

# Exploring the Cultural Differences and Social Reasons Between People's Imagination and Reality of American Schools

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**Abstract:** Education is a core issue for countries and regions. As one of the most representative educational powerhouses in the world, the United States has received much attention for its education system. This article explores the gap between the imagination and reality of American schools and analyzes the cultural factors and social reasons behind this gap. The authors restore some misconceptions about American schools through their own educational experiences. Finally, the authors hope that the research in this paper will promote cross-cultural communication and educational reform, and better understand the real face of American schools.

**Keywords:** American School; Education; Different

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## Introduction

Education is a core issue in every country and region, and it is related to the future development and progress. Different countries and regions have different philosophies, systems and approaches to education. People often have different imaginations and expectations about education in foreign countries, and these imaginations often come from a variety of factors such as cultural differences, media influences and personal experiences. The purpose of this paper is to explore the gap between what people imagine about American schools and the reality, as well as the cultural factors and social reasons behind this gap. We analyze what outsiders imagine about American schools and how these imaginations relate to reality. At the same time, we will combine theories from cultural studies and educational psychology to explore how people's imaginations of American schools are formed and how to better convey the real image of American schools to avoid leaving unnecessary illusions or disappointments to students. Through the research in this paper, we hope to better understand the real face of American schools and promote cross-cultural communication and educational reform.

In 2014, after being "tested" by the Chinese Hanban and the American College Board, I became one of the 100 teachers who went to the United States to teach in an international school in South Carolina. After two years of immersion in American education, I learned and experienced how "different" everyone is. While we admired the American children across the ocean for their happy learning and professional education, our experts kept urging to reduce the burden on children, with textbooks getting simpler and simpler, tests getting more and more tedious, and school hours getting shorter and shorter but children sleeping later and later. In my childhood, it was hard to imagine that elementary school students would go to bed after 10 o'clock. I don't know if it's the demands of social development, or the nearly distorted values of our generation of parents, or even the high school entrance exam, perhaps there are reasons for this. I would like to restore a few misconceptions about real American school life to you.

## 1. American children just play all day long, and school time is very limited

I can answer this misconception responsibly! Sorry, you are wrong! American elementary school students can be compared to our children to describe their daily school life with the word pathetic is not overstated. Our kids have 10 minutes of recess every 40 or 45 minutes, a lunch break of about 2 hours at noon, sunshine breaks, eye exercises, etc. American elementary school students only have 20 minutes of recess a day. What is "recess"? It's a time to get out of the

classroom and go to the playground to refresh their energy. Some people may say that their school time is short. Let me do a side-by-side comparison of the length of time between our first graders and the first grade I teach in the United States as an example. My American students enter the building at 7:50 am and leave at 3:20 pm, after 20 minutes lunch time and 20 minutes of outdoor activities, they study for nearly 7 hours; if we were to take a look at our first graders, we would have 4 classes in the morning and up to 3 classes in the afternoon, each class would last 30-40 minutes, which means our children study for less than 6 hours, and that is an optimistic estimate. Educational psychologist Eugenie Cannon's theory, the "time allocation principle," states that students need to learn more efficiently by scheduling their study time, not by studying endlessly to get better grades. As a result, American students make the most of their study time, even though they have less break time.

