

Comparative Study of International School Education and Public School Education in China

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Abstract: Nowadays, many Chinese parents are grappling with the decision of whether to choose an international school or a public school for their children. They can compare these two types of school education from various aspects. This article aims to conduct a comparative study on the differences and comparisons between international schools and public schools using comparative research methods. Indeed, there are distinct differences between international schools and public schools. International schools focus more on physical education and develop cooperation abilities. They have beautiful environments and provide good food. Public schools focus more on preparing for the college exam. Most of them have good campus environments, but the food in the canteen is not palatable according to the students. Through investigation, it can be concluded that international schools are suitable for students who desire strong teacher-student connections, engaging in numerous activities, and possessing excellent communication skills. On the other hand, public schools are more suitable for students who thrive in a group learning environment, prefer to engage in individual work, and possess strong problem-solving abilities.

Keywords: international schools, public schools, comparison

1. Introduction

Education has always been a topic of great interest to people around the world. It is no wonder that it is one of the most widely discussed topics in today's society. Different countries have different education systems, policies, and guidelines, all of which play a crucial role in nurturing young talent. China's perspective on education is very different from that of most Western countries and some Asian countries. The concepts of international schools and public schools are familiar to Chinese students, and both types of schools are good choices for the future, with different philosophies, curricula, teaching methods, and activities that can help them learn more knowledge, and prepare them for entering society.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the development of the Chinese nation has entered a new era. China is committed to improving social welfare, such as health, stable jobs, and entertainment, and achieving resource equality through certain reforms. During this period, the concept of international schools was introduced to Chinese society, but only a few Chinese people had ever heard of it. At that time, international schools were mainly responsible for providing education for foreigners, and compared to other public regular schools, international schools focused more on language courses and teaching their own cultures. At the same time, China was committed

to eliminating illiteracy, with volunteers going to rural areas to teach villagers how to read and write. Some workers studied in factories, some elderly people studied in their villages, and even children recited the new words they learned while herding livestock. China has carried out four literacy campaigns, which not only effectively reduced the illiteracy rate but also changed the lives and destinies of a generation, laying a solid foundation for China's future development.

Since the early stage of reform and opening up, the Chinese government has been improving the education system to raise the overall education level of the workforce and the education level of school-age children. It also supports the policy of full-time education in schools, which means that students no longer spend several hours studying in their spare time but properly stay in school throughout the day. The nine-year compulsory education system was implemented in 1986, ensuring that all teenagers receive education at the junior high school level or above. At this stage, education has not yet fully internationalized, and international schools still cater mainly to the children of immigrants or embassy staff.

Even now, a large proportion of students are still undergoing nine years of compulsory education, taking entrance exams for junior high school and high school, and eventually entering universities to study different subjects. It is worth noting that Chinese students are now taught the same textbooks, so all students have the same opportunity to learn the same knowledge, and then take standardized college entrance exams to determine their future direction. In the 21st century, China gradually opened up to the world, and with the upward development of the Chinese economy, people's income levels have increased significantly. More and more families no longer insist on public schools as their first choice, and instead send their children to study abroad. Applying for undergraduate programs overseas has become a popular choice [1].

This article will focus on the differences and comparisons between international schools and public schools, exploring them from four aspects: curriculum, faculty, facilities, student autonomy, and understanding the positioning of different types of schools to provide personalized development paths for students with different needs.

2. International Schools

In recent years, due to different understandings of education, international schools have gained astonishing popularity in China. While there are various types of international schools, they share some common characteristics.

2.1. Curriculum

There are many different curricula among different international schools, but most students in China are prone to take the International Baccalaureate (IB), A-level, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses as they are mostly accepted when applying for a college degree [2]. These programs have similarities. International schools typically provide language and literature courses, including English, Chinese, and other foreign languages such as Spanish, German, and French. Maths courses usually cover algebra, geometry, statistics, and calculus. For science subjects, most international schools offer biology, chemistry, physics, and Environmental Science (ESS), which combines biology and geography. In terms of humanities, international schools offer subjects like economics, psychology, philosophy, history, etc [2]. There are various options for students to choose from, allowing them to select subjects related to their future majors or their interests. The curriculum is the essence of international schools and forms the foundation of their existence. International schools advocate international understanding, mutual respect, mutual learning, and collective progress. They follow Western education philosophies, emphasizing the cultivation of students' minds, shaping their personalities, nurturing inner qualities and individuality, and valuing the holistic development of

students' physical and mental well-being, rather than solely focusing on exam scores or knowledge accumulation [3]. They encourage their students to learn and grow by leading different clubs and organizing extracurricular activities, bringing everyone on campus together rather than studying and reviewing assignments alone. They believe that everyone on campus is a valuable member striving to contribute and make the environment better. Many international schools adopt an inquiry-based learning approach. This method encourages students to explore based on their interests, think critically, and actively engage in the learning process. It promotes independent thinking and problem-solving abilities. Additionally, Physical Education (PE) classes hold an important place in the curriculum of international schools. According to a case study from Concordia International School Shanghai, international schools provide and ensure that every student has sufficient time for exercise and physical activities. In addition to regular sports, they introduce strength training (equipment), dynamic cycling, boxing, pique ball, rock climbing, Frisbee, Golf, bowling, and classic lawn games, allowing students to find their true interests and promote their health and happiness [4].

