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A COMPARISON OF STUDENT MANAGEMENT AND SECONDARY SCHOOL ORGANIZATION IN THE PEOPLES' REPUBLIC OF CHINA, FRANCE, AND AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

School setting, scheduling, student organization and home room system among secondary schools in P.R. China, Japan, France and America are described. The impact of these variables on students' overall development is addressed. The author hopes that the cross country comparison will shed light on the exploration of better educational approaches for secondary students' intellectual and psychological development.

The increased concern for school safety and the provision of a quality education for the new millennium have magnified the discussion of turning each school into a learning community, a place where students like to be. The need to improve school climate and culture has become a consensus among educators today (Hansen & Childs, 1998; Saraon, 1996; & Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993) even though the ecological perspective of schooling has been addressed since the 1960s. According to Laten & Katz (1975), ecology refers to interaction between people and their entire environment. This concept is broadly compatible with that of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget who viewed a person's intelligence as an adaptation to a physical existence (1977). The ecological axiom is that social environments vary in ways that

affect their inhabitants (Kelly, 1971). In return, the inhabitants help to build either a healthier or more undermining environment. As a result, research on ecosystems has been conducted to investigate the characteristics of a school's environment so as to promote innovative modifications of secondary school operation and management.

Variability in the structure of each educational system, however, has created a unique ecology within schools of different countries and a hidden curriculum has developed within each ecology. Students' behavioral, mental and emotional growth is fostered in such an educational environment in addition to family and societal influences upon the young people. A school's micro-management system, including daily class schedules, and formation of a class as well as physical layout of school buildings inter-relatedly affect students' behavior. Compared with other educational establishments, secondary schools of each system operate differently in several aspects of a school's micro-management.

The purpose of this study is to address the relationship between three variables, school physical settings, student management, and governance in structuring the secondary school environment, in the countries of The Peoples' Republic of China, Japan and France. The effect of these variables upon the reconstruction of school ecology will be discussed. The strengths and limits of each system will shed light on assessing the effect of secondary schools' governance on students' intellectual and psychological development.

DEFINITIONS

School physical setting in this study refers to structure of a school's buildings and/or physical layout of classrooms and offices as well as the campus. Student management and governance refers to school schedules, home room organization and the interaction among students within the learning environment.

METHODS

This study combined interviews and field-based experiences. Interviews were conducted among three native French residents, including one who just finished one year teaching in a French middle school, two native Chinese residents, and five native Japanese residents who received elementary and secondary education in their motherlands, plus, my professional experiences in China's secondary schools.

The interview was structured with two components: 1) questions designed by the researchers and several open-ended questions. The questions included description of secondary school physical layout and organization, behavioral management

system, and nature of student-teacher relationships in each system. The open-ended questions covered strengths and limits of each system and comparison of each system with American secondary schools.

RESULTS

The Japanese and Chinese educational systems represent the typical eastern educational philosophy and practice. France, one of the larger Western European countries, has a reputation of a rigid secondary curriculum. The Japanese, Chinese, and French systems each possess distinguishing characteristics as well as some similar aspects: Academics and teachers are generally respected, and at the same time schooling management reconciles all the factors that would affect a student's academic performance. Therefore, a student's overall development is taken into consideration from the day of elementary school entrance through the high school senior year.

Japan, China and France all have a centralized educational system. The Ministry of Education in each country develops a basic framework for curriculum nationally from elementary to senior high schools. With the strict academic requirements in each system, the students, however, are less supervised by adults in their daily behaviors, which coincided with the study by McAdams (1993) when compared with their American counterparts. That is, student daily behaviors in the three countries are more self-controlled with more peer coordination, and the campus is supervised less by adults. The data collected in this study revealed characteristics in the following categories: 1) school physical setting, 2) daily schedule in a regular secondary school, and 3) student organization.

SCHOOL PHYSICAL SETTING

The ecological perspective of schooling highlights the impact that non-academic variables within a learning environment have upon students' academic achievements and affection for schooling. Johns' study (1995) revealed that, when there is lack of natural light in a windowless classroom, a student's basic hormone pattern can be upset, which may influence the students' level of concentration and participation in class activities. The physical layout of a school and management of the physical environment not only purport to suggest neat organization of the physical world, but also to function as a catalyst of motivation for learning and schooling.

