

# ***Comparison of Compulsory Education Between China and Britain***

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**Abstract:** The different political landscapes and historical contexts of China and the UK have given rise to unique features within their compulsory education frameworks. In the Chinese school system, the authority of the teacher is paramount, a didactic approach prevails, and a one-size-fits-all strategy is often applied, a process akin to the force-feeding of knowledge. In stark contrast, the British educational ethos tends to encourage students' individual passions and originality, and emphasises personal growth and development. This research seeks to shed light on the differences between the compulsory education systems of these two nations through an in-depth comparative examination of four key aspects including definition, Curriculum, teachers and social. The ultimate aim of this analysis is to make constructive recommendations that could refine and strengthen the educational structures of both countries, thereby supporting their continued progress and development. The two countries can combine their compulsory education models to make up for the shortcomings in their respective education systems.

**Keywords:** Comparison of compulsory, Chinese education, British education, Education system, Education quality.

## **1. Introduction**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, education is the process of fostering or sharpening personal knowledge or understanding, the development of virtues, ethics and community attributes, and is, an undeniable force in enlightening the mind and enhancing knowledge and skills in various fields [1]. Currently, nations across the globe recognise the pivotal role of education in societal development, and strive to equip learners with essential cognitive skills and foster sophisticated thought processes for the betterment of society [2]. As representative cultures of East and West, China and the UK have their own characteristics, which have profound implications for compulsory education. The compulsory education systems of China and the UK are very different in terms of definition, curriculum, teacher allocation and social impact.

A detailed comparative analysis of the key elements of compulsory education in China and the UK highlights the differences and similarities between the two countries, and provides a valuable reference and inspiration for promoting international exchange and cooperation in education. The comparative study of the compulsory education systems of the two countries promotes mutual learning and teaching in the field of education, and promotes common progress in the development

of education in all countries of the world. Through in-depth knowledge and comparison between the Chinese and British compulsory education systems, the educational community can deepen its understanding of global trends in the development of compulsory education, and provide lessons and experience to build a more scientific and effective education system.

## **2. Definition of compulsory education**

Compulsory education, as defined by UNESCO, refers to educational programmes in which children and young people are legally obliged to participate, usually specified by a certain number of grades or age range.

In China, compulsory education has four main characteristics [3]. First, it is provided free of charge by the state to ensure that every child has access to basic education. Second, it is mandatory for school-age children and adolescents, with parents responsible for ensuring their attendance. Thirdly, compulsory education is inclusive, covering all children and young people regardless of gender, race or socio-economic status. Finally, there is uniformity in the formulation of educational programmes and curriculum standards by the state to ensure consistency in the content and quality of education provided. Mandatory schooling in China spans a period of nine years, consisting of six years of primary education, followed by three years of junior high school, and culminating with three years of senior high school. As a socialist nation, China upholds the principle that the people are the ultimate authorities in the country. The primary objective of compulsory education is to elevate the overall national quality, foster social equality, and protect the fundamental rights of its citizens.

In contrast, in the United Kingdom, mandatory education kicks off at the age of 5 and concludes at 16. The British educational system is segmented into four phases: early years, primary, secondary, and further education. Notably, the UK's educational framework is distinguished by its variety, offering a diverse array of school choices, encompassing state-run, private, and independent institutions that provide a broad spectrum of educational avenues. And parents possess the liberty to select the most appropriate educational establishment for their child, which introduces an element of choice in the education sector. In addition, following the Foundation Stage, students are at liberty to opt for academic or vocational paths, which shows the adaptable nature of the educational structure. Throughout various phases of their academic voyage, students engage in standardized evaluations like GCSEs to gauge their educational advancements. Concurrently, the British educational system emphasizes the overall growth of students and the cultivation of their varied passions [4].

Starting with its educational ethos, China's compulsory education system prioritises a standardised curriculum and centralised governance to ensure consistency and equity. In contrast, the UK's approach to compulsory education celebrates diversity and responds to individual needs, offering students and their parents a wider range of options. Next, in terms of implementation, China enforces a uniform curriculum and government oversight to ensure educational quality and equity. The UK system, on the other hand, tends to encourage the individual talents of each pupil, giving families greater freedom in their educational choices. Finally, in terms of objectives, China's compulsory education system aims to democratise primary education, improve the nation's intellectual calibre and lay a solid foundation for young people's academic and personal lives. The UK's goals go beyond basic education, focusing on fostering creativity and critical thinking while supporting each student's personal journey.

### 3. Comparison

#### 3.1. Curriculum

This essay explores the differences in the compulsory education frameworks of China and the United States by examining the structure of their respective curricula.