2.2. Faculty

Teachers in international schools typically come from different countries, but can be broadly categorized as Chinese teachers and foreign teachers from other countries. Foreign teachers mostly come from English-speaking countries or countries where English is a second language. They primarily teach humanities subjects such as history and economics, which tend to have a Western educational focus, as well as physics and math. Chinese teachers mainly teach subjects related to the Chinese language and also take responsibility for some science subjects [5]. Generally, compared to traditional public schools, international schools strive to maintain a lower student-to-teacher ratio and have relatively small class sizes. The benefits of small class sizes include better communication between students and between students and teachers. In a classroom with fewer students, the teacher can hear all students' viewpoints and promptly correct mistakes or explain parts that may confuse them. Additionally, teachers can provide personalized instruction based on students' weaknesses. They can quickly review topics that students are familiar with, and focus more on chapters that students find challenging.

2.3. Facilities

International schools in China typically have a well-designed campus environment. Most international schools have carefully decorated classrooms, science and computer laboratories, libraries, art studios, music rooms, and sports facilities. They usually have a football field and a basketball court for students to enjoy PE classes or hang out with friends after school. This is why most international schools have their own football, basketball, and volleyball teams; resulting in competitions between different international schools. The overall external environment of international schools is good, including gardens regularly maintained by gardeners.

Most international schools have computers, televisions, and other scientific instruments. The computers in international schools are usually prepared for Computer Science (CS) students and other subjects that require computer usage. These computers are typically connected to the school's network and equipped with necessary software, such as MuseScore, as well as internet access. Many classrooms are equipped with interactive whiteboards or projectors. These technologies enable teachers to present their PPT presentations and help students better understand the content through multimedia resources and images.

Accommodation conditions vary depending on the school, but most international schools have dormitories with four students per room. Some international schools allow students in the same grade and class to live in the same dormitory, while others mix students from different grades and classes.

This promotes cross-grade communication and friendship, and helps the younger students integrate into campus life quickly.

The food provided by international schools may vary from school to school, but most international schools have cafeteria-style dining halls that regularly provide three meals a day for students. The cafeteria usually offers a variety of dietary options to accommodate different dietary needs and preferences. This may include a vegetarian section for vegetarians and gluten-free or allergen-free options for those with allergies. In addition, the cafeterias label ingredients to prevent students with religious beliefs and dietary restrictions from consuming dishes that are not suitable for them.

2.4. Student Autonomy

Most international schools are very open. International students have a high degree of freedom. In order to dress freely, apart from not having strict uniform requirements, international students can wear clothes that represent their own style. As long as they don't violate the school rules, they can wear whatever they want. The school may have some basic dress code regulations, such as not wearing revealing clothing. International students can have ear piercings and wear earrings to class. In addition, some international schools may allow students to dye or perm their hair. However, other types of piercings are usually not allowed and tattoos are prohibited as well. From the praise of teachers for students' attire, hairstyles, and makeup, we can clearly see the school's level of tolerance. For the freedom to use electronic devices, most international schools allow the use of laptops, mobile phones, and tablets at school. Some schools may have regulations that prohibit the use of mobile phones in the classroom, but laptops and tablets can still be used to take notes and research additional information not mentioned by the teachers. In addition, during non-class time, international students are usually free to use their electronics. They can enjoy themselves by editing videos, chatting with parents and friends, and posting about their daily lives on social media. For freedom of speech in the classroom, we strongly encourage international students to share their opinions and perspectives. They are welcome to discuss with their classmates or group members to arrive at a well-considered answer. In this case, they need to respect others' opinions in order to provide a safe space for learning, and most of them follow this rule perfectly. More importantly, when teachers make mistakes, they can debate with the teacher in the classroom or if it is an open-ended question, everyone has their own interpretation. However, schools may impose restrictions on certain sensitive or controversial topics to ensure order and a conducive learning environment, which is indeed important for protecting students.

3. Public Schools

Public schools in China are educational institutions funded and operated by the government. These schools are where the majority of Chinese students attend and are responsible for providing compulsory education using national textbooks.

