

## A Comparison of American and Japanese Senior High Schools: Homerooms, Homeroom Teachers, and the Sense of a “Home Base” for Students

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The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the role of the homeroom in American and Japanese senior high schools. It is based primarily on my many years of teaching in the senior high schools of both nations. It is my contention that the differences between the two are so significant and so striking that they dwarf whatever similarities that do exist. The primary difference is that in Japan, homeroom is taken almost literally as a “home base” or even a kind of “home away from home” in a way that is simply not the case for most American students. In American high schools, the role of a “home base” is filled by the presence of student lockers and the area immediately adjacent to these lockers. Otherwise, the main role of homeroom is mostly to have a convenient and acceptable place to check student attendance and for students to listen to announcements over the school’s intercommunications system. It is thus primarily an *administrative convenience* rather than a major educational or social institution.

This very limited role contrasts sharply with Japanese homerooms. In Japan, the homeroom (or *homuruumu* in Japanese) is a gathering place of great importance. Whereas American students may spend only about thirty to forty minutes per day actually inside their homerooms, Japanese students spend virtually their entire school day inside theirs. But the great imbalance of time spent is just one of many key differences. In American high schools the one major factor that determines the actual composition of a given homeroom is often simply a student’s last name and its place in the English alphabet. By contrast, Japanese homerooms are often determined by other far more significant factors and characteristics. These may include a common course of study, participation in after-school clubs (especially sports), and the relative academic level of a certain group of students.

This sense of students identifying themselves primarily with their homerooms and homeroom teachers is emphasized and encouraged on a regular basis by school authorities. For example, during school cultural festivals and sports festivals, students are usually grouped according to their homerooms and a sense of pride and loyalty to the homeroom is actively promoted and encouraged. By contrast, similar student gatherings in the USA are meant to enforce a general sense of pride and loyalty to the school itself or toward the student body in general with little if any emphasis placed upon a strong sense of loyalty or commitment to a student’s particular homeroom.

Finally, the vastly different role of homeroom teachers in both nations is discussed. Whereas the role of homeroom teachers in the USA is rather limited in scope and responsibility, homeroom teachers in Japan have a great deal of authority and responsibility mostly unheard of in American secondary schools. A few examples of such differences will be discussed.

### 1. Introduction

In the following article I shall examine what is referred to as the homeroom (or *homuruumu* in Japanese) in both American and Japanese senior high schools. My main purpose is to highlight the often striking differences in both the concept and everyday reality of the homeroom and how these differences play themselves out in the secondary school systems of each nation.

Before beginning this task a quick word of

explanation about the form of this essay is in order. Previously I have written several articles that relied upon extensive use of secondary as well as primary sources. But in this essay I have resisted this impulse in order to rely mostly on my own primary research, namely, my own experiences in both American and Japanese high schools, first as a high school student (in the United States) and later as a full-time teacher (in both Japan and the United States). Any researcher interested in the core literature on this topic should consult the

various sources listed in the *References* section included at the end of this essay.

## 2. My academic background and teaching experience

Because my own background and experience shall serve as the primary source of information and analysis in this essay, what follows is a brief summary of my educational background and relevant teaching experience.

I attended and graduated from a large private senior high school in the state of New Jersey in the 1970's. After graduation I attended Boston University in the state of Massachusetts. After college I worked in the private sector for a couple of years before returning to the academic world in the early 1980's. I enrolled in a graduate program at the University of California working toward and earning a Master's Degree.

Shortly after receiving my M.A., I was offered a full-time teaching position at a large private senior high school in the Los Angeles area. I accepted this post on a one year basis in order to replace another teacher that had taken a one year leave of absence. This was at an all-girls senior high school called Immaculate Heart High School. I shall refer to this school henceforth simply as 'I.H.' This post began in 1987 and lasted until 1988. A few months after this one year position ended I was offered a job as an EFL teacher at a large private co-educational high school in Nagasaki prefecture on the island of Kyushu in western Japan. The English name of the school is Nagasaki Nihon University High School, or simply *Nagasaki Nichidai* in Japanese. This position lasted for three full years ending in March, 1992. As a convenient short-hand term I shall often refer to this school simply as 'N' high school. Subsequently I was offered

another three-year position at a co-ed private high school, this time in the city of Yokohama. I shall often refer to this school as 'Y' high school. After completing three years at this Yokohama school, I was offered a position at a four-year college, namely, Shonan Institute of Technology, in 1996. I have remained at S.I.T. ever since.