##### 3.1.1. Difference

Rooted in historical and societal foundations, China has long established a set of core academic disciplines, including Chinese language studies, mathematics and English, as the essential pillars of its educational system. These subjects account for a significant proportion of the total schooling experience, with the 2011 National Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan, promulgated by the Ministry of Education, stipulating that primary school students should devote 35%, 33% and 20% of their total study time to Chinese, maths and English respectively. In junior high schools, the percentages rise slightly to 40%, 37% and 23% in the same order [5]. This approach reflects China's rigorous academic ethos, where curriculum design is heavily influenced by standardised examinations that serve as gateways to prestigious universities. Consequently, this intense focus on exam preparation can inadvertently sideline the holistic development of students, reducing some to mere learning automatons. By contrast, the British educational paradigm gives students the freedom to tailor their learning journey to their own unique interests and passions. Beginning in primary school, students are introduced to a wide range of subjects, including history and science, which are carefully developed in subsequent years. This model, pioneered in the US, not only equips students with practical life skills, but also gives them the freedom to explore and nurture personal interests, fostering well-rounded individual competencies.

Moreover, when it comes to pedagogical styles, traditional Chinese education is predominantly didactic, with a strong emphasis on knowledge transfer and memorisation. On the other hand, the US educational approach relies heavily on proactive student engagement and the cultivation of critical thinking through exploratory and inquiry-based learning experiences. The UK places greater emphasis on active student participation and inquiry-based learning, encouraging students to ask questions and find answers. These differences not only reflect educational ideas and values from different cultural backgrounds, but also have a profound impact on students' learning and development.

##### 3.1.2. The reason for the difference

A significant factor contributing to the disparity in educational content between the two nations stems from their divergent educational objectives. The cornerstone of China's academic approach is rooted in rigorous, closed-book assessments, with the pivotal college entrance examination often considered a transformative juncture in a person's life. This phenomenon reflects the broader goal of Chinese education: to sift through the population for exceptional talent and dramatically alter an individual's social standing, placing a premium on a student's prowess in acing tests[6]. Conversely, the UK adopts a multifaceted approach to student evaluations, featuring a variety of methods that encompass essay compositions and practical workshops, among others. The British counterpart to China's Gaokao are the A-level exams, which serve as a gateway to university education. Unlike the Gaokao, A-levels can be retaken, and they have the potential to supplant the high school certificate. Reflecting this difference, UK education prioritizes fostering the comprehensive growth and multifarious abilities of its students[7].

### 3.2. Teaching staff

Both China and the United Kingdom are committed to high quality education in terms of the quality of teachers in compulsory education, and are committed to producing students who can meet the needs of the society of the future through continuous reform and innovation. Teachers in both countries play a crucial role in their respective education systems, and their professional development and teaching practices have a crucial impact on improving the quality of education.

In the discussion of the comparison between the provision of compulsory education teachers in China and the United Kingdom, an analysis is conducted mainly from multiple perspectives, including the educational level, education and training system and teaching methods of teachers, teaching.

#### 3.2.1. Educational level

Both countries recognise the importance of professional qualifications for compulsory school teachers, requiring them to have at least a bachelor's degree and a background relevant to the subject they teach. In China, a distinction is made between active (in-service) teachers and those who don't currently teach (out-of-service)[8]. The latter category enjoys a lower entry barrier, allowing college students to take the Teacher Qualification Examination. Success in this exam, coupled with networking and occasionally gifts, can open the door to a teaching position, although this process does not consistently ensure teaching excellence. On the other hand, the UK has strict criteria for teacher qualifications. Prospective teachers must hold an undergraduate degree plus a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE/PGDE) or gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) through an accredited teacher training programme, a rigorous journey that significantly hones their teaching skills[9].

#### 3.2.2. Education and training system

In China, the route to becoming a teacher is rigorous, requiring the passing of a National Teaching Qualification Examination for a teaching certificate, as well as an extensive internship and professional development programme. Meanwhile, the UK's approach to teacher training is very practical, requiring newly qualified teachers to spend a year under the tutelage of experienced educators to fully prepare them for the classroom[10].

#### 3.2.3. Teaching methods

In the context of Chinese primary education, there is a pronounced tendency towards teacher-led classrooms that emphasise rote learning over analytical skills. According to Jin and Cortazzi, Chinese classrooms are vibrant with engagement, yet they focus on the absorption and regurgitation of information. This approach arguably stems from Confucianism, fostering a culture where knowledge is quietly accepted and theory is prioritised over practical experience[11]. Take language teaching, for example, where grammar trumps conversational skills. This teacher-centred model reflects a wider disregard for student autonomy in learning, and elevates the role of the teacher to an almost sacrosanct level. The quintessential student, through this lens, is diligent, resilient and focused on cultivating the right attitude toward learning rather than honing specific skills. In a system that values exam results, it's assumed that a positive attitude toward learning will naturally lead to academic success and mastery of skills. Teacher-led instruction is therefore championed as the route to excellence, with a student body more invested in passing exams than in the learning journey. Testing reigns supreme, with most school effort directed towards exam preparation. In contrast, British educators have historically championed critical thinking and

autonomy, guiding students towards the acquisition of knowledge through exploration and hands-on learning[11].

