How Other Countries “Do Discipline”

Case studies of how other countries approach student behavior suggest lessons to be shared.

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It’s a challenge for schools in every country: How to provide the right kind of discipline and create a climate that nurtures learning. This challenge may look different in different countries. A school’s disciplinary climate not only is the product of educators’ beliefs and actions, students’ beliefs and actions, and the interaction of these, but also is shaped by the legal and social context of the country.

Yet when we became involved in researching questions of school discipline and the moral authority of teachers, we were surprised at the dearth of research comparing various countries’ ideas about discipline and typical responses to challenging behaviors. We recently brought together an international group of 18 social scientists to study the relationship between school discipline and student achievement. Our study examined assessment and survey data from 49 countries that participated in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS), with in-depth case studies of Canada, Chile, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. The findings of our study were recently brought together in the report Improving Learning Environments: School Discipline and Student Achievement in Comparative Perspective (Arum & Velez, 2012).

We compared these countries in terms of how extensive their
School Discipline, Achievement, and Poverty

Exploring our international data, we found consistent evidence that discipline problems were strongly associated with lower student achievement. In addition to assessing math and science achievement, TIMSS surveys students, teachers, and administrators about their experiences in school. Our study used responses to TIMSS survey questions on discipline problems to form a picture of school discipline climates.

Principals reported on absenteeism, tardy arrivals, and skipping class among 8th graders. Teachers reported on how often their ability to teach math or science was limited by disruptive students. Students responded to questions about recent experiences of victimization in school, such as how often during the past month they’d been hit by another student, had something stolen, or been teased or called names.

It’s not just that students attending schools with notable discipline problems have both lower test scores and smaller test score gains between years. School-level and country-level differences in students’ test score performance are also strongly associated with school discipline. Countries with fewer discipline problems in their schools—such as Japan and South Korea—consistently score at the top of international comparisons of standardized math and science assessments. Nations with higher than average school discipline problems—such as the United States, Israel, and Chile—consistently show lower test score performance than one would expect given their levels of economic development.

Considering this reality, it’s important to explore why school discipline problems are more common in certain settings. Many assume it’s simply poverty that produces serious discipline struggles. We found evidence of a more complicated dynamic.

Although the socioeconomic background of a school’s population was indeed related to the level of challenging student behaviors within that school, we also found that the greater the differences among students’ backgrounds within a school, the higher the level of discipline problems. The same holds true for differences among learners within a country. That is, when there’s greater economic inequality and social distance in a school—or a nation—discipline problems occur more frequently.

Our research implies that school discipline problems in the United States have had a disparate impact in recent decades on black students—and their test scores. Black students tend to be concentrated in schools with ineffective discipline. We found that differences in test score gains between black and white students were concentrated in schools where educators reported school discipline was lax (Arum & Velez, 2012). Remarkably, in the 40 percent of schools in which educators reported more effective discipline, there was no difference in black–white test score gains. The stakes are high, then, for figuring out best practices for addressing disruptive student behaviors.

Teacher Authority and Zero Tolerance

The degree of authority that a society grants its teachers is a key factor in how that country’s schools maintain
good learning climates. Countries in which teacher authority is strongest, like Japan and Korea, tend to rely on informal ways of imposing order, such as regulating students’ dress. Legal regulations and formal means of keeping control, such as having security personnel check student IDs, are more prevalent in nations in which teacher authority is weaker (or frequently challenged), as in the United States and Israel.

In U.S. schools, formal policing is common. Sixty-eight percent of U.S. children ages 12–18 attend schools in which a security guard or police officer is present. Seventy percent of U.S. schools monitor students through security cameras, and 11 percent use metal detectors. About 25 percent of American public schools use drug-sniffing dogs, and 6 percent perform drug testing on athletes (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012).

Many U.S. schools have adopted zero tolerance policies—rigid guidelines requiring suspension or expulsion for a range of offenses, including drug possession and fighting. School suspensions, in particular, are common in the United States; 25 percent of high school students have been suspended from school (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011).