I should add that I have taught in several other positions that have informed my outlook and knowledge of teaching, including one year as a part-time instructor at an elite junior high school for girls in the Yokohama area, as well as two full years as a teaching assistant at the University of California when I was a graduate student. Please note, however, that in terms of the specific observations and comments I will make about secondary education and homerooms, the key schools involved are (as a student) my own senior high school in New Jersey, and secondly (as a teacher) my experience gained at 'I.H.' in Los Angeles, the 'N' senior high school in Nagasaki, and the 'Y' senior high school in Yokohama.

## 3. The "home-base" for students: homerooms, lockers and travelling sections

A major difference between American and Japanese senior high schools has to do with what I shall call the student's "home base" during a typical high school day. In order to illustrate this difference, I shall recall my own schooldays in the USA, going through a typical day when I was at my senior high school in terms of where and when I was obligated to be during the school day. Then I will contrast this experience with that of the Japanese students that I taught at a large high school in Nagasaki prefecture.

In a typical day, I would wake up rather early, at about 6:20 AM, and head off to catch a school bus which picked me up around 7:00

AM. It took about 40 minutes to reach my high school. When I arrived, the very first thing I would do is head for my locker. As lockers are not generally available at high schools in Japan, I should explain that a student locker is simply a kind of metal compartment where students place their books, coats, and other belongings. As it usually has a combination lock, each student has to remember a sequence of numbers in order to manipulate it so as to lock and unlock this compartment many times during the school day. Also, please note that students did not simply visit lockers in the morning and late afternoon. We would often return to the lockers after each and every class, taking out or putting back books, clothes, or other items.

After leaving and retrieving some books from my locker, I would head off to my first homeroom period. It is important to note that this period of time was very brief, probably not lasting more than 10 minutes. There were only two purposes for this brief period: first, for the homeroom teacher to take attendance, and secondly, to be present in case the principal or vice-principal wished to make a brief announcement over the school's audio intercommunications system (or "intercom" for short). But in general, the main purpose of homeroom was merely to take attendance.

After a bell was rung at about 8:10, I left the homeroom and headed off for my first classes with my travelling section. This section consisted of students who were all studying in a particular field of study. I recall that as a high school freshman the main dividing line was between those of us who chose to study a second foreign language and those who opted for an additional course in the natural sciences. So my day consisted of literally "travelling" from room to room and taking classes with single-subject teachers. Since most of my single-subject teachers also happened to be homeroom teachers as well, I walked to the

rooms where these teachers were already present and waiting for us to arrive. Put simply, we the students did the walking or "travelling" while the homeroom teachers generally stayed put in their homerooms.

After taking about five or six classes I would return to my homeroom at the end of the school day, usually around 2:30 P.M. or so. This second homeroom period was slightly longer than the first, lasting about 20 minutes or so. Here a second attendance was taken, and the intercom system was then utilized by the principal or vice-principal to make a series of regular announcements to the students. At about 2:50 a bell would ring signifying the end of homeroom and the regular school day. At that point I would return to my locker, retrieve my coat or jacket, and take home the books necessary to do the homework for that night. I would then head for the school buses waiting in the parking lot to return home.

#### **4. The main purpose of homeroom in the USA.**

At this juncture, two important questions about my American high school should be raised. First, upon what kind of criteria was my homeroom class actually created? The answer is a simple one: my placement in a particular homeroom was determined by nothing more than an alphabetical designation. In other words, the first letter of my last name determined which homeroom I would be assigned to. Because my last name began with the letter "S", I was placed in the "S to Z" homeroom. Thus students whose family names began with the letter "A" were slotted into homeroom number one, and so on down the line all strictly in alphabetical order. Note therefore that my placement in homeroom had absolutely nothing to do with any other possible common factor. All students who shared the same general position in the English

alphabet shared that homeroom with me. Therefore it should be no surprise that I often had very little in common with my fellow homeroom students: they may have had much better grades than I did, or much worse; they may have been taking different courses than I did, or planned on pursuing very different career ambitions than I had. They may have been athletes who disliked studying, or book loving students who hated sports, or, for that matter, students who loved both sports and books or who hated them both. Thus we had little in common other than a mere designation of the English alphabet, and obviously, that we were all students of the same graduating year attending the same high school. This also meant that even after sharing the same room with mostly the same people for four full years of high school, there were indeed many students in my homeroom that I seldom if ever talked to mainly because we didn't seem to have much in common other than the fact of our similar age and that we were students in the same school.

