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Rhetoric 102 Section AR5

05 May 2018

British and Chinese Secondary Education: A Star and A Flashlight

As Human society develops, education plays a more and more important role in the advance of the world, especially the secondary education that is a vital transition between primary education and higher education. Interested in the respective quality of British and Chinese secondary education, British Broadcasting Corporation, known as *BBC*, produced a documentary called *Are Our kids Tough Enough? Chinese School* (2015) to investigate the differences between British and Chinese educational styles. In the *BBC* documentary, students from Grade Nine, Bohunt School, Liphook, Hampshire, Britain were divided into two groups to receive British and Chinese secondary education respectively for a month, after which all of them would take Math, Science, and Mandarin exams to help educators figure out which secondary education was better.

In this research paper, I will respectively compare British and Chinese students' behaviors, teachers' notions of education, as well as ways in teaching English, Math, Science, and Physical Education reflected by the *BBC* documentary. Besides, I will interact with M Lee Manning's article, entitled "Child-Centered Middle School" (2000), which explains the concept of child-centered middle school in detail, as well as other peer-view articles and TV reviews to deepen my understanding of British and Chinese secondary education. While Ellen E Jones argues in her TV review of the *BBC* documentary on *Independent* that "while

British schools have ‘a culture of child-centred learning’, Chinese education was characterised as ‘authority, discipline and ruthless competition’”, I will argue that British secondary education emphasizes individuals’ development while Chinese secondary education highlights groups’ advance. Furthermore, British secondary education acts as a star in the sky to lead the way while its Chinese counterpart acts as a flashlight in hand to show the way when kids walk in the darkness.

Educational characteristics are obviously reflected by the objects of education, the students. Precisely, I will argue that British students’ behaviors show that British secondary education encourages students to be themselves and to express themselves. By contrast, Chinese students’ behaviors reveal a strong sense of responsibility to build strong groups. When Jones talks about the outcome of British education in her TV review of the *BBC* documentary, she mentions that one of the advantages of British secondary education is that “it produces lots of spirited characters”, which means that British secondary education encourages students to be themselves. During a break between classes, British students Rosie and Angelina were “in a party mode” (*BBC*), dancing accompanied with pop music and shouting out its lyric in the classroom, regardless of other students (*BBC*), which shows that British students may feel free to pursue their own happiness without concerning others’ feelings. Besides, when Aiyun Li, one of the five Chinese teachers offering Chinese education, taught her British students Confucianism that people should adjust themselves to fit in with the society, “free-spirited” (*BBC*) Angelina held an opposite opinion by arguing that “In my opinion, I think that’s wrong. I think you should be your own person not just... You should not be forced to be what people tell you to be. You should be who you are”,

which gained other students' warm applause (*BBC*). From my perspective, the casual dancing, thoughtful opinion held by Angelina, and Angelina's action to express her own ideas show that British students attach great importance to being themselves and expressing their own ideas. By contrast, Chinese students' behaviors are more "self-controlled" (Liu 32) than their British counterparts. During classes, Chinese students were seated silently, paying full attention to the teachers and making their own notes (*BBC*). While attending the self-study section, most of the Chinese students did their own homework quietly instead of disturbing their peers (*BBC*). Based on Chinese students' mannered behaviors, someone may argue that Chinese students are isolated with each other due to lack of communication among individuals, which seems to hurt the cohesion of their group. However, I will argue that the mannered behaviors show Chinese students' respect to their peers' "individual hard working" (Bush, Coleman and Si 189) and feelings, revealing their strong sense of responsibility to build a cohesive group. According to the comparison between British and Chinese students' behaviors, I will assert that British secondary education puts notions of individual advance into practice by encouraging students to become unique individuals while its Chinese counterpart develops groups by cultivating students to form cohesive groups.

