



Summary of “China-Denmark Education Forum” the 22nd September 2020

Introduction

At the first China- Denmark Education Forum twelve speakers from China and Denmark took up the challenge to give their ideas of future teaching methods and objectives of education in the shadow of Covid-19 and the universal implementation of digital tools in educational institutions. Unanticipatedly, on-line teaching was globally introduced in 2020 at all levels of education. Conventional classroom and teacher led teaching gave way for on-line teaching, and it has initiated a debate how to organize future education.

Importantly, the very diverse contributions of the speakers should first of all be defined by their individual experiences, their local background and professional positions, rather than their nationality. Some distinct differences between the presentations of the Chinese and Danish participants are clearly noticeable, but there are also diverse or opposite views within each national group. Equally, many similar assessments and visions for the future are evident, irrespective of the nationality of the speakers. Instead of marking out differences, we should concentrate on how we can complement each other in the future.

Still, we must bear in mind that the realm of the discussion is very dissimilar for the speakers. In China, on-line teaching includes about 200 million students in primary and secondary education, while the equivalent number is about half a million in Denmark. China covers a land area approximately 200 times the size of Denmark, and it is home to a population with a very diversified culture and huge socio-economic differences. In comparison, Denmark is characterized by a much more homogenous and small population.

The role of virtual teaching

The speakers are all concerned how we include virtual learning in future education. How do we qualify students not only for a computerized and digital labour market but also to become competent information consumers while simultaneously maintaining a physical environment and interaction? All speakers emphasize that learning is a social activity. Still, virtual teaching opens up for new interactive learning ways and in the words of Zhang Zhi, Director of Shanghai Educational Technology Center, the school will integrate virtuality and reality. However, Ane Qvortrup, professor, University of Southern Denmark reminds us of the complexities of having a virtual identity and of being a physical person in a physical context, and she sees it as an important task to enable young people to handle this sort of dualism.

The employment of virtual teaching is generally viewed as a supplement teaching tool that offers a new way of thinking, the introduction of experimental pedagogy and a break with traditional classroom teaching. That is particularly evident in the presentations of the Chinese commentators. The online teaching is somehow a “window of opportunity” that allows a break with traditional classroom teaching and transforms the student from a passive to an autonomous student. New teaching methods present an opening for the inception of a curriculum that fosters critical thinking and develop a “whole person”. Among the Danish interviewees virtual teaching is regarded as an adjustment to meet the technological development in the society and an opportunity to create alternative and playful teaching methods. The concern is more how to sustain an existing environment that emphasizes dialogue, active student participation and value orientated teaching.



The importance of value-orientated education

The speakers agree that the aim of education should be guided by personal core values. The ideal is not to create a professional successful person, but as expressed by Li Zhenxi, member of CE30 and Morten Albæk, author and philosopher, education should grow people striving for happiness and a meaningful life. Bertel Haarder underlines how students at schools in Denmark are taught also to respect the values of the welfare state, such as equality, particularly gender equality, tolerance and trust in institutions and fellow citizens. Opposite Mr Haarder, Li Zhenxi talks about citizenship and cooperation education and refers to values, such as democracy, equality and honesty and benevolence. The vocabulary may be different as it reflects fundamental values and traditions in each of the two countries, but in both cases the emphasis is to cultivate a “whole person”.

Still, it is highlighted by a number of speakers that basic skills, such as reading, are still fundamental for the acquisition of competencies otherwise required. Also at higher educational levels, Anya Eskildsen, CEO at Niels Brock, points out that basic knowledge concerning an area of studying is necessary for developing an understanding of that specific study field. It is also mentioned by Danish and particularly Chinese interviewees that teaching must be science based. This view is spurred by the distorted debate about Covid-19 and the resulting misinformation about the spread of the pandemic. As a consequence of the pandemic, several Chinese and Danish interviewees stress that we live in world full of uncertainties and through education we must learn to handle the unanticipated scenarios.

On-line teaching and home schooling

It is striking that the Chinese commentators somehow make on-line teaching synonymous with home schooling and view the role of teachers and particularly parents differently than the Danes. Chinese speakers, for instance Zhang Zhi and Lin Weimin, Principal of BFSU Foreign Languages School, envision that much schooling will take place at home and that basic education will be performed on-line at home involving the assistance of parents and, according to Liu Jian, Dean of China Education Innovation Institute, Beijing Normal University, with moderate intervention from teachers. Chinese interviewees employ the term family education. Parents and other family members will engage in teaching while teachers will be instructors and learning helpers in learning laboratories that delivers individualized teaching. While the majority of the Chinese commentators consider home-schooling to be a strengthening of Chinese family life Yang Dongping is very critical of this assessment. He concludes on the basis of survey data home schooling has led to problematic parent-child relationships. He points out that parents should not be substitute teachers as they do not have adequate qualifications. In opposition to this, Liu Jian describes how so-called “micro-classes” as part of home schooling have worked successfully, and with the phrasing of parents, teaching basic knowledge.

