

Comparative Study of Preschool Education Between China and the UK: Differences in Models, Cultural Logic, and Integration Paths

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Abstract. With the deepening of global educational reforms, preschool education, as the foundational stage for an individual's lifelong development, has been receiving increasing attention concerning its quality and models. China and the United Kingdom have developed locally distinctive educational models and practice systems in preschool education. This study aims to systematically compare preschool education in China and the UK in terms of policy orientation, curriculum implementation, teacher roles, and home-school collaboration, analyze the underlying cultural and social factors, and explore their impact on the holistic development of children. The research finds that Chinese preschool education emphasizes collectivism and knowledge transmission, focusing on standardization and uniformity; in contrast, the UK places more emphasis on individual differences and play-oriented approaches, advocating child-centered learning and autonomous exploration. Based on these findings, this paper proposes integrated recommendations to promote the comprehensive development of preschool education, including curriculum integration, teacher professional development, and home-school collaboration, to provide a reference for preschool education reform in China.

Keywords: Preschool Education Models, China-UK Comparison, Child Development, Curriculum System, Teacher Roles

1. Introduction

Education is one of the strong pillars that make the continuation and growth of the human society, and preschool education, being the first in the whole educational chain, cannot be underestimated. Early childhood care and education is one of the priority fields for UNESCO towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030, titled Education [1]. In the modern globalized world, the aspects of preschool schooling in various cultural settings not only come into contact but also educate each other, creating a hybrid educative environment. As nations possessing long-term cultural roots and education structures in the East and the West, respectively, the development patterns of preschool education and model options that were chosen by China and the UK

significantly represent the values of the society, the education philosophy, and the perception of children in the countries.

Preschool education in China has been recorded to have been growing in a speedy manner since the turn of the 21st century. Due to the launch of the "National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010-2020) and a set of consequent policies, the new epoch has shifted its priorities to preschool education that is universal, inclusive, safe, and high-quality [2]. Nonetheless, with this growth, certain problems have cropped up, including the need to increase intrinsic quality, transcend the culture of Primary, and encourage the development of children in an all-encompassing way that has been embedded as a major thorn in the flesh of preschool education reform in China. Simultaneously, the United Kingdom, which has a long history of child-oriented education and a constantly rising education system in the field of early childhood education, also has a positive image on the international level. Its system, which revolves around the focus of the legalization of the Statutory Framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage, particularly the legalization of play as the primary form of learning among children, offers a significant source of inspiration to other countries across the globe [3].

This study is not devoted to the mere evaluation of the negative and positive aspects of both models, but it attempts to acquire a profound knowledge of the logic and reasons of the two models through the systematic comparative analysis. In particular, the paper shall be based on four main dimensions, which include policy systems, curriculum practice, teacher-student interaction, and home-school relationships, to identify the similarities and differences between Chinese and British preschool education systems. The significance of the comparative study is twofold technically, as it allows further elaboration on the nature and role of preschool education in a cross-cultural context; previously, it may allow factoring in more internationally informed and practical ideas on how optimally to design policy, structure the curriculum, and train teachers in the Chinese preschool system. The purpose of the ultimate goal is to discover the way of preschool education that is planted on the Chinese cultural soil with advanced international experiences, and is, therefore, more efficient because the alternative will be to support the comprehensive and individual development of each of the children.

2. Early childhood education model and practice in China

2.1. Inclusive development system

Policies and local exploration have enabled the early childhood education in China to develop a model in development based on inclusiveness, and there are parallel developments in moral education and knowledge education. Besides showing the institutional benefits, the model also indicates the importance of transformation in comparison with the early foundational education framework within the UK. In terms of the policy guarantees, China has engaged in four stages of the Early Children Education Action Plan and enforcement of the Preschool Education Law, which constituted a network of public and inclusive services in the urban and rural regions. By 2023, up to 86.2 percent of kindergartens in China were inclusive, and the gross enrollment rate of the three years of preschool was 91.1 percent, which successfully responds to the social problems of the Chinese, such as the inability to enroll and the high costs [4]. This centrally planned allocation of preschool education funds has encouraged the allocation of preschool education funds to the central, western, and rural areas of China, greatly reducing regional educational inequalities and making sure every child has a right to education, actually achieving universal early care and education [4].