Students may be mainly influenced by their teachers, and the educational characteristics are revealed even more apparently by teachers' notions of education than students' behaviors. Particularly, I will assert that British teachers emphasize service for students while their Chinese equivalents highlight service for country. When Raymond J. Bandlow talks about the organizing principle of child-centered schools in his article, he asserts that "middle grades should be a time for allowing students to grow" (70), which is

consistent to British teachers' notions that lessons should be designed for students' development. When Jay Bremner, a British Math teacher in Bohunt School, talked about his point of view on lessons, he maintained that "it's not the teacher's lesson any more, it is the students' lesson and if we, as teachers, don't develop lessons to tailor to the needs of our particular groups, it's just going to fall on deaf ears" (*BBC*), showing a strong sense of service for students. Based on Bremner's argument, I will assert that British lessons are designed for students and that British teachers attach great importance to adjusting their lessons to fulfill students' various needs. On the contrary, Chinese teachers hold a different attitude towards education. When Jun Yang, the Chinese teacher who delivered Science lessons in the *BBC* documentary, shared her point of view on Chinese education, she asserted that "Chinese education is not only delivery of the subject knowledge. Chinese education is, too, cultivating a human being. We teach them how to be sensible, responsible citizens of the country, because we serve our country" (*BBC*), emphasizing service for the motherland. Consistent to Yang's argument, Miantao Sun argues that "The essential aim of this education system reform was to promote the quality of the whole nation and produce more qualified personnel so as to realize China's socialist modernization" (314) when he discusses the education system reform taken in 1985. Usage of the phrase "realize China's socialist modernization" (Sun 314) reveals that Chinese education is designed to boost the advance of China. Based on the analysis on teachers' notions of education, I will maintain that British teachers have strong awareness of service for students, trying to provide lessons that advocate students' individual development while their Chinese counterparts highlight notions of service for the motherland, setting precise objective for groups' advance.

Equipped with respective education philosophy, British and Chinese teachers influence their students by delivering lessons. As a result, curriculum also reveals educational characteristics. Specifically, from my perspective, British English education encourages students to have their own ideas and to learn from questioning and thinking while initiative is not promoted in Chinese English education. At the beginning of English lessons, Sara Baldwin, an English teacher in Bohunt School, shared some of her points and showed the students how to deal with rhetorical problems (*BBC*). After knowing the methods, students were asked to answer questions that were set by Baldwin independently, after which they would discuss the questions and ask their English teacher for necessary helps (*BBC*).

According to the pattern of British-style English lessons, I will maintain that such “enquiry-based” (*BBC*) English lessons, where “autonomy and questioning are encouraged” (Wollaston), offer students an opportunity to come up with their own answers to the questions set by their teachers and to ask their teachers various questions, during which diverse ideas are encouraged, and students’ critical thinking skills are trained. When Manning discusses “the instructional practices and learning environment in a child-centered middle school” (157), he argues that young adolescents should be allowed to make significant academic choices and decisions (157), which is consistent to the “enquiry-based” (*BBC*) British way in teaching English that encourages students to have their own ideas. Different from its active British counterpart, the Chinese way seems to be passive. During the entire Chinese-style English lesson, Aiyun Li, the Chinese teacher who taught English grammar, kept repeating grammatical knowledge to help her students remember it (*BBC*), which is in accordance with Meng Deng and Zhenzhou Zhao’s statement that the Chinese traditional passive learning

style relies on memorization and regurgitation (808-809). Besides, students had few opportunities to ask questions or to express their own ideas (*BBC*), revealing that initiative is not encouraged in Chinese English education. Based on the scene in Chinese-style English lessons, I will argue that Chinese way in teaching English is to make students passively accept the canonical information delivered by teachers instead of gaining knowledge by questioning and thinking, which results in relative conformity of students' thoughts. According to the analysis on British and Chinese way in teaching English, I will maintain that British education inspires students to have their own ideal developmental directions by encouraging various ideas while its Chinese equivalent harmonizes students' thoughts to build cohesive groups, boosting groups' advance.