Though on-line teaching has been the norm during the initial phase of the pandemic in Denmark, it appears that virtual teaching in the future is not associated with home schooling. Virtual teaching is construed by the Danish interviewees as a means of teaching that can take multiple forms and involve many different physical environments. Though Ane Qvortrup mentions that parents have been satisfied with the on-line teaching, the Danish government sent children at elementary school back to the classroom before other students were admitted back. The policy was initiated by the assessment of the public mood that home



schooling was very stressful for parents who at the same time should work from home. Consequently, it is unlikely that on-line teaching in Denmark will take the form of home schooling.

New teaching methods require new skills of the teachers and the panel recognizes that there is a need for continuing education. However, it appears that neither in China nor Denmark formalized continuing educational schemes at national level exist that equip teachers with skills to meet the new challenges that virtual teaching represents. However, at a more experimental and regional level in China and at individual schools in Denmark successful schemes or supporting systems are reported to have been set up, from which the teaching environment can gain valuable knowledge.

Advantages and shortcomings of virtual teaching

Virtual teaching opens up many new ways to invigorate conventional thinking of teaching and, as highlighted by the speakers, to make educational content more problem based, explorative and driven by “real content”. Zhu Yongxin brings up that on-line teaching allows the teacher to teach the individual students according to their aptitude. This is supported by Anya Eskildsen and Lis Zacho who have experienced that with on-line teaching they have an understanding of learning problems of individual students. Anya Eskildsen also finds that on-line teaching leaves a chance for quiet students to blossom. However, two important shortcomings of on-line teaching are brought up by members of the panel. First, in the survey conducted by Ane Qvortrup a significant number of students felt uncomfortable with the set up and a noticeable number of students simply felt that they did not have the competency to benefit from the teaching. This raises the question whether on-line or virtual teaching altogether benefits or disadvantages the academically or socially weaker section of students compared with conventional teaching. Do we develop a new form of illiteracy on top of reading and writing illiteracy?

Secondly, Lin Weimin and Yang Dongping are concerned about the disparity between urban and rural areas and poor and not poor regarding access to virtual technology. The individualization of teaching and its employment of costly technical devices will according to the speakers leave the more disadvantaged regions of the country and individuals in a further deprived position. The Danish speakers do not touch on this aspect. Is that because it is irrelevant in a Danish context or are there groups of students who will be disadvantaged staying put with the technical development? How will educational institutions administrate that purchasing power is very different among students and thereby their possibility to purchase and benefit from the new technological advancements?

Concluding words

The speakers present an optimistic perception of the transformation of conventional teaching to a teaching environment that heavily relies on online teaching. However, they uniformly agree that “hybrid teaching” is the way forward as the classroom cannot be substituted. Physical interaction and direct communication must still be an integral part of education. Online teaching allows process and project orientated teaching, where “playing” should be an intrinsic element. Such teaching is already the norm in the Danish educational system, but assumingly not as prominent in the Chinese schools as the Chinese speakers highlight the strong emphasis on exams. For the Chinese speakers the employment of online teaching appears to be a window of opportunity to reform a very teacher led and result based system relying



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strongly on exams to a system much more interactive, value orientated and less focused on exams testing conventional academic knowledge. However, as the speakers have portrayed the Chinese parents of the students to be consumed by their children to excel at exams, Chinese educators appear to lack the support among many parents to reform the educational system and introduce a more experimental based school. As home schooling in China in the future emerges as the center of on-line teaching it is otherwise important to get the parents onboard to secure the reforms. In Denmark the situation seems rather different. The challenge of instituting online teaching in a more individualized learning environment appears to be the sustaining of a culture of togetherness and interaction between teachers and students and students themselves. Anecdotally, compared with their Chinese counter-parts school parents in Denmark appear to be more concerned about the well-being and relevant teaching of their children than exam outcomes. The last but important take from the presentations is the focus by a number of contributors on lifelong learning. For individuals to keep up their skills in a fast changing labour market, to manage uncertainties and to take part in democratic processes with a qualified voice and vote, we as citizens, in the words of Mogens Godballe, need to be enlightened and possess a mind of growth. Education is an essential instrument in this undertaking.