2.2. Special benefits and local practice study

Practically, another special pathway to early childhood development has also been formed through preschool education in China. Through a well-developed system of knowledge enlightenment, children will gradually be exposed to simple classes at the primary school level, and this will enable an easier transition between the preschool system and the elementary school. This is an organized teaching pattern that develops cognitive skills among children at an early age and provides a strong base for further admission of the child in primary school [5]. Simultaneously, China has great highlights because of the intense penetration of local education. Kindergartens have blended the best of the traditional Chinese culture with the moral education experience by exposing the children to the traditional festivals and the transmission of the folk games, and enabling the children to form cultural identity and national belongingness. Balanced regional educational resources regarding promotion have also realized great results. With county-controlled school placements and specific help, the hardware facilities and the quality of teachers at rural kindergartens have increased significantly, slowly bridging the quality gap between city and country preschool education [6]. The fact that the teaching workforce is constantly empowered is also remarkable. The percentage of principals who have associate degrees or higher and full-time teachers has hit 93.1% [7]. The adherence to the National Training Program for Preschool Teachers has also increased the level of professional skills within the field of education and care during early childhood, and the talent support of the high-quality development of preschool education.

2.3. Transformation needs and practical dilemmas from a comparative perspective

Some kindergartens have also achieved initial results in gamified curriculum teaching. By designing certain game activities, knowledge is integrated into play, which not only enhances children's interest in learning but also consolidates cognitive outcomes, showing significant effects on child development and realizing preliminary exploration of learning through play. China's preschool education model is shifting from extensive expansion to the improvement of internal quality. The coverage of inclusive kindergartens is increasing year by year, but issues such as uneven school quality and unequal supply of high-quality resources are becoming prominent, with significant imbalances in resource allocation across regions. Although the trend of 'primary school-oriented' preschool education has been explicitly prohibited by policy, it still exists implicitly in some areas, driven by competition for school admissions and parental anxiety about education, which goes against the physical and mental development of young children, placing governance in multiple practical dilemmas [8]. The current quality evaluation system is insufficient, teacher capability varies significantly, and salary protection is inadequate, becoming obstacles that need to be overcome in the transformation process, restricting the simultaneous improvement of education quality and educational equity.

3. Educate and practice early childhood education in the UK

3.1. Policy framework and educational philosophy

As a national curriculum standard in the UK, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which deals with developing children aged 0 to 5, aims to offer individualized support to each child in terms of systematic observation and assessment and has created a rigid professional qualification certification framework to ensure professional proficiency of teachers [9]. This paradigm seeks to put in place the

respect and pursuit of the act of seeking knowledge in the educational practice [10]. It has, however, been researched that in the case of introducing internationally accepted forms of free teaching methods and curriculum systems into other cultural backgrounds, mechanical copying could face opposition since it does not go hand in hand with the current values held by the respective countries in the form of education, like the Soviet or the Confucian tradition [11]. In the UK, even though the EYFS framework is fairly established, practice has certain challenges, which include high expectations on academic performance in society, a lack of knowledge on the role of games in meeting the goals of the curriculum, and limited teacher training [12].

3.2. Structure and the design of activities in the course

Regarding the implementation of the curriculum, EYFS focuses on the complex development of children based on integrated and gamified methods. Using the example of mathematics education, early childhood education in the UK is concerned with the development of mathematical abilities in children in real-life contexts, and the expansion of teaching forms and methods is widely used, as opposed to the traditionally used pedagogy of teaching [13]. Not only does gamified curriculum design effectively increase the participation interest of the children in various activities (labor education), but it also increases their feeling of responsibility, capability of cooperation, and other social attributes.

practice. Simultaneously, it is also helpful in inspiring teachers to be innovative in their teaching approaches [14]. It is in this game-based curriculum model that children are given space to construct knowledge through essential exploration, and the teachers are given the roles of being supporters and guides, where they are able to give reference to social learning of children through essential situational creation, language response, and behavior modeling [15]. Families and kindergarten have been seen as the key to the ever-increasing social education. Teachers guide parents to center on more profound capabilities other than obedience by using actions like training parents and visiting their homes as one of the ways of consolidating effectiveness in family engagement, such as emotional management and interaction aptitudes [15].