### **5. The locker area as the true “home base” in American high schools**

A second question that needs to be addressed involves student lockers. Were using these simple metal compartments really all that important in the daily lives of students? The answer to that question is a definite ‘yes’. The role of student lockers was (and undoubtedly continues to be) quite important. As mentioned previously, students like me returned to our lockers many times during the school day. Compare this with visits to our homerooms: it was not unusual at all that I would go inside my homeroom no more than twice a day: first, for a mere ten minutes in the early morning, and then again for a relatively short meeting of perhaps twenty minutes in the afternoon just before formal school hours came to a close.

More importantly, for many students, especially girls, the locker area was not merely a place to return and retrieve books and pens. It was also a place where they could chat with fellow students and exchange gossip about friends, boyfriends, teachers, or anyone else for that matter. This kind of socializing in the locker area was so common that faculty and other staff members who had disciplinary authority at the school were delegated to roam the hallways with the purpose of breaking up the little chat groups that would inevitably form around the lockers. These authorities would then hurry the students off to their next classes to avoid being late.

Thus it is fair to say that the locker itself serves as a sort of “home base” for the average American high school student. By contrast, the homeroom itself is of secondary importance. It is even possible to assert that the main significance of homeroom in an American high school--certainly in the minds of many students--is its close proximity to the lockers, as the lockers are usually located right outside the homeroom. I don't mean to imply that homerooms or homeroom teachers have absolutely no importance, because they certainly do. However, as should become evident by the end of this article, they are certainly far less important than their counterparts in Japanese senior high schools.

### **6. A typical day in a Japanese senior high school**

Now let's turn to a typical day in the life of a Japanese student, or more specifically, how students at my high school in Nagasaki went about their daily activities but with a special focus on the significance of homeroom. A typical student at ‘N’ high school did not need to reach school as early as I did at my high school. That's because the very first formal meeting of the day did not involve students.

That first meeting was for faculty and staff only. Virtually all of the teachers would meet for at least 10 minutes in a large room designated for the faculty. This large room is called the *shokuin-shitu* in Japanese. The length of this meeting allowed 'N' school students to enjoy a bit more time to actually reach homeroom than I did at my American high school: my homeroom period began as early as 8:00 A.M., whereas at 'N' school, the morning homeroom began at 8:30 A.M. or so, whereas the first subject classes began at about 8:40 or 8:45 A.M.

It is here that we see the first significant difference in terms of homeroom in both school systems: recall that my first goal was to reach my locker, and then head off to a very brief homeroom period. After that moment, in my case at 8:10 A.M., *I would most likely never revisit the homeroom at all until the end of the school day*. On the other hand, students at 'N' high school, who were just starting their school day, *would stay in their homerooms for most of the rest of the day*.

After the homeroom teacher took attendance and perhaps made a few brief announcements, the students at 'N' high school would simply wait in their homerooms for teachers to come visit them. Here we see the second key difference between U.S. and Japanese systems, but especially in terms of teacher and student roles: in the United States, generally speaking, it is the student, and not the teacher, who travels from class to class during the day. But in Japan, it is the teacher who must play the role of the perpetual visitor, whereas the student simply "stays home" in his or her homeroom.

A student at 'N' high school would usually stay in homeroom for most of the day. The only major exceptions might be: 1.) to visit the cafeteria during lunch period; 2.) to head for the gymnasium or ball field for a physical education class; or 3.) to visit the large faculty

room to meet and talk with teachers. But for the most part, students would spend most of their time at school within the walls of their homeroom.

At the very end of the day, there would be yet another meeting for faculty in the large teachers' room. The topics might include the upcoming *bunka-sai* (a kind of student festival), the *taiiku-sai* (a sports festival), problems with student behavior and discipline, or similar topics of discussion. After this second and final meeting of the day, homeroom teachers would head back to their homerooms to conduct the final homeroom period. However, it was a very rare event if homeroom teachers simply took attendance and left the homeroom to return home to their families. More often than not, they would need stay after school and talk with students for a significant period of time after the short attendance-check process was finished. However, these subsequent meetings did not necessarily take place inside the homeroom itself. It was more common that students would visit their homeroom teachers inside the *shokuin-shitu*.

