Comparative Studies on Administration in the Schools of the U.S.A. and Japan: Focusing on Personnel Management

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Summary
The Japanese educational system is very different from the American counterpart. By comparing both educational systems in the field of personnel management, I discuss the characteristics of both systems, their similarities and differences. I contend that good communication skills are crucial for administrators in both countries.

Key Words
administration, personnel management, communication skill

1. Introduction
The Japanese educational system and the U.S. educational system are very different. It is almost impossible to talk about a typical school system in the U.S.A. The U.S. educational systems are locally controlled and differ widely throughout amongst the fifty states. In addition to this fact, there are charter schools, site-based management, vouchers for private schools, and so on.

In Japan, it is much easier to talk about a typical school system even though a few new systems are appearing now. Japanese schools operate on the six–three–three plan; six years for elementary school, three years for each junior and senior high school. Nine-year compulsory education is free of charge. In principle, no matter where one lives, one can receive the compulsory education of almost the same quality based on a standardized curriculum in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter, Ministry of Education) closely supervises curriculum and textbooks, and classes with much the same content are taught throughout the country. In Japan, elementary schools through senior high schools must use textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education. This system sometimes causes much controversy, but it plays an important role in maintaining the quality of education in Japan.

In Japan, each prefecture has a board of education, and each municipality within the prefecture also has its own board of education. The boards of education play a major role in the administration of Japanese schools. Public elementary schools and junior high schools are directed and run through the municipal board of education, which comes under the authority and directional guidance of both the prefectural and the national Ministry of Education. The prefectural board of education also comes under the authority and directional guidance of the national Ministry of Education. Walko (1995) describes the
characteristics of the municipal board of education as follows:

The Japanese model of education emphasizes national standards and policies in all aspects of education, and it is the main responsibility of the local board of education to ensure that these dictates are implemented at that level. Theoretically, a small group of elected supervisors oversees every local board of education. In practice, they play almost no role in formulating and deciding educational matters, preferring to defer to the superintendent and professional bureaucrats of the local board of education. (p. 1)

In Japan, all the teachers in public schools are expected to be transferred every several years, usually without much consultation. Public elementary and junior high school teachers are to be transferred within the local school district. Public senior high school teachers are to be transferred within the prefecture. In the U.S.A., teachers do not have to follow such a system.

Teachers in the U.S.A. must work hard to acquire tenure. However, in Japan, once the teachers are officially hired after they overcome their one-year temporary employment, they can work until the retirement age of sixty with a few exceptions. In other words, Japanese teachers acquire tenure much more easily than their American counterparts.

2. Personnel Management

At first glance, the staff members of the Administrative Department in the Japanese prefectural board of education look equivalent to the school business administrators in the U.S.A. But the administrators' roles are quite different between the school business administrators in the U.S.A. and in Japan. In this section, I would like to focus on some topics concerning personnel management.

2.1 Personnel Selection.

For school business administrators in the U.S.A., personnel selection is a very challenging task. In Japan, personnel selection is also a stressful task, and the procedures are completely different. Applicants of teachers and custodians for public schools must take competitive examinations that are given once a year. In general, it is the prefectural board of education that has the responsibility of carrying out the examinations. The procedures for selection are determined and made public several months before the actual selection. The procedures and the selection criteria are rarely changed, and they are almost the same throughout the country. Therefore, each individual administrator in Japan does not have to be concerned or worried about the criteria. However, the administrators in Japan do have to work hard on the implementation of the selection due to thousands of applicants in each prefecture. Administrators have to organize a series of tests for the applicants. These tests usually include an aptitude test, academic aptitude tests on both general knowledge and the specialized subject, an essay question, an interview, and athletic ability tests in the first-stage examinations. The second-stage examinations usually include an
interview and an oral test on the specialized subject. When I took the first-stage examinations, it was in July. We had to swim 50 meters in the swimming pool and run 1,500 meters in the hottest summer afternoon. Perseverance is one of the vital factors in selection.

After these examinations, administrators make lists of the successful applicants in the order of achieved performance records. Based on the estimates of the number of new teachers needed in the next school year, they allocate the new teachers. Even though your name is on the list, you will not be hired if the administrators' estimate is wrong. I believe that this rarely happens.

As stated before, Japanese teachers in public schools have to be transferred every several years. Therefore, the administrators have to consider the balance of teachers at each school when they allocate the new teachers. New teachers cannot select their working place and the final decision is usually made very late. In my case, I got a telephone call from the principal around March 20 and I had to start working on April 1. After I got the call, I had to find an apartment and buy many things to live by myself as quickly as possible. This is not an exceptional case in Japan.