3.3. Teacher support and parent participation

The UK preschool education system attaches great importance to the mechanism construction of teacher professional development and home-school co-education. The implementation of the EYFS framework not only relies on policy texts but also on a professional team that has received systematic training. Its qualification certification and continuous professional development system provide guarantees for the quality of education [9]. At the same time, incorporating the EYFS principle throughout the entire early education stage and even the lower grades of primary school is seen as an important measure to improve the overall quality of education and optimize children's development outcomes [16]. At the level of family participation, the UK emphasizes the establishment of equal and two-way cooperative relationships, encouraging parents not only to be recipients of education but also partners in joint decision-making and implementation. This deeply integrated home-school collaboration model is in line with the educational philosophy in the UK that emphasizes individual differences and supports children's independent development, jointly building an educational ecosystem that supports children's comprehensive growth.

4. Practical suggestions for the comprehensive development of preschool education

4.1. Comparative analysis

Compared with the UK's child-centered and exploratory play-based learning system, there is still a prominent problem of excessive learning orientation in China's preschool education. Although the "Preschool Education Law" explicitly prohibits elementary school-oriented behavior, some kindergartens still have hidden knowledge indoctrination phenomena, with about 2/3 of kindergartens showing varying degrees of elementary school-oriented tendencies, and even conducting subject teaching in the name of comprehensive quality and artistic cell expansion through external training institutions [7]. Behind this tendency is the driving force of parental parenting anxiety, where a singular social evaluation system leads parents to excessively pursue winning at the starting line, simplifying early childhood education into a linear process of knowledge transmission.

The deeper dilemma lies in the formal implementation of gamified teaching. Some teachers, due to the lack of systematic game teaching training, fail to truly understand the educational value of games and equate them with pure entertainment, making it difficult to achieve the organic integration of knowledge transmission and independent exploration. This creates a significant gap with the core connotation of "learning by playing" in the UK, which emphasizes children's active exploration [5]. The deviation between this concept and practice has led to shortcomings in cultivating children's creativity and exploratory spirit in China's preschool education, and has provided a clear direction for drawing on international advanced experience and promoting the transformation of education models.

4.2. Suggestions

The deeper dilemma lies in the formal implementation of gamified teaching. This has led to shortcomings in cultivating children's creativity and exploratory spirit in China's preschool education, and also provides a clear direction for drawing on international advanced experience and promoting the transformation of education models. The gap between this concept and practice not only reflects the urgent need for reform in China's preschool education amidst structural difficulties, but also provides a practical basis for actively drawing on international experiences such as the UK's EYFS framework.

4.2.1. Promote the localization and integration of EYFS core concepts

The paper draws inspiration from the core framework of the EYFS framework in the UK, which is called 'Play to Learn', and combines it with China's preschool education model to construct a dual-oriented curriculum system of 'Game+Development'. Ensure the sustainable development of the seven major development areas and four development principles for young children, integrate knowledge enlightenment into natural exploration and life practice games, such as shaping children's understanding of traditional Chinese culture through "traditional festival workshops" games, and use "outdoor building challenges" to cultivate children's critical thinking and cooperation abilities, avoiding gamification and teaching formalism. Based on the development of non-preschool education in China, it should appropriately draw on the "active learning" concept of EYFS, reduce the indoctrination of preconceived knowledge in the curriculum, and give children autonomy in play, allowing them to achieve the coordinated development of cognition and ability through

independent exploration [17]. At the same time, retaining the advantages of China's preschool education development model, achieving an organic balance between "learning" and "playing" through gamification design, and solving the dual dilemma of "primary schoolization" and "entertainment".