After the last formal homeroom meeting ended and the final bell of the day was rung, it is safe to say that a clear majority of students did indeed leave the school building to board school buses and head for home. However, a significant number of students, and virtually all of the teachers, remained on the school grounds well after that final bell. The majority of students who stayed were members of various after-school clubs, but a fair number of students stayed after school for other reasons, most commonly to spend time chatting with their friends, or just waiting for friends who were participating members of an after-school club or sport.

## **7. Observation and analysis: the importance of time spent inside the homeroom**

As one reviews this account of a typical day in the lives of American and Japanese high school students, several points should become clear. First of all, it is obvious that there is a drastic difference in the amount of time students spend in homeroom. For an American student like myself, I would spend no more than thirty or forty minutes per day actually present in my homeroom class. On the other hand, my Japanese counterpart might spend a minimum of six hours actually present in homeroom, and sometimes far more than that, on a daily basis.

The very fact of this quantitative difference reminds me of something a wise old professor of mine at my undergraduate university once said. He contended that when examining many situations in life, there comes a point when a mere difference in the quantity of something can often lead to a radical difference in quality as well. In other words, even with all other factors considered as constants, a change in the amount or degree of something, even a small change, can be of great importance.

So it is with trying to measure the experience of students in radically different educational settings. The difference in time spent in homerooms is not simply quantitative. The outlook of the typical Japanese student toward his or her homeroom is dramatically altered by the simple fact that he or she spends so much time in homeroom every day, whereas his or her American counterpart spends very little time there. This difference in outlook would still be true even if all other possible factors are removed, and indeed, there are other major factors at work that do add to the qualitative difference that exists between the two systems of education. But the mere fact of spending only a half hour every day in homeroom, when compared to spending over

six hours a day, is a rather glaring fact that cannot be taken lightly.

Exactly what kind of qualitative difference is there? By far the most important one is that American students do not really view homeroom as being a genuine “home” base: it is more commonly viewed as simply a place to gather a few minutes every day so that the homeroom teacher can take attendance, make a few announcements, and have his or her students listen to a few announcements broadcast by the school authorities heard over the intercom in the homeroom itself. On the other hand, and as mentioned above, American students tend to view their travelling sections as of far greater relevance and importance in their academic and social lives. It was certainly in my travelling section that I made my best and dearest friends. But as for homeroom, it was simply not long enough to get to know the students anywhere near as well as I did my fellow students in my travelling section.

By contrast, Japanese students at ‘N’ high school looked to their homeroom for just about everything. For example, as a teacher for three years at this school I couldn’t help but notice that friendships formed among students in first year homeroom class tended to become especially deep and strong over the years. And the sheer amount of time students spent together as fellow homeroom students was, without question, a major contributing factor to the intensity and endurance of such friendships.

## **8. A second key factor: homeroom students often share a common course of study in Japan**

As mentioned above, as an American high school student the only things I truly had in common with my fellow students in homeroom was merely our place in the alphabet and, of course, that we were all

students in the same year at the same school. But students at 'N' school in Nagasaki had much more in common than those rather arbitrary factors. They also shared a common course of study. The primary course of study, both at 'N' school as well as in Japan generally, is called the *futsu-ka*. This was loosely translated by my Japanese colleagues as the "ordinary" course, though a better translation would be that of a common or *regular* course of study. Students in this class take what might best be described as a college preparatory course of subjects. However, the Nagasaki high school was large enough that it also included several other courses of study. These included a "secretarial" course, a "business" course, and an "art and design" course. What these courses all had in common was that they attempted to prepare students for certain vocations and careers and thus not strictly for possible college entrance (although it was still possible for some students, especially those in the "art and design" course, to enter a four year college). More importantly for the purposes of this essay, the students in each of these courses all had their own separate homerooms. For example, the "art and design class", called the *dezain-ka* in Japanese, all stayed in the same homeroom. Furthermore, homeroom teachers were not randomly selected but were in fact all art or design teachers themselves. This contrasts rather sharply with my American homeroom teachers in that they often had little to do with my own course of study: in fact, I never actually took any courses at all with either my first or fourth year homeroom teachers. The same was true of all my fellow American students: our homeroom teachers were experienced teachers who may or may not have taught any of the students in their homerooms.

