greatest aim of mankind. To help facilitate general unity, Confucius taught filial piety—the reverence and emulation of one’s rulers and elders—and the importance of deeply embedded personal duty.

When social harmony is a major focus, however, the notion of truth and the role of the individual necessarily become more complex and ambiguous. For Confucius, “truth” is not associated with an external, objective reality, but rather “knowing how to live as a harmonious, integrated person within a community” (Kyung, 2004, p. 118). Similarly, Confucian ethics are more difficult to pin down, given that they are humanistic and situational in nature. Whether an action is right or wrong depends on its context, intention, and benefits to the common good.

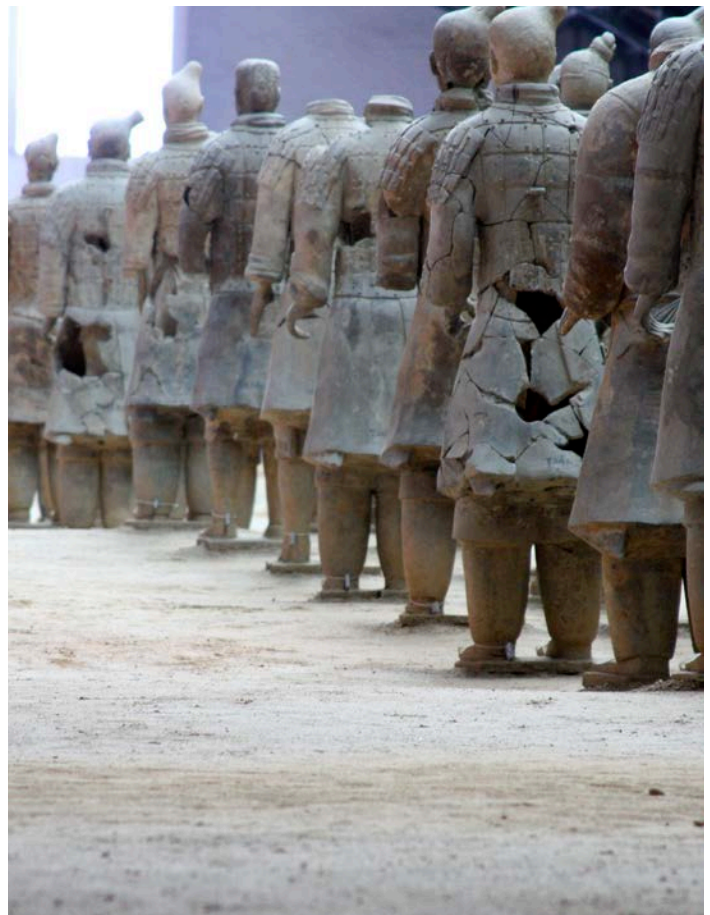
Modern China continues to nourish a rich cultural heritage shaped by Confucianism. Historically, being educated in Confucian concepts was limited to a select group of people establishing strong traditions, rules, and behaviors of feudal society. This deeply-rooted tradition emphasized differences between classes of people, especially in regards to knowledge. Education in China became institutionalized as an honor and privilege of the elites.

For many Chinese families, the activity of learning is likened to loyalty to the emperor and reverence for one’s ancestors. The Confucian legacy of education and the role of individuals in supporting collective society have firmly grounded the connections between knowledge or wisdom and morality in Chinese culture.

Although Confucius lived hundreds of years before the Common Era, his philosophy still profoundly influences the collective psyche of the Chinese culture. Moreover, as one of China’s most renowned and influential teachers, his ideas are deeply embedded and evident in the nation’s present-day educational system.

In addition to Confucian moral philosophy, China’s tradition of holding education in high esteem also has roots in the Civil Examination System. This system, utilized for selecting government officials, was extremely competitive. It was considered the lone path to upward social mobility and a hopeful future. It was thought to be an effective and fair way of transforming one’s social status. This long tradition of hard work passed on an enthusiasm for examinations and deemed the acts of preparing for and taking an examination synonymous with education. Even though it evolved over many dynasties and was eventually abandoned early in the 20th Century, the examination system was traditionally thought to be an effective and fair system.

These are complicated but important concepts where teaching and learning are concerned. In a worldview that perceives one’s results on an examination as an endorsement of authentic learning and values harmony above all else, morality and politics become essential curricular elements.