4.2.2. Establish a scientifically diverse evaluation and co-education mechanism

Referring to the EYFS scale evaluation method in the UK, a personalized evaluation system covering dimensions such as physical development, emotional and social development, and cognitive development of young children is constructed. The development trajectory is dynamically tracked through observation and recording, work analysis, and other methods, replacing a single knowledge assessment [17]. In response to parents' anxiety about early childhood education, kindergartens need to establish an EYFS-style home communication platform. Through forms such as observation manuals for children's growth and gamified development sharing sessions, they can convey scientific parenting concepts to parents, achieve home-school co-education, showcase the comprehensive ability improvement of children in games, and alleviate rush-to-run anxiety. At the same time, it will collaborate with community services to launch parent-child game classes, guide parents to participate in family exploration tasks, extend the concept of learning by playing to family scenes, and form a collaborative effort between home and school to educate students.

4.2.3. Strengthening teachers' professional ability in game teaching

Improve the professional training system for preschool teachers around the child-centered practice model of the UK EYFS framework. Through forms such as in-school teaching and research, cross-school communication, etc., the focus is on cultivating teachers' game design ability, observing and interpreting children's behavior, actively supporting children's exploration ability, and mastering teaching techniques of scaffolding guidance in games. Create a game teaching case library, and gather both local and overseas, fine practical examples, which can be learnt by teachers, and create and modify according to the local culture, and the nature of early childhood development. Teacher assessment measures include the inclusion of the ability to teach games, to encourage the teacher take the localization route of learning through playing, to support the overall development of the preschool education, to organize the organic synthesis of the Chinese superiority of inclusive education with the international advanced education.

5. Conclusion

Through systematic comparison of preschool models of education in China and the UK, this paper arrives at the critical disparities in philosophy, approach, and outcomes of two education models that are based on different cultural and institutional frameworks. Preschool education in China has become a large-scale and inclusive program, under the intense influence of policy, focusing on significant knowledge transmission and collective coordination, which plays an efficient role in guaranteeing equity at the education level threshold and the basic quality standard. The philosophy of preschool education in the UK is child-centered and takes the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework which emphasizes the role of play as the primary mode of learning along with the focus on individual differences, independent inquisition, and close collaboration between the home and school, which encourages the initiation and expression of initiative, creative activities, and personal growth in children. According to the results of the research, neither of the two models

is flawless: the Chinese model has problems with overcoming the tendency towards the academic-oriented early education and the need to attain the organic environment of play and teaching; the UK model is struggling with standardization and the necessity to balance educational and academic strains.

It is on this foundation that this paper recommends three practical suggestions, which include: enhancing the localization of the key principles of the EYFS, scientific and diversified mechanisms of assessment and co-education, and improving the professional skills of teachers in the play-based teaching techniques. The purpose is to disseminate early childhood education in China that is prevalent so that it can naturally absorb foreign experiences like learning through play and child-centred, but also preserve commonality and structural benefits towards achieving higher quality that is more accommodative, developmental, and culturally suitable. It is not just a methodological point of reference but a profound discussion and artistic revolution of educational philosophy and views on children.

Going forward, the high-grade nurturing of preschool education within China not only ought to further address several hits, namely: First, advance a research on the topic of the interaction between the notions of culture and education, exploring the ways of how to retain the best traditions of the Chinese educational form in the context of modernization and how to combine them with the contemporary sciences of child nurturing; second, introduce an assessment system that can reward both the process and result, encouraging the change of assessment of preschool education toward evaluating the quality of learning, social-emotional competence, and Finally, the final purpose of preschool schooling is to conserve the authenticity of childhood, to nurture the development of every child through relations and to bloom through discovery. This is the direction that needs a long-term discussion and a system of mutual exploration between the policy direction, scholarly studies, and practical innovation, such that in the conflict between globalization and localization, it can find a way of development of preschool education with Chinese features and global meaning.

Authors contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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