So the very fact that students in a given homeroom at 'N' school also shared a common course of study goes a long way in explaining

the intensity of feeling that students seemed to feel for their own homerooms, i.e., especially their fellow homeroom students as well as their homeroom teachers. Also, students in different homerooms developed sometimes strikingly different reputations to the point where each homeroom had a unique "personality" all its own. For example, students in the *futsu-ka* course were pursuing, at least in theory, a college preparatory course of study, and thus it was theoretically possible (though highly unlikely) that a *futsu-ka* student might enter one of Japan's elite universities such as Tokyo University or Waseda University. But students in the "secretarial" class (the *hisho-ka* in Japanese) did not have such dreams. They knew that they would not be entering such elite universities and, in most cases, would not be entering any four-year colleges at all. Thus they didn't have to spend an enormous amount of time studying for or worrying about taking difficult college entrance exams like their fellow students in the *futsu-ka*. But they also knew that they were receiving a practical education for real jobs after high school, or that they were destined to enter one of the two-year women's colleges in Japan known as the *tan-dai*. In other words, the outlook of a typical *hi-sho-ka* student was often much different from that of a *futsu-ka* student. This particular outlook was much intensified by sharing a homeroom, day after day, by students with similar career goals and aspirations. Because of such additional factors, the homerooms of each separate course took on an identity all their own. In the case of the secretarial course, students had a reputation for being much happier and carefree than their counterparts in the *futsu-ka* course. This meant that a teacher like me who entered the homeroom of the *hi-sho-ka* sensed immediately that this was a different class with a much different atmosphere than the other courses like the *futsu-ka*. The secretarial

students were often noisy and rambunctious but also rather happy, carefree, and generally very kind students. They also showed a rather fierce loyalty to their homeroom teachers as well, something which would be considered rather odd in an American high school, since many students might never even take a course with their homeroom teachers and thus really wouldn't know from first-hand experience how well such people could teach in a single subject classroom.

### 9. “Tracking” *futsu-ka* students and separating them into different homerooms based upon academic level

This same sense of separateness that the *hi-sho-ka* exhibited also existed in the homerooms of the other more specialized classes as well. But what about the much larger *futsu-ka*? Were there any differences in their homerooms other than where their names placed in the Japanese language? Indeed there were. At both ‘N’ and ‘Y’ high schools, *futsu-ka* students were also separated according to academic ability and academic potential. This “tracking” of students according to academic performance certainly existed and all the teachers knew about it, but a pretense of fairness and academic equality was still maintained at both schools. Perhaps the most obvious and somewhat humorous example of both the reality of tracking as well as the token attempt to hide it concerned the numbering of the homerooms in the *futsu-ka* course. At ‘Y’ school, the very best academic students were separated into an elite group known as the *toku-shin*. Though they were indeed categorized as the best and the brightest of their first year class, they were given a numerical designation that belied their lofty status. So instead of receiving a “1-1” designation (i.e., the number one homeroom in the first year class) students in the *toku-shin*

were given the very last sequential numbers in their class, namely, 1-8, 1-9, and 1-10. Thus the thinly veiled fiction that the academically gifted were being given no special designation or treatment apart from their less academically gifted fellows could be maintained, if only in this rather token and superficial way.

### 10. The school authorities encourage homeroom pride and school spirit: yet another key difference between Japanese and American high schools