In the U.S.A., each administrator's role in the personnel selection is more crucial than that of Japan, for each school has to fill the vacant position for itself. Ray et al. (2001, p. 183) argue as follows:

- It may be better to leave a position unfilled than to fill it with an improperly trained person or a person with a poor or unrealistic attitude toward the job or the world of work in general. No effort should be spared to select competent personnel and to compensate them adequately.

In the process of the selection, an interview is the critical factor in both countries. However, in Japan, as there are usually thousands of applicants in each prefecture, it is impossible to give an exhaustive interview. On the other hand, in the U.S.A., the interviewers can take more time to acquire as much information as possible.

With regard to the selection process in the U.S.A., Seyfarth (1996, p. 37) provides us with a useful model shown in Figure 1. Talented teachers are difficult to find, but this process will help you to select the better personnel.

When you carry out the procedure of selection, the primary source of information about the selection criteria for a position is a job description or job model. When you work in the U.S.A., the job description or job model is very important. However, teachers in Japan do not have such a concept. From an idealistic viewpoint, this means teachers' workloads are limitless and they have to do anything to provide the best education for the students. On the other hand, from a realistic viewpoint, the lack of job description or job model sometimes leads to the neglect of duty. I think it is time for Japanese schools to have a job description or job model. In the past, the Japanese people had a tendency to think highly of the tacit understanding. These days, the trend is changing very rapidly. Therefore, the concept should be discussed more and propagated in Japanese schools.
2.2 Training for Teachers

After the recruitment of new teachers, training is essential for them in both countries. In the U.S.A., a teaching certificate needs to be renewed and teachers have to prepare for the next renewal. But in Japan, a teaching certificate does not have to be renewed. Once teachers get the position, they can work until their retirement age if they want to. Whenever this system is criticized in Japan, the American school system is mentioned as a better example. But a lot of teachers are against the idea and the renewal system will not be adopted in the near future.

In Japanese public schools, the first year training for newly recruited teachers goes on throughout the year. It includes the mentor system and training sessions outside of their school. More often than not, retired teachers are employed to help them to become full-fledged teachers.

In Japanese public schools, a teacher apprentice period is one year. After the one-year training sessions, they are officially hired. Administrators in Japan must supervise the beginning teachers' training sessions and help them to improve their abilities.

In the U.S.A., mentors also play an important role for new teachers. Newly recruited teachers are usually highly motivated, but feel uneasy about the new environment. Teachers are solitary in class in the sense that no other teacher helps them in class unless you are team-teaching. It is essential for American beginning teachers to have a mentor teacher and good induction programs like those of Japan. I understand many schools in the U.S.A. allot mentors to beginning teachers. However, sometimes they are not functioning as well as they should be (cf. Snowden and Gorton, 1998).

In order to help teachers improve their abilities, the administrators' role is important in
both countries. If teachers can not improve their abilities, the quality of education will deteriorate and the turnover rate will increase, as well.

2.3 Salary Structure and Evaluation

With regards to teacher turnover rate, the most crucial factor is the salary compensation. Teachers' salary is not so high in either country. In Japan, the pay scale of the teacher is usually based on academic degrees and years of experience. Teachers at public schools are not national public service personnel, but the salary scales of national public service personnel are applied correspondingly with some adjustment. This is because they are a kind of local public personnel and in principle they cannot conduct strikes. Japan has an organ called the National Personnel Authority where scheduled rates of salaries for national public service personnel are decided in order to avoid strikes conducted by public workers. The National Personnel Authority is supposed to submit the fair report on the salaries.

On the whole, the Japanese teachers belong to the middle-income group. As academic degrees and years of experience are taken into account, younger teachers are obliged to get lower salaries than experienced teachers. However, they know that if they continue to be a teacher, the salaries will increase steadily and that once they get the job, they can usually hold the position until the retirement age. That is why the younger teachers are able to accept the lower salaries.

In the U.S.A., the single-salary policies could be a hindrance to employing qualified teachers especially in the areas of math and science. But in Japan, the single-salary policies do not seem to be a hindrance to employing qualified teachers and the students' abilities in math and science are relatively high.