In France, the school campus is fenced. Most Japanese and Chinese schools are surrounded by walls. The defending object encompassing the school campus represents the concept that school is a closed institution for the safety of minors.

Classrooms of the same grade are adjacent to each other. The higher grades are farther away from the school central office. A full time gate guard in China is hired for minimum security: in charge of opening and closing the campus gate as well as receiving guests. Students don't have lockers for their backpacks. Students in Japan and China go to their home room upon arrival to school and put the backpack in the open drawer under each desk. In France, students can put their backpacks somewhere in the cafeteria or even in the courtyard if they don't like to carry it around. Thus, hallway congestion in the early morning, between classes or at the end of the school day is not as severe in the three countries as that in most of the American schools. There is at least one large open-air area within the campus for students' relaxation at recess. The open-air playground offers students opportunities to be exposed to natural light as well as to release extra energy by playing outside for a while instead of rushing from one class to another as is the practice in the American secondary schools. In the open environment, students watch over each other, learning how to interact with each other in a safe manner.

Teachers share a central place in an office separate from classrooms. Each teacher has a working desk. If teaching materials and equipment are needed for a particular class, the teacher always gets students' help to take those to the classroom. Teachers meet students and parents, when necessary, in the office. This physical setting facilitates dialogues among teachers for lesson preparation and encourages a cooperative approach in helping a particular student. Teachers can easily meet each other during recess time and do not feel isolated as much as American high school teachers.

SCHOOL SCHEDULE

The three secondary education systems share more similarities than differences in terms of school attendance days, daily scheduling, especially the use of recess to promote student learning. Japan and China both have a school year of 240 days. Those days are used for instruction as well as some school-wide events: sports festival, cultural festival, music concerts, etc. Almost every student is involved in each event except special circumstances. Those events enable students to demonstrate their strength in different fields and consequently promote students' self-esteem. The French educational system has the shortest school year (176 days) of all the countries, even four days shorter than the 180 days in American schools (McAdams, 1993). Each school day, however, is longer. A typical day may end at 5:00 or even 5:30 p.m.. In France, students go to school also on Saturday mornings. For each absence, a written excuse is equally required to be signed by a parent or

a doctor in Japan, France and China.

A school day is normally longer in the three countries than that of the United States. Students are not as fortunate as American students to take school buses. Most students attend schools in their neighborhood. Those living away from the school have to find their own means of transportation. Schooling is a full day commitment for a student from 8:00 a.m. to five or six p.m.. In China, a 30-minute morning review session is added prior to the first period at eight o'clock. An average of 10 minutes of recess time is given to students between classes. In China and France, the recess time between every two periods in the morning and afternoon is even longer, with 20 or 25 minutes. Students are all required to exit the classroom in order to receive sunlight and relax to perform better in the next class. In France, the classrooms are locked during that time. In China, all students are required to do unified stretching-out exercises on the open playground. This longer recess time allows students to "change gears" and regain their attention for the next period. The recess time is students' "free time" to learn self control and peer supervision of behaviors. Teachers are seldom assigned to be present during that time to supervise students' behaviors except that a vice-principal who is in charge of students' behaviors school-wide patrols the playground occasionally. In some French schools, para professionals are hired to supervise the recess time.

In Japan, the lunch break is approximately 40 minutes, followed by the cleaning time. Students take turns to serve lunch to fellow students. After lunch, the same students clean up lunch waste. In France and China, students are given a 1.5 or even 2-hour lunch break. Students can either go home or purchase food in the nearby community.

In order to help students build cohesiveness in the schooling process, schools outside of America all offer students after school activities or clubs. Participation is required for Japanese freshmen students. Although it is not mandatory for Chinese and French students, the majority of them join clubs. Many teachers take a leadership role in these after-school activities.

The average instructional hours per year is only a little more in the three countries than that in American schools: 1073 hours in France, 1050 hours in Japan, 1177 in China and 1014 in America (Chalker & Haynes, 1994). Students outside of America stay in school for more hours daily. Being in school and working on school activities, academically and socially, are viewed as a student's full time responsibility. The Japanese participants indicated that those Japanese high school students who worked after school hours didn't want their teachers and/or school to know of their work. This tends to be viewed as a student's negligence of schoolwork. The low

achievers especially are embarrassed to tell about their after-school job.