### 3.3. Social aspect

This part compares the different education systems of the two countries, and the influence of social mobility and welfare policies on compulsory educational affairs under different systems.

The compulsory education system is regarded in the People's Republic of China as an important part of the social welfare system aimed at ensuring that all school-age children have equal access to education. Although there is still much debate about the effectiveness of the system in promoting class mobility, recent research has shown that while compulsory education has raised the overall level of education in society, its effectiveness in reducing the gap in educational equity is not obvious. Together with the proliferation of out-of-school tutoring facilities, the educational gap between socio-economic levels tends to widen, a trend that potentially undermines the positive role of schools in promoting educational equity [12]. Compulsory education in the UK, on the other hand, is part of a wider welfare state paradigm designed to compensate for financial shortfalls in education. The Butler Education Act of 1944 established a three-tiered system of education that guaranteed compulsory education for all school-age children. The British welfare system, with its focus on providing necessary support to individuals as a right, has played a key role in shaping social policy and laying the foundations for social services such as education[13].

Social mobility is shaped by the structure of the education system and the broader social policy framework. Social mobility and social welfare policies are closely linked, and together they shape equality of opportunity and social equity within a country. High levels of social mobility mean that individuals have a greater chance of being able to improve their economic and social status through their own efforts and talents. Social welfare policies, on the other hand, support disadvantaged groups and improve the well-being of society as a whole by providing basic services such as education. In comparing the compulsory education systems in China and the UK, the reason for choosing to focus on social mobility is that it reflects whether a country's education system is able to provide equal opportunities for all students. High social mobility means that even if an individual is born at the bottom of society, it is possible for an individual to gain opportunities for social advancement through education. When comparing the compulsory education systems in China and the UK, focusing on social mobility can reveal whether the education system is effective in removing the constraints of economic and social context on personal development, thereby achieving the goals of social equity and equal opportunity. In China, although the compulsory education system aims to equalise education, there are significant inequalities in the distribution of educational resources and quality between urban and rural areas, which to varying degrees limit the opportunities for upward social mobility for rural children. The British welfare state system aims to create a relatively level playing field, but the educational streaming mechanism, a three-tier education system through grammar schools, secondary modern schools and technical schools, has also been criticised for exacerbating social stratification and failing to provide equal opportunities for social mobility. The UK's social welfare system, based on the Beveridge Report, is much broader and provides comprehensive social security, including education[13]. In contrast, China's social security system is still in its infancy compared to the UK, although it is developing and actively waiting to reduce educational inequality.

Overall, both China and the UK have made compulsory education an important part of their social welfare policies. There is a close interplay between compulsory education policy, social welfare policy and social mobility. For example, good compulsory education policies can help reduce social inequalities and increase social mobility by improving the quality of education and equality of opportunity. At the same time, sound social welfare policies can indirectly promote



social mobility by providing basic protection for vulnerable groups, reducing poverty rates, and providing individuals with better educational opportunities. However, there are major differences between the two countries in the way it is implemented and its impact on social class mobility. China's education system has made remarkable achievements in popularising education, but still faces the problems of the urban-rural education gap and the uneven distribution of non-formal education resources. The UK education system, with its broader welfare state, has a longer history of providing universal education, but continues to struggle with educational stratification and class mobility. Both countries continue to improve their policies to better serve their populations and promote social justice through education[14].

Compulsory schooling policies in both the United Kingdom and the China reflect the importance that each country attaches to education as a social good and to the promotion of social mobility. Both countries are constantly striving to promote social equity and mobility through education policy, although the challenges they face and the specific strategies they employ differ.

#### 4. Conclusion

The People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom have each demonstrated a different focus in the implementation of compulsory education. China has focused on strengthening uniform educational standards and providing universal access to basic knowledge and skills, while the UK has tended to increase the richness and diversity of the curriculum and support individualised pathways for students. Both governments have sought to reduce educational inequalities based on social and class differences by optimising education policies and resource allocation. So this essay has achieved the original research purpose. The blueprint for education reform in both China and the UK should focus on improving the overall standard of education and promoting the practice and improvement of educational equity.

Unfortunately, this paper has a number of shortcomings. Firstly, it relies solely on literary sources and lacks any empirical research, so it lacks a solid factual basis. In addition, the scope of the comparison is rather narrow. To increase the reliability of future work, it would be wise to include first-hand data, such as experimental surveys and questionnaires. Secondly, it is advisable to broaden the range of comparative perspectives in order to provide a more comprehensive and accurate analysis.

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