Impetus for Change

Fellows kicked off their study tour in Beijing, which reinforced their impressions of China's rich cultural heritage and allowed them a glimpse of the challenge facing this nation and its leaders. For centuries Beijing has served as the heart of politics, art, and culture in China. It is the second largest city in China, with over 20 million people. Witnessing such an enormous number of people first hand brought greater perspective and appreciation for the effort and progress China has made in educating its populace to date, and also the magnitude of challenge China faces now and in the future.

Fellows attended a faculty lecture at Beijing Normal University where two professors, experts in education policy and finance, explained the educational governance systems, the current state of education policy initiatives, and some of the major challenges of reform.

The professors explained to the fellows that the general aim of all social and economic policies in China is to build a well-off and well-rounded socialist society. Even though there are obvious financial benefits to the movement of introducing western practice to manufacturing industries in China, there are also observable consequences. These outcomes have prompted education and financial policy makers to rethink their traditional frameworks, to open doors for a new market economy and education system in hopes of achieving, ultimately, have a more harmonious society.

Education policymakers in China are targeting three main problems: school governance, inequity, and inefficiency of a continued emphasis on preparing students to do well on exams over producing creative, innovative thinkers.

These three ideas frame key lessons learned from their study tour.

School Governance

The differences between the U.S. and Chinese educational systems were striking. Perhaps the most interesting is China's desire to move from a centralized, controlling educational governance system to one that allows more local control over finances and even curriculum—quite the reverse to what many see in recent federal policies in the U.S. that aim to consolidate control at the national level.



Preparing for China

Before visiting China, fellows prepared for the trip through personal readings, combined with web-based sessions and discussions with leading scholars and policy experts on China's education system and reform efforts.

In China, fellows had the opportunity to engage in a combination of seminars, cultural activities and school visits. After returning home, they spent an extensive amount of time attempting to understand the Chinese education system and make their learning relevant and applicable to their work here in the U.S.

On the following pages the 2012-13 GEPFP fellows share the most prominent themes they learned about education reform in China.



Key Lessons Learned

Rapid globalization and new political openness have brought Western ideas to China. Some reformers are now calling for greater creativity and self-directed learning for students, and Chinese education leaders appear to be listening.

While these reform efforts appear to be set in motion, the historic cultural influence on education provides an important context for understanding the education system and reform efforts now underway in China.

On several occasions, people fellows spoke to used the words “educational democratization,” which was their way of expressing the hope to improve the system by having more decisions made at the local level. In the U.S., private schools in suburban or rural areas are often considered to be stronger than typical public schools and draw elite students, while in China the best students are drawn to the public schools in large urban centers. China has expanded its basic compulsory system to include private and non-government schooling options.

China has recently accomplished the major goal of expanding the amount of time students spend in formal schooling, so that now students must complete nine years of compulsory education. Two major goals of the government are to eliminate illiteracy and reduce dropout rates in the rural regions.

To reach these goals, the Chinese central government has increased subsidies to rural schools, including assistance with textbooks and funds to reduce financial barriers for poor families.

Experiences on the study tour provided opportunities for Fellows to form opinions of education in China—and also for them to hear Chinese perceptions of education in the U.S. Professor Liansheng Yuan, School of Economics and Business Administration, Beijing Normal University praised the U.S. system for its flexibility, including opportunities for students to choose both a school and course of study, for our ability to develop critical thinking and creativity in students, for the involvement of social sectors and communities in policy making and governance, and for our success in incorporating technology into instruction.

During their stay in Shanghai, fellows had a policy briefing with Professor Hu Wei, Deputy Director of the Shanghai Academy of Education Sciences and the Chair of China’s Non-Governments Schools Association, along with several of his associates from the Xiehe Education Group and the Shanghai United International School (SUIS), including Ms. Vivian Chen, Superintendent of Xiehe. Shanghai schools have generally been

very successful, in no small part because Shanghai is a cosmopolitan city that has attracted talented people and is more open to outside ideas. This success has prompted the central government to allow a degree of experimentation, in hopes of replicating Shanghai’s outcomes. An independent, non-public international school, SUIS is an example of external forces influencing public school policies.

The Xiehe Education Group is a non-profit and non-government organization which performs strategic educational planning, school management, and teacher training. Its leader stated that China is reforming its education system by increasing the funding of education and diversifying the system to include not only public schools but also non-public, non-profit schools. Fellows also learned that the government wants non-profit schools to stimulate school reform by encouraging public schools to learn from managed private schools. Additionally, they were told there is a higher quality of learning in Shanghai because Shanghai has developed more non-government schools than any other city in China.