It should be clear from this discussion that students at both ‘N’ school and ‘Y’ school developed a strong sense of identification with their homerooms, their homeroom students, and their homeroom teachers. This sense of identification and sometimes rather strong commitment was encouraged by the school authorities in many ways. Obvious examples included the annual cultural festival and the annual sports festival. Certainly at ‘N’ school’s cultural festival, each special project, game, or cultural event was generally presented according to each homeroom, although it is also true that individual clubs at the school had their own special projects to display as well. And I also recall that many of the games and events that occurred during the sports festival were arranged according to homerooms and homeroom numbers. Once again, I recall no such similar attempts to encourage a kind of “homeroom spirit” at my American high school. For one, there was no “cultural festival” at my high school, though perhaps the rough equivalent that did take place was a kind of “open house” that was held every year. But this open house was a much more modest affair, usually consisting of just the school clubs and their representatives attempting to recruit new student members to their clubs. Instead, what my American high school did have were “pep rallies”. These rallies were



meetings of the entire student body, usually intended as a show of support for one of the school's elite sports teams about to play an important game. The actual purpose was primarily to encourage a strong sense of commitment and loyalty to the high school itself as well as to the particular sports team involved. These rallies were all held in the school's very large gymnasium. But other than the mere seating arrangements at these rallies, no attempt was ever made to encourage any kind of homeroom loyalty or camaraderie: it was simply the school itself that was the focus of such feelings.

### **11. The role of the homeroom teacher: a truly major difference in these school systems**

Now I shall turn from the role of the homeroom in the daily lives of American and Japanese senior high school students in order to take a brief look at the strikingly different roles that homeroom teachers play in the secondary school systems of both countries. As a starting point, let me discuss my own teaching background at the senior high school in Los Angeles as it relates to teaching in general and homeroom teaching in particular. As a new full-time teacher at the school, I was not given a homeroom assignment. This was not unusual as homeroom responsibilities were normally given only to very experienced teachers at the school. Most new teachers were assigned other duties, especially club, sports, or other after-school activities. My particular assignment was to moderate the debate team at the school. I mention this experience because this particular after-school task turned out to be very time consuming, complicated, and at times, downright exhausting. And it certainly was far more exhausting than that of my

friends who were homeroom teachers. As proof, let's compare daily schedules: the last class of the day ended about 2:40 P.M., with a ten minute homeroom scheduled for about 2:50 P.M. As soon as the 3:00 P.M. bell rang, homeroom teachers could be seen hurrying out of the school building just minutes behind their students who were heading for school buses. Generally speaking, homeroom teachers were in their cars and driving out the school parking lot no later than 3:10 P.M. By contrast, my fellow club moderators and sports coaches and I stayed at the school well after that 3:00 bell. If I was fortunate, that day's club activity might end about 4:30 P.M.; if not, I would have to stay until 5 or 6 o'clock in the evening. In any case, my friends and colleagues who were homeroom teachers were already home and enjoying an early dinner about the time I was just leaving the school for home.

I mention this recollection for two reasons: the first is to show the marked difference in the amount of time various high school teachers spend within the school building or the school grounds in a typical American high school: it is the homeroom teacher, and certainly not the sports coaches or club moderators, that often manage to escape the confines of the school building at the earliest possible moment.

The second reason should be obvious to anyone familiar with the job of a Japanese homeroom teacher. In Japan, only a homeroom teacher determined to lose his or her job would ever leave the school building as early as 3:00 P.M. on a daily basis. In general, most teachers at 'N' high school stayed at least until 4:30 P.M. Homeroom teachers usually stayed longer, sometimes much longer. After the late afternoon teachers meeting ended, teachers would head off to their homerooms around 3:20 P.M., having a formal homeroom of about ten minutes. However, and more often than not, homeroom teachers would linger a while longer in their homerooms taking care of a

variety of tasks. The first one was to supervise the students assigned to cleaning activities. Although all students were required to chip in and help clean in some way, there might be a few students--especially those who were disciplinary problems—who were assigned explicit cleaning chores for that day. Aside from supervising this “cleaning time”, homeroom teachers might also talk with students either in the homeroom or, more commonly, back in the large faculty room. Once homeroom teachers eventually returned to the *shokuin-shitu* they would do a variety of things. These duties might include making up tests or grading student papers and tests, speaking with and advising students who may be especially concerned about their future lives, or counseling those students who have special problems. In more serious cases the homeroom teacher might need to speak personally with parents of a troubled student, and perhaps consult with the single-subject teachers of that child to determine what sort of disciplinary action, if any, should be taken. It was only after performing this array of tasks that a typical homeroom teacher would decide to begin his or her journey home, usually doing so between 4:45 and 7:00 P.M.

It is thus rather easy to see that the life of a Japanese homeroom teacher is a much more demanding one than that of his American counterpart, especially when one is examining the sheer amount of time he or she must spend inside the school building.