Canada also widely adopted zero tolerance in the 1990s. As research demonstrating the bias and ineffectiveness of such policies has surfaced, however, Canadian schools have slowly dismantled them. In theory, zero tolerance ensures that discipline is distributed consistently and deters students from violating rules because they fear harsh punishment. In practice, administrators report that the policies are unnecessarily harsh and disciplinary measures inconsistent. Canadian provinces have begun to adopt “progressive discipline” programs that emphasize positive school climates and opportunities for students to stay in school even when those students have breached school rules or policies.

Although most nations we studied have abolished corporal punishment, it’s still part of the discipline strategy in a few countries. Paddling is practiced in 12 percent of U.S. schools, mostly in the southern United States. More than 220,000 students received corporal punishment in 2007, with the state of Texas alone paddling 49,197 students (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

In South Korea, corporal punishment is common. In a nationally representative sample of 7th to 12th grade South Korean students in 2009, only 30 percent had never received corporal punishment (Mo & Kim, 2009). The position of teachers as respected authority figures is deeply ingrained in South Korean society. The instrument of corporal punishment is colloquially known as the “stick of love.” As the name implies, simplistic framings of corporal punishment as solely punitive may not fit the Korean context.

Cultural Norms and Laws

Although it’s important not to overgeneralize, case studies revealed that the norms and values inherent in a society affect how its schools cope with discipline. For instance, although Israeli schools value maintaining order—grades for school conduct appear on report cards, and students can be expelled if they fail to maintain good conduct—Israelis also idealize sabra culture. Sabra culture values defiant, independent, daring behavior. Such traits were considered necessary for survival in the early years of Israel’s founding, when institutions were still developing and resourceful individuals improvised solutions to daily problems.

When parents of students around the world were asked to rank which values were most important to teach children, only 15 percent of Israeli parents rated obedience as very important, a smaller percentage than almost any other nation (Li & Bond, 2000). Such idealizing of resistance to authority may conflict with maintaining order in schools. Sixty-four percent of Israeli teachers report that they feel ill-equipped to handle discipline problems and want more authority (Smith & Pniel, 2003). Additional factors potentially related to discipline in Israeli schools include the fact that Israel is an ethnically stratified
immigrant society, is surrounded by violent conflict, and has relatively high levels of socioeconomic inequality.

If sabra values may hinder teachers’ moral authority in the classroom, the norms of Confucian culture in South Korea may have the opposite effect. Traditionally, Confucian culture emphasizes hierarchical relationships and values collective needs over individual ones. Acceptance of a teacher’s authority and respect for the classroom community flow easily from Confucian thought and could lead to a more orderly school environment.

South Korea’s tradition of single-sex education may also facilitate a learning-friendly environment. In 2009, 44 percent of South Korea’s public high schools and 13 percent of its public middle schools were single-sex (serving either all boys or all girls). Some research has found fewer discipline problems in sex-segregated schools (Lee & Bryk, 1986).

Another social factor that affects discipline is the legal and regulatory climate within which a country’s schools operate. Here again, the United States is an outlier. We found that among the nine countries profiled in Improving Learning Environments, the United States had the highest levels of school-related litigation. In many countries, the notion of a student suing a school is virtually unknown. In other nations, like Canada, courts have begun to hear more school rights cases, but no more than a handful a year. In the United States in recent years, however, an average of 70 cases have reached the appellate level each year. Fifteen percent of U.S. public school teachers and 55 percent of public school administrators report that they’ve been threatened with a legal suit over a school-related matter (Arum & Preiss, 2009).

U.S. students are afforded explicit legal rights to a significantly greater extent than are students in any other country we examined. There’s a paradox here. Although students as individuals are protected in America, teacher authority and traditional forms of school discipline are constrained. U.S. teachers report that the threat of a potential lawsuit affects how they discipline students (Arum & Preiss, 2009).