Still, a major concern school leaders face is the next step for students after their ninth year. This can be construed as the Chinese equivalent of the “college and career ready” challenge facing U.S. schools. Fellows learned that, prior to 2000, Chinese post-secondary policy was focused on quantity, not quality—building China’s bricks-and-mortar and human capacity to meet the post-secondary enrollment needs of the nation. Now that focus has shifted, as the government looks to improve the outcomes of that system.

Another issue facing Shanghai and China is how to cope with an increasing number of so-called migrant students. China is experiencing an unprecedented migration within its borders as people leave the western interior of the country and move to the cities of its eastern coast. Because they are migrants an estimated 20 percent of the students are ineligible for spots in Shanghai’s schools. This leads us to the second education problem being targeted by the national government: inequity.





before her child would be eligible to attend school there—essentially disqualifying a generation of children. Current accountability systems and public prestige provide cities and schools with no incentives to change these policies on their own.

The solution China is trying is to “level up” the playing field as well as implementing policies to ensure quality training and development to provide good teachers to all schools.

Inefficiency

Today, schooling in China is aimed at preparing students to take the gaokao, a national exam used for university admissions. This emphasis meets the expectations of most parents, who still believe the gaokao is not only fair, but an indisputable path to success. Policymakers, on the other hand, believe the current system is spending an inordinate amount of time and resources to prepare students to do well on the examination, but fails to adequately prepare them to have the necessary skills for 21st century China.

It is important to know the historical cultural context bolstering and sustaining a society’s enduring faith and support in the gaokao to fully grasp why any alternative is a major challenge for education reformers.

Inequity

Equity in education is a primary concern in China. Longstanding inequities include governmental funding, teacher availability and quality, and school facilities. During the visit fellows learned that China is increasing funding for rural schools, and has developed an accountability system with inspections to ensure increased equity.

As millions of families move to the cities to find work, migrant students have become a significant problem, complicated by the fact that many cities have residency laws based on the status of the mother. For example, a mother would have to live in Shanghai for 15 years





High Stakes for Chinese Families

The ideas originally taught by Confucius have, over time, given rise to consequences for China's education reform efforts. These outcomes have raised the stakes for Chinese families and forced the Chinese government to formulate innovative ways to influence public school policy.

In Chinese culture, students are expected to pursue a rigorous curriculum and, according to several parents who met and spoke with the GEPFP Fellows, their homework often keeps them up until 11:00 p.m. or later. Saturdays and Sundays are spent on extra tutoring. Everything these students do is aimed at performing well on the single two-day final examination, which will ultimately determine the university they attend.

Although the idea of investing so much time and energy on a single test may seem extreme in the eyes of Westerners, knowing the historical and cultural significance of the Civil Examination System, it is natural to Chinese parents. Parents described the gaokao as an objective measure of a child's ability because it acts as an equalizer, preventing families with connections from directly exerting their power to ensure a student's placement in a top university. Perhaps more importantly,

the gaokao ensures opportunity for students whose families do not have such power.

Moreover, parents said the examination's pressure is necessary and serves their children well. China's population is massive and there aren't nearly enough resources or positions for everyone. It can hardly be surprising, then, that Chinese parents place enormous pressure on their children to achieve excellence. In a nation that limits parents to only one child, the success of that child is crucial to sustaining the entire family. At some point, the child will be responsible for supporting his or her parents (Confucius' veneration of the elders is still a cultural expectation today), and thus must be positioned to earn, exchange, and contribute a great many things of worth to the family and community alike.

While these sentiments reinforce China's culture of hard work and discipline, it is blamed by many as inhibiting creativity and critical thinking skills. Evidently some parents are listening and deciding to pursue alternatives traditional public schools.

Moving Forward

The experiences Fellows had on the study tour revealed how small pockets of reform (international private schools) in a few cities in China—Beijing, Xi'an, and Shanghai—are emerging in a country where there once was no diversity in education and only one voice, the central government. Although traditional public schools use the national curriculum, which emphasizes knowledge acquisition through textbooks as the way students learn, there are influential leaders in China who believe in the application of constructivist theory and the importance of teaching students to think critically. Several of the school leaders who met with the Fellows believe in the importance of the government providing avenues to allow parents a greater voice in support of their children's education, which ultimately helps inform and shape public policy.

There is almost certainly a healthy balance to be found somewhere between the traditions of East and West. Social harmony versus healthy public debate, the individual versus society, structure versus creativity—there is a middle ground in these areas for which our global community will always be searching. Schools around the world continue to reflect the ideals of the societies in which they operate, and will thus provide windows into other cultures that allow us to better understand them.



This document represents a collaborative effort by the 2012-13 GEPFP Fellows and the Office of K-12 Outreach.

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