## 12. Contrasting how teachers are assigned to their homeroom classes

I must also add that the way homeroom teachers are assigned to each class, and how many years they spend with each class, is yet another strikingly different element in the two educational systems. In the American high schools I have discussed thus far, homeroom

teachers were generally assigned to a *particular year and not to a particular homeroom class*. For example, in my own first year of high school, my homeroom teacher was a woman who was considered to be a first year homeroom teacher. So in my second year of high school, this same woman remained as a first year homeroom teacher to a fresh batch of first year students. In fact, I rarely saw her much ever again, as I never took any classes with her at all. The same was pretty much true of my second, third, and fourth year homeroom teachers. In general, the most experienced and trusted teachers were assigned to the homerooms of third and fourth year students, and thus they *remained in those two classes only*. In other words, it was highly unlikely that an American student would ever have the same homeroom teacher twice in four years.

The opposite situation prevailed in both of my Japanese high schools. In general, a homeroom teacher is assigned a particular homeroom class in the students' first year, and that same teacher must stay with that same class for the duration, *i.e., for all three years of senior high school*. Needless to say, this is yet another reason why the relationship between homeroom teacher and homeroom students tends to be much more intense than that of their American counterparts.

I should note that in Japan it is possible for a homeroom teacher to be re-assigned to a different homeroom before the three year period is completed. For example, I recall that there was a particularly troublesome class at “Y” school in which a new homeroom teacher was assigned in just the second year. My sense was that this was an attempt by the school's administration to see if this rather difficult class might react better to a new teacher. And there might be other reasons why teachers might be changed, including the illness or sudden retirement of a homeroom teacher. But

such instances were rare exceptions: generally speaking, homeroom teachers in Japan stay with the very same homeroom students for all three years of senior high school.

But the responsibilities and authority of the Japanese homeroom teacher entail much more than simply putting in extra time within the confines of the school building, or merely putting in more years as the homeroom teacher of a particular class. To see why, I shall return to a brief examination of the life of his or her American counterpart.

### **13. The power and authority of homeroom teachers: USA vs. Japan**

An American homeroom teacher's primary responsibility is to ensure two things: one, that students arrive at school on time in the morning, and two, that the number of student absences is kept to a minimum. These are the teacher's two most explicit formal tasks. In addition to this, the teacher should also ensure that students come to school properly dressed, that they are in good health, and that they are generally prepared for that day's classes. However, other than these formal duties, homeroom teachers are fairly limited in their formal roles and responsibilities. Generally speaking, modern public and private American high schools hire an array of specialists who are ready to take on the specialized needs and troubles of students. For example, if a homeroom teacher notices that a student is upset or crying excessively, he or she may try to comfort or advise that student. However, if the problem persists, that same homeroom teacher will simply refer that student to the school psychologist. At I.H. high school, a professional psychologist was employed to deal with such matters. This psychologist held a doctorate in adolescent psychology and was very experienced in advising and counseling troubled teenage students.

The same situation existed in terms of older students who were trying to decide which colleges to apply to. The homeroom teacher might try to give some informal advice based on his or her own collegiate experiences, but the teacher would ultimately refer such a student to the school's full-time guidance counselor for detailed help and information. This counselor had an office to himself and could give students plenty of information about colleges and universities, including information that the student's homeroom teacher simply would not have knowledge of or easy access to. And if a student is having serious problems in terms of discipline, absences, or lateness, the chances are that the homeroom teacher would simply refer the student to the administrator responsible for dealing with student behavior. At I.H., this person would be either the dean of students or the vice-principal.

Thus it is rather clear that the authority and responsibilities of the American homeroom teacher are rather limited in range and scope. Now compare it with his or her Japanese counterpart. Just about all of the specialized functions colonized by educational specialists in the U.S.A. are still reserved by the homeroom teacher in Japan. It is fair to say that the typical Japanese homeroom teacher is more like a substitute father or mother than just a mere attendance taker. He or she has a truly remarkable amount of power and authority especially when compared to his or her counterparts in the United States. If anyone doubts this, consider the following two examples. At my high school in Yokohama, students in their third and final year of study completed all regular classes around the end of January. But the graduation ceremony wasn't to be held until March. Thus there was a kind of limbo period in which students no longer had to take classes or to be inside the school building on a regular basis. During this time

students are supposed to be busy taking college entrance exams and looking for employment. However, these young men and women were still considered to be high school students and were therefore expected to comport themselves as such. This meant that they had to adhere to certain dress codes as well as to appropriate levels of behavior. To insure this, third year homeroom teachers were obliged to spend some hours everyday going out in the town adjacent to the school to make sure students were not engaged in unacceptable or illegal conduct. Thus they would roam the train stations, *pachinko* parlors, coffee shops, and other places that students might be tempted to visit and to discipline those students if they were found to be engaged in unacceptable conduct.