Apart from the linguistic course, educational characteristics are also reflected by Math lessons. Precisely, in my opinion, British Math education shows respect to students of different abilities while its Chinese counterpart emphasizes groups' conformity in competence. When Manning talks about the characteristics of child-centered middle schools, he argues that "Specially trained teachers provide educational experiences that address young adolescents' needs, interests, and perspectives. Similarly, educators recognize and address young adolescents' differences resulting from culture, gender, and sexual orientation" (154), which shows child-centered schools' respect to kids' individual diversity. In the *BBC* documentary, British Math education addressed students' differences resulting from competence by separating them into "classes of different abilities" (*BBC*) with about 20 students per class (*BBC*). Furthermore, students were divided into different groups to do their group work, discussed Math problems with their groupmates, and received necessary help

from their Math teacher in British-style Math lessons (*BBC*). Based on the pattern of normal British-style Math lessons, I will maintain that British Math education takes diverse individual abilities into account and encourages students to develop themselves referring to their diverse abilities by separating students into “classes of different abilities” (*BBC*) and assigning them distinct material. However, there are few similarities between British Math lessons and their Chinese equivalents. Though with a common pattern of Chinese secondary education that a teacher stood in the front of a classroom to deliver lessons, typical Chinese-style Math lessons were even harder for students to follow than English lessons owe to the fast delivery of difficult Math material (*BBC*). Besides, the number of students who attended Chinese-style Math lessons was about 50, which was approximately twice as big as a British Math class (*BBC*). When Bush, Coleman, and Si discuss the syllabus of secondary schools in China, they argue that “The main approach to teaching is to carry out the syllabus decided by the government and teachers have little right to change the curriculum” (189), which means that Chinese teachers need to stick to “the syllabus decided by the government” (Bush, Coleman and Si 189). That is to say, in my opinion, it may be hard for Chinese Math teachers to adjust their lessons to suit to students’ diverse abilities because of the large size of a class and “the syllabus decided by the government” (Bush, Coleman and Si 189). Instead, Chinese Math education sets strict requirements for all the students to reach regardless of their diversity in competence (*BBC*), forcing students to make progress in Math to meet the requirements, which may finally enable most of the students to have relatively high competence in Math. Based on the comparison between British and Chinese way in teaching Math, I will maintain that British Math education leads students to develop themselves

according to their diverse abilities while its Chinese counterpart sets strict academic requirements for all the students to improve groups' competence.

Slightly different from Math lessons, British Science education encourages students to develop themselves by emphasizing "self-discovery" (*BBC*) instead of separating students into "classes of different abilities" (*BBC*). Particularly, from my perspective, British Science education highlights notions of "self-discovery" (*BBC*) while its Chinese counterpart tries to ensure that most of the students obtain the required Science knowledge. Justifying British way in teaching Science, Manning argues in his article that one of the specific characteristics of child-centered schools should be "Provide exploratory programs (both curricular and special interest), so that young adolescents will have opportunities to discover their talents abilities and values" (154), which emphasizes that kids should be provided with chances to explore the unknown on their own. In British-style Science lessons, experimental methods were not shown directly by Vicky Gough, a Science teacher in Bohunt School (*BBC*). Instead, students divided into various groups needed to work as a team to perform experiments, to discover correct methods and to acquire Science knowledge by themselves, during which notions of Science that "getting it wrong and then correcting it, and finding the way to do it" (*BBC*) are highlighted. Furthermore, students' self-learning abilities are improved, and Science knowledge is subtly related to each other in such practical Science lessons, which is in accordance with Manning's argument about child-centered middle schools that "Place emphasis on thinking and learning how to learn, rather than focusing only on isolated and disconnected facts" (157). Based on the pattern of typical British-style Science lessons, I will maintain that "self-discovery" (*BBC*) is a method highlighted by British Science education to

help students obtain new knowledge and develop their self-learning abilities, boosting students' individual development. On the contrary, it is the Science teachers who perform experiments in Chinese-style Science lessons. Specifically, in the Chinese-style Science lessons conducted in Bohunt School, Miss Yang showed how to perform the experiments on the platform in the front of the classroom and delivered related Science knowledge directly to her students (*BBC*), which corresponds to the Chinese education pattern that a teacher stands in the front of the classroom to deliver the knowledge students are supposed to know according to "the syllabus decided by the government" (Bush, Coleman and Si 189). From my perspective, students' tasks in a Chinese-style Science lesson are to listen carefully to the teacher, to observe the experimental process, and to write down what the teacher writes on the blackboard on their notebooks. According to the pattern of Chinese-style Science lessons, I will argue that Chinese Science education enables students to have canonical Science knowledge, because both the Science knowledge and the experimental methods are shown authoritatively by the teachers, resulting in conformity of students' knowledge. Based on the analysis on British and Chinese methods in teaching Science, I will maintain that "self-discovery" (*BBC*) is virtually a useful approach to benefit students' individual development while the conformity of students' knowledge strengthens groups' cohesion, contributing to groups' advance.