3.1. Curriculum

Public schools offer compulsory education to students. The curriculum in public schools includes subjects that all students must study. In primary school, the compulsory subjects are Chinese, English, Mathematics, and science. In middle school, students are required to study Chinese, English, and Mathematics. In addition to these three core courses, students will learn geography and art in seventh grade, history and biology in eighth grade, and chemistry and physics in ninth grade. They must pass exams to obtain a middle school diploma. When they complete nine-year compulsory education and enter high school, they will have to choose three additional subjects beyond the regular curriculum, known as the "xiaosanmen" (the three extra subjects). This is in preparation for the standardized

college entrance examination. Students can choose physics, chemistry, biology, history, politics, or geography based on their future majors. The main focus of public schools is to prepare students for standardized exams, which indeed helps many students enter their dream schools, and achieve their life goals. Educators and learners consider scores as an important indicator, and schools must adopt an education model that is obsessed with pursuing efficiency and skill development to maximize individual interests [6]. Therefore, teachers in public schools tend to lecture in class rather than facilitate discussions. Nevertheless, public schools still value students' growth. Moral education is emphasized, and various activities are organized to achieve this goal [7]. Students participate in extracurricular activities to gain life experience and knowledge. Schools also organize sports events, drama competitions, and other campus activities to enrich students' daily lives.

3.2. Faculty

Teachers in public schools are all Chinese. Teachers are usually required to have at least a bachelor's degree in education or a related subject. They must obtain a teaching certificate issued by the local education authority. High school teachers have higher requirements and should at least be graduates of four-year teacher-specialized colleges or normal universities [8]. From the research population, it can be seen that there are significantly more female teachers than male teachers in public schools [9]. Female teachers usually teach Chinese, English, history, and other humanities subjects, while male teachers usually teach Maths, physics, and chemistry, such as courses related to numbers and data. Due to the characteristics of the school, it is difficult to implement small-class teaching in public schools. The class sizes in Chinese public schools are relatively large. In urban areas, class sizes can range from 30 to 60 students, or even more. The average number of students per class is about 42 to 45. Due to the varying levels of students' knowledge, it is difficult for the teachers to personalize the content of each class based on the students' situations. Additionally, considering the tight curriculum, teachers usually give lectures and answer students' questions. Considering this situation, some public schools may divide students into different levels of classes based on their grades.

3.3. Facilities

The campus environment of Chinese public schools in China may vary greatly depending on the location and region. Most schools have outdoor spaces for PE classes and morning exercises. The classrooms in public schools are usually designed to accommodate a large number of students. The classrooms are typically equipped with the same type of desks and chairs, which are neatly arranged according to the required number of rows and columns. In the middle front of the classroom, there is a teacher's desk, with a blackboard or whiteboard behind it, and a touchscreen television in the middle. Currently, Internet access in Chinese primary and secondary public schools is close to 100%, and most schools have projectors and televisions for PPT presentations. Most high schools may prepare scientific experimental instruments for students who choose chemistry, physics, or biology as one of the three subjects in addition to Chinese, English, and Math. However, some secondary schools and primary schools may not have these types of equipment because the local government doesn't have enough funds to support them.

The accommodation conditions also vary. Most school dormitories have four-person dorms, six-person dorms, or even more. Most dormitories have bunk beds to save space. Dormitories usually do not have desks because students spend most of their time in the classroom. Furthermore, students in the same dorm usually come from the same class.

In recent years, the quality of food in public schools has indeed improved, but the problem of an unbalanced diet is still prominent. Students in public schools often complain about the taste of cafeteria food. Therefore, students are often picky eat and there is a relatively high rate of leftovers.

However, this is indeed unavoidable as public schools have to prepare a large amount of food for a large number of students, teachers, and staff. Some dishes may become cold during the preparation process [10].

3.4. Student Autonomy

In public schools, students have less freedom compared to international students. Public schools have more rules. In order to have the freedom to dress themselves, public schools usually do not allow students to wear their own clothes. Public schools have dress codes that dictate what students can wear, which is usually a uniform in most cases. These dress codes are in place to prevent students from comparing and showing off. They may restrict certain accessories like hats, necklaces, or bracelets. All kinds of piercings and tattoos are strictly forbidden in public schools, especially tattoos, as they represent rebellion and disobedience. Public schools don't allow students to dye or perm their hair. For schools so-called "gaokao provinces" like Henan, Jiangsu, and Anhui, may require girls to have short hair and boys to have shaved heads in order to save more time for studying. In terms of the freedom to use electronic devices, public school students are now prohibited from using them, and even bringing them to school may result in punishment, as there are now policies explicitly stating this. Public school teachers have the right to confiscate students' phones when they see them using them, and they will only return them to the students when their parents come to collect them. As for freedom of speech in the classroom, students in public schools are generally encouraged to ask questions and share their understandings. However, they may follow guidelines set by the teachers, such as raising their hands and waiting for permission to speak. Additionally, even though they are encouraged to participate in the classroom, sometimes it is not allowed to point out the teacher's mistake while they are lecturing, as it interrupts the teacher's flow of thought or slows down the pace of the class.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1. Curriculum