I am confident that any experienced American homeroom teacher who read the preceding description did so with some surprise or astonishment. This is because for most high schools in the USA, the main authority of a homeroom teacher lies almost exclusively *inside the school building itself*. Therefore, if a student is found inside the school building wearing unacceptable clothing or sneaking a puff on a cigarette, a teacher would have every right to admonish the student on the spot. Such behavior might also be referred to the person in charge of discipline at the school, usually the vice-principal or the dean of students. However, the idea of homeroom teachers *going well outside the school building* to search for misbehaving students, especially such students who were not actually required to be at school during that time, would be considered very controversial at best, and at worst, simply unacceptable. The reason is that in American senior high schools, what students do outside of school is generally considered to be their own private business, especially if they are not actually required to be inside the school grounds at that particular

moment in time. If students are indeed breaking the law, then the proper authority to deal with such misbehavior is the local police department, and certainly not wandering homeroom teachers. Once again, there are possible exceptions, especially if a teacher just happens to see a student do something especially bad, for example, trying to rob or molest someone far from school grounds, but almost certainly he or she would not be formally assigned for that purpose on a regular basis. And even in this extreme instance, that teacher would probably telephone the police first before trying to get involved in such a serious incident.

There is another instance that I recall quite clearly which again illustrates the clear differences in the authority and role of homeroom teachers in both countries. This second incident involved one of my best friends on the faculty of 'N' high school, an English teacher who was in charge of a homeroom. One day I noticed that he had been absent from the faculty room for an extended period of time. I asked him what had happened. He told me that a student in his homeroom had been caught by the local police smoking cigarettes. Bear in mind that unlike in the first example, where students were no longer required to be inside the school building, in this second case, this student clearly needed to be inside the school and taking classes. However, also note that the area in which he was found was clearly not on the immediate school grounds. It was, in fact, located in what might be called a gray area situated about halfway between the immediate school grounds and that of the local town that was adjacent to the school. In other words, the student was clearly not in the school building though he should have been, and the homeroom period had already come and gone as it was already late morning.

But here is the key point: after the student

was arrested and brought to the local police station, *the very first person the police decided to call was the school's homeroom teacher!* Once again, this should be a fairly astonishing story for American homeroom teachers to contemplate. It is quite safe to say that under similar circumstances in the United States, the chance that the police would call a homeroom teacher first would be extremely unlikely. The odds are excellent that a police officer would not call the school at all, but would instead call the student's parents to see if they could come to the station and pick up the student. Only if neither parent could be located would the police then call the high school, and even then, it would surely be a call to either the vice-principal or the principal's office. It would be highly unlikely that the police would inform the homeroom teacher at all. What would most likely happen is that the vice-principal would have to contact the homeroom teacher just to keep him informed about the situation. And my guess is that the school would need to be informed by the police but only because the student should have been on school grounds at that moment of the day, and that the area where the student was found was fairly close to the school.

As in the first example, we see how Japanese homeroom teachers are given far greater authority as official and unofficial guardians of students in their homerooms. About the only time I can think of where American homeroom teachers would have this kind of clear authority and responsibility would be on school trips or what my Japanese colleagues liked to call school excursions. Indeed, when American students travel, whether by bus, train, or airplane, they might indeed travel by homeroom number---although there is also an equal chance that they would be categorized by travelling sections as well. But at least in this rare instance, American homeroom teachers might wield the kind of

parental authority that Japanese homeroom teachers simply take for granted.

#### 14. Conclusion

I hope that my discussion of the role of homerooms and homeroom teachers in American and Japanese senior high schools will prove helpful. It is intended for professional researchers, teachers abroad who are interested in teaching in Japan, as well as people with a general interest in the topic of comparative education.

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