**Social Controls versus Rules**

Some countries keep student behavior within guidelines by enforcing social controls and show less need for explicit rules and punishments. Others mix social and formal controls.

Japan, South Korea, and Chile use detailed dress codes. High school students in these nations have specific guidelines for the color and length of their blouses, skirts, socks, and pants. School manuals also dictate hairstyles, personal accessories, and other aspects of grooming. Students complain about the extensive restrictions, but they comply for the most part.

Japanese students and parents believe the strict dress code restrictions help maintain order, but students may also comply for extrinsic reasons. Japanese middle school teachers report on students’ dress code violations as part of the high school application process, and high school admission is competitive.

In Russia, informal social controls mix with more formal controls. Educators use peer pressure to elicit student compliance. Teachers cultivate a strong sense of classroom community; they stress that misbehaving students are “letting down the team.” Faced with the ire of their classmates, many disobedient students curb their behavior.

Russian principals play an active role in classrooms. They frequently observe student effectiveness, assess student behavior, and report their observations and assessments to government authorities. When necessary, principals partner with parents of misbehaving students in reinforcing school rules, but principals are the ultimate arbiters of discipline.

Schools in the Netherlands, in contrast, facilitate a process by which students draft a statute of students’ rights and duties. Each statute is subject to approval by student representatives, parents, teachers, and principals. Thus, the way Dutch schools respond to misbehavior varies among schools because the student-created statutes contain differing regulations. Minor infractions most commonly receive light sanctions, such as removal from class, a phone call to parents, or community service. Misbehavior that most statutes deem more serious is punishable by suspension.

**Lessons for the United States**

Our examination of how school systems in these countries face challenging student behavior—in many cases successfully—has implications for schools in the United States. We suggest that policymakers and school systems consider several broad areas of change to improve school climates in the United States. This would require reversing current reform trends.

We would expect discipline problems in the United States to be relatively high because of the nation’s level of economic inequality and diversity. But rather than addressing underlying causes of discipline problems, recent reforms have done the opposite. Education reforms have focused on organizational management, school personnel,
and curriculum. Relatively little policy attention has focused on problems associated with school discipline, and what attention has gone to this issue has often been counterproductive.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Supreme Court extended rudimentary due process rights to students, even for day-to-day disciplinary procedures. This opened broad avenues—unprecedented in scope—for students to legally challenge educators about disciplinary matters. In the 1990s, security guards and zero tolerance policies were broadly introduced into urban schools. Rather than enhancing educators’ authority, these measures eroded educators’ traditional discretion to address matters of student behavior in educationally desirable, appropriate ways.

As our findings illustrate, reducing discipline problems in schools will not likely be accomplished by relying on greater formal sanctions and stricter enforcement. For discipline to be effective, students and others need to perceive it not just as strict, but also as fair (Arum, 2003). We believe students will better internalize the rules of the school and society when educators’ moral authority is supported, as it is in countries like Japan that outperform the United States academically.

In recent decades, the moral authority of U.S. educators has been undermined by specific institutional changes. Courts, legislators, and officials—with the best intentions—put in place case law, statutes, and regulations that constrained educators’ professional discretion. Revisiting such policies and case law decisions would enable local educators to devise more appropriate disciplinary systems that would better serve students.

Educators don’t have to wait for broader regulatory changes, however. Some practices that countries like Japan and the Netherlands use in their own contexts may serve as good models. For example, Japan relies heavily on homeroom teachers to provide guidance and to support the rehabilitation of delinquent students. In the Netherlands, disciplinary policies are generated locally by teachers and principals, who actively involve student and parent representatives.

Addressing the high rates of discipline problems in U.S. schools will certainly require a shift to disciplinary techniques (both formal and informal) that have the broad support of the teachers, parents, and students themselves. For discipline to be effective, students and parents must perceive it as legitimate.

TIMSS 2003 collected data from more than 360,000 students, 25,000 teachers, and 12,000 principals. Within countries, schools were randomly sampled to ensure that they were representative of the country as a whole.

References


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