The curricula in international schools and public schools are different. International schools offer programs such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), A-Levels, and Advanced Placement (AP), which focus on subjects related to university education. These programs primarily introduce various concepts in the subject rather than delving into difficult knowledge. They emphasize developing students' strengths rather than remedying their weaknesses. Additionally, they encourage students to work together, help each other, and grow collectively. On the other hand, public schools teach almost the same subjects in primary and secondary education, following a nine-year compulsory education system. In high school, students can choose three additional subjects for the college entrance exam. After selecting their courses, students need to tackle challenging problems and delve deeper into the relevant knowledge. Public schools devote more effort to remedying weaknesses as they aim for higher scores in future exams. Schools also prioritize improving students' academic performance, with teachers staying up late after class to assist students. In public schools, students work on their assignments individually rather than doing reports and group projects together.

4.2. Faculty

Teachers in international schools are more diverse compared to those in public schools, with a more balanced gender ratio. Public schools primarily use Chinese as the medium of instruction, while international schools emphasize an English-based environment. Public schools focus more on knowledge input and improving grades in all subjects, while international schools prioritize activities.

International schools encourage students to highlight their strengths rather than solely focusing on improving grades in subjects they are not good at. The student-to-teacher ratio is generally higher in public schools, which is why public school classes are larger while international school classes are smaller. Therefore, public schools have teachers giving lectures, while international schools have a significant proportion of student-led discussions.

4.3. Facilities

Both international schools and public schools have good environments, but it depends on the locations of the schools. They both have places for students to exercise, but international schools may have more diverse options such as football fields and basketball courts. Nowadays, schools have televisions and projectors for playing PPT presentations. Laboratory equipment is more common in high schools and for senior students in international schools. Public schools will have larger classrooms that can accommodate more students. The accommodation arrangements in international schools and public schools are different. In international schools, students from different grades and classes live in the same dormitory, while in public schools, students from the same class live in the same room. Desks are unlikely to be present in public school dormitories as students spend most of their time in classrooms. The meals in the cafeterias of international schools seem to be better than those in public schools. However, public schools and local governments are working hard to improve the quality of food in the cafeteria.

4.4. Student Autonomy

Students in international schools have a higher degree of freedom at school. Although some schools may prohibit students from using phones during that time, students can still bring their phones to school and use them during breaks. Additionally, they can use computers and laptops to take notes in class. Most international schools allow students not to wear uniforms. They can have ear piercings, wear necklaces and bracelets. Students in public schools have a lower degree of freedom. They cannot carry electronic devices such as phones and laptops with them, and wearing uniforms is mandatory every day without any other decorations allowed. However, other types of piercings and tattoos are not allowed in both types of schools.

5. Conclusion

International schools and public schools each have their own advantages and disadvantages. International schools typically offer a more diverse environment, providing students with unique opportunities to learn about different cultures and think from different perspectives. Additionally, international schools often have smaller class sizes, which can provide students with more personalized attention and support. Students are encouraged to conduct experiments and draw their own conclusions. They regularly do group presentations and discussions. They can join clubs or write proposals to establish their own club's interests. Students in international schools have a certain level of freedom. On the other hand, these advantages can also be disadvantages. Students may spend a lot of time using electronic devices, thus wasting time on other activities, and reducing their study time. Furthermore, since teachers encourage students to self-study, the time teachers spend on lecturing will be greatly reduced, which may result in students not mastering the course content well. The tuition fees in international schools are also higher than those in public schools.

Public schools are easier for students from different parts of China to enroll in and are more affordable. They have a relatively strict management system. Students are required to participate in rigorous courses as well as work and rest. It is more suitable for students with poor self-discipline. In public schools, students can concentrate better on studying and tackling difficult subjects. The

downside of public schools is that the food may not as good, but the prices are more affordable. Additionally, students may feel stressed due to the high intensity of the school, which may lead to some psychological issues.

In conclusion, international schools are suitable for students who want more attention from teachers, enjoy participating in many activities, and are able to communicate with others. Public schools are suitable for students with poor self-discipline, who can study with a large group of people, and have strong problem-solving abilities.

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