Apart from the courses inside a classroom, the courses outside a classroom, like Physical Education, also reflect educational characteristics. Specifically, I will argue that British PE education offers students freedom to choose the content of their PE lessons, developing their own hobbies while its Chinese equivalent limits the content of PE lessons

due to the national examination set by the government, creating competitive atmosphere.

When Manning discusses the curriculum of child-centered middle schools (157), he maintains that “the curriculum in the child-centered middle school reflects young adolescents' interests” (155), which indicates that the child-centered education encourages students to develop themselves according to their own interests. Similarly, British-style PE lessons were optional and mainly for fun, where students were allowed to choose the sports they were interested in, fulfilling students' diverse needs in sports (*BBC*). Based on the pattern of British-style PE lessons, I will assert that British PE education highlights the development of students' diverse interests in sports by allowing them to choose the content of PE lessons. By contrast, the content of Chinese-style PE lessons is relatively fixed, and Chinese PE education may be much more competitive than its British counterpart. “In the 1990s, the communist government of China decided that physical exercise would become central to the national examination system” (*BBC*), which aims at improving students' physical health by setting mechanical requirements. As a result, Chinese PE education had an “emphasis on preparation for examinations” (Bush, Coleman and Si 189), which limited the content of PE lessons into several items that were tested in the national examination, such as 1000 meters for boys and 800 meters for girls (*BBC*). That is to say, in my opinion, Chinese-style PE lessons virtually become training for students to prepare for the national examination in Chinese secondary education instead of a period of time for students to develop their own hobbies in British secondary education. Accordingly, students needed to train hard and to compete against their peers to earn better grades in PE examinations (*BBC*), forming highly competitive atmosphere. Based on the competitive Chinese-style PE lessons, someone may

assert that Chinese PE education aims at improving individuals' competence rather than groups' competence, because it emphasizes the competition among individuals. Disagreeing with this point of view, I will argue that emphasis on individual competition is virtually a method to improve the competence of the entire group. On the one hand, individual competition may keep the students with strong competence working hard to prevent others from overtaking them. On the other hand, students fallen behind may try their best to catch up with the front runners. As a result, the ability of the entire group may be improved. According to the analysis on British and Chinese ways in teaching PE, I will maintain that British PE education offers students freedom to develop themselves while its Chinese counterpart highlights notions of competition to develop entire groups.

Based on the characteristics of British and Chinese secondary education, I will maintain that British secondary education advocates students' individual development, cultivating students to have strong initiative while its Chinese equivalent has an emphasis on groups' advance, doing well in equipping students with basic skills to solve problems. In British secondary education, students' behaviors reveal notions of self-expression while teachers' education philosophy shows an emphasis on service for students. Besides, British-style English lessons highlight concept of questioning and thinking, and Science lessons attach importance to "self-discovery" (*BBC*). Furthermore, both British-style Math and PE lessons respect students' individual diversity. By contrast, Chinese students' mannered behaviors show their responsibility to the entire group while Chinese teachers' notions of education reveal a strong sense of service for China. Besides, Chinese teachers deliver canonical knowledge systematically in a fast speed and set strict academic

requirements for all the students to ensure the conformity of students' thoughts, competence and knowledge, building cohesive groups. Furthermore, Chinese PE education highlights notions of competition. From my perspective, British education acts as a star in the sky to lead the way at night, because it encourages students to develop themselves according to their own interests while Chinese education acts as a flashlight in hand to show the way at night, because it does well in equipping students with knowledge by systematical delivery of material. In my opinion, combining British and Chinese secondary education makes a huge difference. On the one hand, the combined educational methods encourage kids to explore the unknown according to their own interests. On the other hand, the hybrid educational approaches equip children with necessary knowledge to support their exploration. In short, kids may advance better in the darkness with the help of a star to lead the way and a flashlight to show the way.

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