Many Japanese teachers think that they work equally very hard. Therefore, teachers who get paid less than other teachers will feel very discouraged. The teachers who get paid less might think that teachers who get paid more must do more. This kind of logic leads to demoralization and increases intragroup conflict. If we get paid equitably, a basis on our academic degrees and years of experience, teamwork and good interpersonal relations will flourish. However, it is true that outstanding teachers sometimes feel frustrated by getting paid equally to other average performing teachers. Therefore, it is very difficult to keep outstanding teachers in Japan, too. In my personal observation, the more outstanding they are, the more chance they will leave. As is mentioned in Seyfarth (2001, p. 105), in the U.S.A., inadequate salary was the most frequently cited reason for leaving teaching by those who had taken jobs in other fields. In Japan, the same trend is beginning to appear.

As for salaries, I would like to point out a couple of characteristics of teachers pay in Japan. They receive no compensatory pay for working extra hours and working on Sundays. Furthermore, almost all the teachers must be in charge of a club activity, for which they receive no extra pay. Many teachers who are in charge of a club do not have
experience of running it. The Japanese system assumes that a teacher is a teacher. Therefore, he or she can teach anything, including club activities. So the costs of coaching a sports club are subsidized by the teachers.

Concerning teachers’ salary schedule in the U.S.A., Lieberman (1996, p. 389) describes the situations as follows: “Teachers unions advocate single-salary schedules—paying all teachers the same salary regardless of subject. Under single-salary schedules, teachers are paid solely on the basis of their years of teaching experience and their academic credits.” However, the districts which partly adopt the merit-pay system are gradually increasing in the U.S.A. (cf. http://www.wp.mext.go.jp/jky1989/index-23.html). According to Seyfarth (1996, p. 173), “it is unlikely that the single salary schedule will disappear,” but the alternatives of the single salary schedule are being considered in many districts. They are merit pay, incentive pay, and career ladders. If your district has adopted one of them, the staff evaluations become more crucial.

Seyfarth (1996, p. 152) also points out five criteria commonly used to evaluate instructive effectiveness. They are “knowledge of subject; preparation and planning, implementing and managing instruction, student evaluation, and classroom environment.” These criteria hold good in Japanese schools.

In both countries, evaluations should not be a “witch-hunt” procedure in which the person who makes evaluations is seeking for faults in a staff member’s performance (cf. Ray et al., 2001). The evaluation method must reflect the activities which are described in the job description in the U.S.A. Japanese schools usually don’t have a job description like the American schools do. Therefore, according to a report of the board of education in Tokyo, the following factors should be considered in Japan when principals or vice-principals make evaluations: (1) ability, (2) high motivation; and (3) achievement (cf. http://www.kyoiku.metro.tokyo.jp/toukei/jinjikoka.htm).

I believe that evaluations of teachers should promote effective performance of job responsibilities. Therefore, training for teacher evaluators is also very important and the opportunities for sufficient training should be given to evaluators in both countries.

Teacher performance is an ongoing debate with no end in sight. Generally, there are formative and summative evaluation systems. Formative evaluation receives better support.

2.4 Conflict Management

Another important issue for administrators is how they should resolve a conflict when it occurs. Seyfarth (1996, p. 244) describes four typical issues which cause conflicts to arise as follows: “(1) application and interpretation of rules and policies; (2) allocation of resources and privileges; (3) duties and responsibilities of employees; and (4) assessment of employee performance.”

I believe that Americans think highly of contracts. When a conflict arises, they will rely on the contract. Therefore, it is essential to have certain effective procedures in the
contract. A grievance procedure in a contract plays a major role in resolving conflicts smoothly. And administrators must follow the procedure to solve the problem as soon as possible.

On the other hand, schools in Japan usually have no written agreement for grievance procedures. Japanese teachers think highly of working in harmony with others. Therefore, they try to solve problems informally and as inconspicuously as possible. This procedure sometimes takes a long time, as can be easily imagined. This kind of solution often makes people from abroad frustrated and even the Japanese sometimes feel irritated. Administrators' ability to solve problems as inconspicuously as possible is required in Japan.

In order to reduce the stress of the involved parties and the turnover rate, administrators in both countries should deal promptly and efficiently with conflicts.

3. Closing Remarks

In this paper, by comparing the Japanese educational system with the American counterpart in the field of personnel management, I attempt to make clear the characteristics of both systems, their similarities and differences.

In closing, I would like to point out one of the most important factors for administrators in both countries, —good communication skills. In personnel management, we deal with people. I believe lack of communication leads to misunderstanding, distrust, discontent, and so on. We are now living in a stressful society. Open, effective, and hearty communication will relieve tension and decrease misunderstanding. I believe good communicators are good administrators.

Notes

1) With regard to the conflict management, Tanaka (2002) goes into details. Therefore, I will make my description on this topic as concise as possible.

References