## **2. American teachers are very relaxed and just take the children to play**

This is not entirely wrong. American teachers integrate a lot of classroom content into the game, so that children in the process of tackling one by one, to find the laws themselves, to solve problems. Imagine locking a group of over-energetic American children in a classroom for a day, and then teaching them what they've been taught. It's not easy to combine teaching and playing, and it's certainly not the case when you're an elementary school teacher in the United States. In my two years of teaching in the U.S, I have lost my voice a total of two times, for about five days each time. Being a male teacher should not have been so vulnerable, and that starts with the amount of hours worked. The American elementary school teachers are required to be in the classroom 30 minutes before the children, that is, before 7:20 p.m. In the afternoon, after the children are dismissed, the teachers have to take them to the school bus or watch them find their parents' private cars, which is called bus duty and car duty, and after this, there are weekly meetings, correcting students' homework, writing emails to parents and so on. By the time it's all over, it's probably almost 5:00 pm. The worst part is that there is a lunch duty every few days, when one of the teachers and the social worker have to watch the children during their lunch to prevent accidents. A classroom of children is already a headache, but in addition a whole grade of children who are already hungry at this time. How painful you know! Therefore, what I did during first a few weeks arrived in the U.S was to take a nap on the couch for an hour when I got back to my place, otherwise I couldn't let my spiritual energy return to its normal place. I have heard many people talk about the saying "Work hard, play harder", but I think it would be truer if I changed it to "Play hard, work harder". And again, there is an expression that says, "Did your language teacher teach you math? That's a very appropriate description of an American elementary school teacher. In American elementary schools, there is only one classroom teacher in each class, and that is what we call the classroom teacher. And I have to teach Chinese, math, science, social study, culture, etc. to the children, Seven hours a day without any interruption. Compared to other regular classroom teachers, I was lucky because we were a bilingual Chinese immersion class, and the school also allocated a 65-year-old teacher to work alongside me. Perhaps only Dewey's theory of progressive education can better explain this phenomenon. The education system is more focused on student autonomy and creativity, and students have more time for inquiry-based learning and social activities.

## **3. American children are very independent and go to school on their own**

This is definitely not true for elementary school students, even many high school students have to be school bus riders. If any parent of an elementary school student let their child get to school by themselves, then they would immediately be taken out of custody. This is where the teacher I mentioned above has to take each child after school each day to where their guardian has designated a mode of transportation. Some children take the school bus, some parents drive to pick them up, and the parents' vehicles are identified by numbers, and the teachers see the numbers and call the children so that they can get them all there accurately. There are also some children whose guardians are very busy and do not have time to pick up their children at the end of the school day, so what should we do? Don't think that there is no lunch counters in the US, they also have similar organizations called boys and girls club, of course the school will organize a school bus to take these children away first. Analyzed from the perspective of cultural studies theory, different countries and regions have different cultures and values regarding the development of children's independence and self-care skills, and cannot be simply

compared.

#### **4. American kids are free and not always regulated like our kids are**

Freedom is freedom under rules, and I personally don't feel that American children have more freedom in school. There is a picture book called "David Goes to School" that accurately describes the rules of behavior in school. It says on the title page that there is no yelling, no pushing or shoving, and no running in the hallways. Children going to the bathroom or to the cafeteria are required to keep the volume at zero, and violations of school rules are subject to being taken to the principal's office, and in serious cases the principal may contact the parents and ask them to take the child home immediately and not to attend school for 1-3 days. As for dress, my American school requires that only school uniforms can be worn. The uniforms come in white, blue, yellow and other colors, and children from wealthy families can wear different colors every day. Some low-income families have to wash and reuse their uniforms, while public school tuition is free, but each set of uniforms needs to be purchased individually, which costs \$15.

#### **5. American students grow up without taking any tests and without academic pressure**

This is probably a common perception we have. But the second week after I arrived at the school, I received an email which was to deliver the MAP test to the students on a certain afternoon. I thought it was a geography test, but after asking about it, I realized it was a standardized test in South Carolina, which the kids have been taking since kindergarten. There are three to four tests per school year, and each student is given a report card with three lines representing individual scores, district averages, and state averages, so it's easy to see where they stand at a glance. There is also a passing score line and a merit line. Students who exceed the merit line are often given special tutoring, which is of course free of charge. If you want to apply to an Ivy League college or university, there are many more tests to take than just the SAT and ACT.

The above is just the tip of the iceberg of the American school where I lived, there are more private schools with more restrictive rules and higher tuition fees. There are quite a few aspiring colleges bound high school students who only get 5 hours of sleep a day! I also sincerely hope that this article can give more readers a little guidance and bring you a realistic view of American school life!

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