Students are fully occupied with school work and school activities every day. They have little time to work for pay nor enjoy social life as much as American youths. The spirit of working diligently and taking responsibility for the assumed commitment are fostered in the process of such schooling.

STUDENT ORGANIZATION

In contrast to America, secondary students in the three countries are organized more cohesively through a homeroom system. Once students enter each level in a Japanese secondary school, they are grouped in a home room class. Each home room class is reformed yearly. One participant of this study attended one of the largest Japanese schools. It held approximately 10,000 junior high students with more than 20 classes at each grade level. There were about 40 to 45 students in each class. The students in that school were organized the same way.

Students stay with the same group of peers for all three years at each level, junior high and senior high in France and China. In Japan and China, a regular classroom belongs to each home room class. Students don't need to change classrooms during the day unless they take classes that need special facilities, such as chemistry, physics lab or music classes. Instructors are the ones who travel between classes in Japan and China. This approach reduces a lot of hallway traffic congestion and disciplinary concerns. In France, students change classes together as an entire group of the home room class. Each home room class elects a home room government committee at the beginning of each school year. The elected members are generally highly respected by the peers. They assist the home room teacher supervises peer behaviors and organize class presentation at school-wide events, i.e., sports festival, music festival. In some schools, the student officers are invited to faculty meetings regarding school-wide problems and concerns, such as recent student behavior trends, suggestions on the improvement of student behaviors school wide. The student officers would return and report to the home room students. The focus of student officers is more toward behavior and academic management than social activities. A home room classroom functions as the residential place in school for students. Staying with the same group of peers for formal class activities for three years provides teenagers less opportunity to be exposed to or to get acquainted with a greater number of students. Students clean their home room classrooms as well as bathrooms in Japan and China while custodians clean each classroom in France.

Each home room has its designated home room teacher in Japan and China or principal teacher in France, who is in charge of the home room students' overall

development. Teachers act as both instructor and counselor. They supervise home room students' overall performance academically, emotionally and socially, and counsels students regarding career choice and/or college decision at senior year. The home room teacher is always the first to contact students' parents no matter what the problems may be with a student. In some Japanese secondary schools, home room teachers are required to conduct a home visit to every home room student's house at least once a year. A home room teacher assumes dual responsibilities for a student's overall academic and behavioral performance in school (Liu & Barnhart, 1999).

MERITS AND CONCERNS OF THEIR OWN SYSTEM

The French participants all expressed their appreciation of the rigid curriculum offered in France. The rigidity promotes structure, enriched knowledge, good understanding of the importance of education in people's lives, and critical thinking skills. The solid foundation resulting from the rigidity has benefitted their studies in the American higher education. On the other hand, they prefer that the French teachers would be as lenient as American teachers and the long days of school could be a little bit shorter.

The Japanese participants had very pleasant memories of social events, such as cultural festival, sports festival. The two males enjoyed after-class clubs more than the social events. The Japanese participants all liked the concept of school uniforms. They never bothered thinking about what to wear for each school day. This reduced discriminatory attitudes among students. One participant expressed her dislike of the large number of rules in high schools, such as length of hair and bangs.

The participants all recognized the merits of each system in fostering a sense of responsibilities, feeling of belonging and cohesiveness which were cultivated among students through rigorous curriculum and home room system and club activities.

PREDICTED IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Building a positive learning community involves efforts in eclectic practice, taking the best from each instructional practice as well as approaches to student management and school physical settings in each country. Every student's overall growth as a human being should always be the priority of instructional practice, behavior management and physical setting. The stability evolving from the home room practice in the three countries in this study provides students with the sense of belonging in the school. Students who don't have a caring home often find in their home room

a connection, a sense of belonging, and/or stability, instead of needing to find acceptance and affiliation on the streets. The comparison of school physical setting and student management of the three countries allows an examination and analysis of educational philosophy and practice accordingly.

Educators' professional development is currently being intensively discussed for the provision of quality service to students. In addition, student management and supervision and physical setting of a school need to be scrutinized as an entity and changed into a system which is appropriate for adolescents' intellectual and psychological development.

Although the number of participants in this study was limited, the description of their schools was compatible with other research, and they provided detailed accounts of their daily life in secondary schools. For future studies, more interviews as well as authentic observation of the daily operation of schools in the countries would be ideal.

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